

# Ridvan 2000

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To the Baha'is of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We bow our heads in gratitude to the Lord of Hosts, our hearts brimming with joy, as we witness how marvellous a difference four years have made since the launching of the global Plan now concluded at this Festival of Splendours. So marked was the progress achieved during this period that our world community attained heights from which bright new horizons for its future exploits can clearly be discerned.

The quantitative difference resulted mainly from a more critical qualitative difference. The culture of the Baha'i community experienced a change. This change is noticeable in the expanded capability, the methodical pattern of functioning and the consequent depth of confidence of the three constituent participants in the Plan--the individual, the institutions and the local community. That is so because the friends concerned themselves more consistently with deepening their knowledge of the divine Teachings and learned much--and this more systematically than before--about how to apply them to promulgating the Cause, to managing their individual and collective activities, and to working with their neighbours. In a word, they entered into a learning mode from which purposeful action was pursued. The chief propellant of this change was the system of training institutes established throughout the world with great rapidity--an accomplishment which, in the field of expansion and consolidation, qualifies as the single greatest legacy of the Four Year Plan. In the increased capacity of individuals to teach the Faith, as shown in the thrust of individual initiatives; in the improved ability of Spiritual Assemblies, Councils and committees to guide the endeavours of the friends; in the introduction of new patterns of thought and action which influenced the collective behaviour of the local community--in all such respects the system of training institutes demonstrated its indispensability as an engine of the process of entry by troops. By extending their operation through local study circles, many institutes magnified their capacity to cover wide regions with their programmes. Mongolia, for instance, set up 106 study circles and, as a result, recorded a significant rise in the number of new believers. Concurrent with these kinds of developments, the members of our worldwide community also gave more attention to drawing on the power of prayer, to meditating on the sacred Word, and to deriving the spiritual benefits of participation in devotional gatherings. It is through the workings of these elements of an intensified individual and collective transformation that the size of the community is increasing. Although the numbers of new believers has as yet only slightly surpassed those of recent years, it is immensely gratifying to see that this increase is now geographically widespread, is engaging ever-larger segments of the community, and is successful in integrating new declarants into

the life of the Cause.

So salutary, so promising a condition of the Faith also owes much, beyond measure, to the advisory influence, collaborative role and practical work of the Institution of the Counsellors which were amplified with respect to the formation and operation of institutes --an amplification that reflected the timely stimulation imparted by a vibrant and ever alert International Teaching Centre.

The central theme of the Four Year Plan--that of advancing the process of entry by troops--produced a high degree of integration of thought and action. It focused attention on a major stage of the evolution of the Baha'i community that must be attained during the Formative Age; for until entry by troops is more widely sustained, the conditions will not be ripe for mass conversion, that breakthrough promised by Shoghi Effendi in his writings. The thematic focus of the Plan bore implications for all categories of Baha'i activity; it called for a clarity of understanding which made possible systematic and strategic planning as a prerequisite of individual and collective action. The members of the community came gradually to appreciate how systematization would facilitate the processes of growth and development. This raising of consciousness was a huge step that led to an upgrading of teaching activities and a change in the culture of the community.

The integrative aspects of the theme were evident in the efforts at planning, building institutional capacity, and developing human resources. The threads connecting all these can be traced from the outset of the Plan to its very end. The December 1995 Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in the Holy Land marked the beginning. There the Counsellors were oriented to the features of the Plan. This was followed by their consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies in national planning sessions that moved subsequently to the regional level, involving Auxiliary Board members, Local Spiritual Assemblies and committees. Thus, at all levels, elements of the Baha'i administration became involved in the planning process, and reached beyond this stage to that of implementation, at which the institutional capacity to cope with entry by troops had to be created. Two major steps were taken in this regard: one was the establishment of training institutes; the other was the formal establishment and widespread introduction of Regional Baha'i Councils as a feature of the administration between the local and national levels to strengthen the administrative capacity of certain communities where the growing complexity of the issues facing National Spiritual Assemblies required this development. Equally of relevance to integrating the essentials of the process were the strategies defined for the work in social and economic development, which is a critical part of consolidation, and in external affairs, which is a vital factor in enabling the Faith to manage the consequences of its emergence from obscurity. The combined effect produced resounding results, the enumeration of which would far exceed the compass of these pages. We are moved, however, to cite certain highlights that illustrate the scope of the Plan's achievements.

In the Holy Land, the construction of the Terraces and the buildings on the Arc forged ahead with every assurance of meeting the announced deadline for their

completion at the end of this Gregorian year. Moreover, the building in Haifa to which we referred in our last Ridvan message in connection with the expanded size of pilgrimage groups is ready for use as of this Ridvan. In this same connection, architectural plans were approved for the much-needed facility to be built at Bahji to accommodate pilgrims and other Baha'i and non-Baha'i visitors.

The translation of the Texts for the expected new volume of Baha'u'llah's Writings has been completed and preparations are under way for its publication. Strides in expansion and consolidation were manifest in ways other than those already mentioned: in pioneering, proclamation, the publication of literature, the use of the arts, the formation of Spiritual Assemblies, and advances of Baha'i studies associations. Some 3,300 believers settled as long- and short-term international pioneers. That many countries usually on the receiving end had themselves dispatched pioneers abroad was a further indication of the maturation of national communities. True to the mandate addressed to their members, the Canadian and United States communities excelled in the number of pioneers that left their shores and in the much greater number of travelling teachers, including a significant representation of youth. Especially noteworthy, too, was the heartening response of believers of African descent in the United States to the call that Baha'i teachers travel to Africa.

Proclamation of the Cause involved a variety of actions which included the sponsoring of a wide range of occasions--anniversaries, commemorations, discussion groups, exhibits, and the like--that made it possible for large numbers of people to become acquainted with the teachings of the Faith. The Houses of Worship were magnetic centres for visitors who entered their doors in increasing numbers, especially in India, where some five million people were received during the last year. Added to such activities were the multiple uses of the media to get the Baha'i message across. In the United States, some 60,000 inquirers responded to a media campaign designed by the National Teaching Committee. Worldwide, knowledge of the Faith was spread through the appearance, more frequently than before, of unsolicited, sympathetic articles in the print media. There was a similar broadening of exposure through readiness on the part of radio and television stations to include regular Baha'i programmes; this was so in such countries as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia. Such fortunate developments were crowned by the independent choice of international media establishments to use the Shrine of the Bab and the Terraces as the site for the telecast of the Holy Land's segment of the worldwide media programme celebrating the arrival of the year 2000.

The use of the arts became an important feature in the proclamation, teaching, deepening and devotional activities of the worldwide community. The arts attracted young people, who applied them to their teaching and deepening activities principally through the numerous drama and dance workshops active in many parts of the world. But the dynamics of the arts went far beyond singing and dancing to involve a range of imaginative activities that grounded people in the Cause. Where folk art was used, particularly in Africa, the teaching work was greatly enhanced. For example, Ghana and Liberia each mounted a Light

of Unity Project for promoting the arts in teaching. In India, the Communal Harmony Group had a similar purpose.

Mostly at the urging of the Counsellors and with the support of the Continental Fund, a boost was given to the translation and publication of Baha'i literature especially in Africa and Asia. Moreover, the Kitab-i-Aqdas appeared in a complete Arabic edition and in other languages.

While the restriction of the formation of Local Spiritual Assemblies to the first day of Ridvan, which took effect in 1997, produced the anticipated decrease in the number of these institutions, the fall was not drastic. The number has since held its ground and a sound process of consolidation is in place. Eight new pillars of the Universal House of Justice were raised up, bringing the total of National Spiritual Assemblies to 181.

Particularly gratifying has been the gathering momentum, during these four years, of Baha'i scholarly activity, which forged ahead with the vital task of reinforcing the intellectual foundations of the Faith's work. Two invaluable results have been the impressive enrichment of Baha'i literature and the production of a body of dissertations examining various contemporary problems in the light of Baha'i principles. The network of Associations of Baha'i Studies, celebrating this year its twenty-fifth anniversary, welcomed five new affiliates during the Plan. Reflective of the diversity and creativity that this field of service is attracting were the holding of Papua New Guinea's first Baha'i studies conference and the Japanese Association's ground-breaking focus on the spiritual origins of traditional Japanese scholarship.

Progress in the field of social and economic development was decidedly qualitative, although figures showing an increase of projects were also impressive. Annually reported activities grew from some 1,350 at the beginning of the Plan to more than 1,800 nearing its end. The movement towards a more systematic approach remained the dominant characteristic of the work during this period. To promote consultation and action on the principles of social and economic development, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Baha'i World Centre sponsored 13 regional seminars in which an estimated 700 representatives from 60 countries participated. This Office also attended to the devising of pilot projects and materials suitable for the mounting of organized campaigns to foster youth empowerment and literacy, community health worker training, the advancement of women, and moral education. An example was the programme in Guyana that trained more than 1,500 literacy facilitators; another was the completion in Malaysia of eight modules for the advancement of women, which became the basis for training sessions held in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A plan to integrate Baha'i radio stations with the work of training institutes was initiated in the Guaymi region of Panama. As institutes have the potential to provide training for social and economic development, a movement in that direction involved a dozen institutes, which are currently experimenting with such efforts in areas including literacy, community health worker training, and vocational training. A number of Baha'i-sponsored and Baha'i-inspired agencies have devoted their energies to projects, such as the one which involved collaboration with the World Health Organization in combating river blindness in Cameroon; more than 30,000 individuals have

received the needed medication through this Baha'i project. Another instance is the private university in Ethiopia, Unity College, whose student body has risen to 8,000. Another is Landegg Academy in Switzerland, which, while expanding and consolidating its academic programme, extended highly appreciated assistance in the ongoing quest for a remedy to the horrendous social consequences of conflict in the Balkans. Yet another is Nur University in Bolivia, which, in a collaborative project with Ecuador, offered training to more than 1,000 school teachers in its moral leadership programme. In this field of social and economic development, such evidences of capacity building were a great benefit to the purposes of the Plan.

Guided by the external affairs strategy communicated to National Spiritual Assemblies in 1994, the community's capacity in the fields of diplomatic and public information likewise expanded at an astonishing rate, placing the Baha'i community in a dynamic relationship with the United Nations, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media.

The strategy focused activities at international and national levels on two key objectives: to influence the processes towards world peace, and to defend the Faith. Through the measures adopted for the defence of our dearly loved co-religionists in Iran, the Baha'i International Community won a new measure of respect and support that created opportunities for other aims of the strategy to be pursued. To meet the challenge of the intractable situation in Iran, our institutions and external affairs agencies devised new approaches to activating available instruments of governments and the United Nations. The case of the persecutions in Iran occupied the attention of the highest authorities on the planet. Indeed, the news that an Iranian court had reaffirmed death sentences for two of the friends and imposed a similar sentence on a third evoked a sharp response from the President of the United States, who issued a clear admonition to Iran. As a consequence of the interventions of world leaders and the United Nations, the executions of Iranian Baha'is virtually stopped and the number of those sentenced to long-term imprisonment was drastically reduced.

While we have welcomed these interventions, we acclaim the self-sacrificing spirit, the fortitude, and the indomitable faith of our brothers and sisters in Iran that have invested such efforts with potency. These manifest qualities of the soul baffle their compatriots as to the stamina with which they withstand the assaults so viciously and so relentlessly unloosed against them. How else could one explain that so few have been able to stand up to so many for so long? How else could they have aroused the active concern of the world when even a single one of them faces the threat of death? Iran's tragedy is that the assailants have until now failed to see that the divine principles for which these persecuted ones have sacrificed their possessions and even their lives contain the very solutions that would satisfy the yearnings of a population in its hour of discontent. But there can be no doubt whatever that the systematic tyranny to which our Iranian friends have so cruelly been subjected will ultimately yield to the Almighty Power guiding the mysterious proceedings toward their assured destiny in all its promised glory.

With regard to the other objective of the external affairs strategy, the lines

of action were guided by four themes--human rights, the status of women, global prosperity, and moral development. Our records show a huge step forward in the work on human rights and the status of women. With regard to the former, the United Nations Office prosecuted a creative programme of human rights education which has, so far, served as a means of building the capacity of no fewer than 99 National Spiritual Assemblies for diplomatic work. Regarding the status of women, the existence of 52 national offices for the advancement of women, the contributions of numerous Baha'i women and men to conferences and workshops at all levels, the selection of Baha'i representatives to crucial positions on key NGO committees, including the one that serves the United Nations Development Fund for Women, show how the followers of Baha'u'llah assiduously promote His principle of the equality of women and men.

At the same time an array of initiatives are disseminating information about the Baha'i Faith to various publics. These include such innovative undertakings as: the launching of "The Baha'i World" Web site, which is already averaging 25,000 visits a month; the issuing of a statement entitled, Who is Writing the Future?, which is helping the friends everywhere talk about contemporary issues; the airing since last November on the World Wide Web of "Payam-e-Doost", the Persian-language radio programme broadcast for an hour weekly in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area--a programme which is available at all times throughout the world on the Internet; and the implementation of a highly original television programme, applying moral principles to day-to-day problems, which has won the warm endorsement of government authorities in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. A phenomenon that has gathered force as the century draws to its end is that the people of the world have arisen to express their aspirations through what has come to be known as the "organizations of civil society". It must be a source of great satisfaction to Baha'is everywhere that the Baha'i International Community as an NGO representing a cross-section of humankind has won such trust as a unifying agent in major discussions shaping the future of humankind. Our principal representative at the United Nations was appointed to co-chair the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, which was established by the Economic and Social Council--a position that is giving the Baha'i International Community a leading role in the organization of the Millennium Forum. This gathering, called by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and scheduled to be held in May, will give organizations of civil society an opportunity to formulate views and recommendations on global issues which will be taken up at the subsequent Millennium Summit in September of this year to be attended by heads of state and government.

Humanity's awakening to the spiritual dimensions of the changes occurring in the world have a special significance for Baha'is. The interfaith dialogue has intensified. During the Four Year Plan it increasingly involved the Faith as a recognized participant. The Parliament of the World's Religions held in Cape Town last December brought together some 6,000 attendees, among whom was a strong Baha'i delegation. Baha'is served on both the South African and International Boards of Directors that planned the event. For Baha'is, interest

in the occasion arose particularly from the fact that the first mention of the Name of Baha'u'llah at a public gathering in the West had occurred at the Parliament held in Chicago in 1893. Two inter-religious events held in Jordan last November included Baha'is as invited participants: a conference on conflict and religion in the Middle East, and the annual meeting of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. Baha'i representatives attended events in Vatican City and New Delhi sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church; on the latter occasion, in the presence of Pope John Paul II, Counsellor Zena Sorabjee was one of the representatives of religions addressing the gathering. In the United Kingdom, the Faith was placed in the public arena when Baha'i representatives joined members of eight other major religions for an interfaith celebration of the new millennium in the Royal Gallery of Westminster Palace, where, in the presence of Royalty, the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other distinguished persons, reference was made to the gathering of the "nine major religions of the United Kingdom." In Germany, for the first time Baha'is were included in an interfaith dialogue. This reversed a longstanding attitude of Christian denominations which had avoided contact with the Faith owing to a book written by a Covenant-breaker and issued by a Lutheran publishing house in 1981. The remedy was provided in a 600-page scholarly rebuttal written by three Baha'is and published in 1995 by a leading non-Baha'i firm, representing a signal victory for the German Baha'i community. An English translation was published in the last year of the Plan. Interfaith dialogue took an unusual form when at Lambeth Palace in 1998 representatives of the World Bank and of nine major religions held a meeting which led to the formation of the World Faiths Development Dialogue. The announced aim of the Dialogue is to try to bridge the gap between the faith communities and the World Bank in order to enable them to work together more effectively to overcome world poverty. The frequency and wide embrace of interfaith gatherings represent a new phenomenon in the relations among the religions. It is apparent that the various religious communities are striving to achieve the spirit of friendliness and fellowship among themselves that Baha'u'llah urged His followers to show towards the followers of other religions.

The concentrated endeavour of the Baha'i community in these four years occurred at a time when the wider society grappled with a torrent of conflicting interests. In this brief but intensely dynamic span, the forces at work in the Baha'i community and throughout the world proceeded with relentless acceleration. In their wake was revealed more conspicuously than before the social phenomena to which Shoghi Effendi alluded. More than six decades ago, he had called attention to the "simultaneous processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other". These twin processes did not continue in isolation from those specific to the Baha'i community but at times proceeded in such a way as to invite, as has already been shown, the direct involvement of the Faith. They seemed to run at opposite sides of the same corridor of time. On one side, wars fomented by religious, political, racial or tribal conflict raged in some 40 places; sudden, total breakdown of civil order paralyzed a number of countries; terrorism as a political weapon became

epidemic; a surge of international criminal networks raised alarm. Yet on the opposite side, attempts at implementing and elaborating the methods of collective security were earnestly made, bringing to mind one of Baha'u'llah's prescriptions for maintaining peace; a call was raised for an international criminal court to be established, another action that accords with Baha'i expectations; to focus attention on the imperative need for an adequate system to deal with global issues, world leaders are scheduled to meet in a Millennium Summit; new methods of communications have opened the way for everyone to communicate with anyone on the planet. The economic disintegration in Asia threatened to destabilize the world economy, but it prompted efforts both to remedy the immediate situation and to find ways of bringing a sense of equity to international trade and finance. These are but a few examples of the two contrasting but interactive tendencies operating at this time, confirming Shoghi Effendi's inspired summation of the forces at work in God's greater plan, "whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind."

At the conclusion of these four eventful years, we have arrived at a portentous convergence of ends and beginnings in measures of Gregorian time and the Baha'i era. In one instance, this convergence entails the wrapping up of the twentieth century and, in the other, opens a new stage in the unfolding of the Formative Age. The perspective from these two frames of time prompts us to reflect on a vision of world-shaping trends that have synchronized, and to do so in the context of the insight so graphically projected by Shoghi Effendi at the inception of the Arc he conceived. During the course of the Plan, this vision assumed a brilliant clarity as the construction projects advanced on Mount Carmel, as world leaders took bold steps towards fashioning the structures of a global political peace, and as local and national Baha'i institutions moved to new levels in their evolution. We carry with us a sacred and enduring memory of the twentieth century that stirs our energies even as it sets our path: It is of that seminal moment in the history of humankind when the Centre of the Covenant of Baha'u'llah, during an unparalleled ministry, designed the architecture of a new World Order and when, subsequently during some of the most devastating years, the Guardian of the Faith devoted his utmost energies to raising up the structures of an Administrative System that, at the end of the century, stands before the gaze of the world in the wholeness of its essential form. We come thus to a bridge between times. The capacities developed through a century of struggle and sacrifice by a handful of intoxicated lovers of Baha'u'llah must now be applied to the inescapable tasks remaining to the Formative Age, whose many epochs of unremitting labour will lead to that Golden Age of our Faith when the Most Great Peace will envelope the earth.

We begin at this Ridvan with a Twelve Month Plan. Brief though it is, it must and will suffice to accomplish certain vital tasks and to lay the ground for the next twenty-year thrust of the Master's Divine Plan. What was so carefully begun four years ago--the systematic acquisition of knowledge, qualities and skills of service--must be augmented. Wherever they exist, national and regional institutes must activate to the full the programmes and systems they

have adopted. New institutes must be formed where such needs have been identified. Greater steps must be taken to systematize the teaching work undertaken through individual initiative and institutional sponsorship. It is partly for this purpose that in several areas of each continent the Counsellors and the National Assemblies have established "Area Growth Programmes". The results will provide a body of experience for the benefit of future Plans. The individual, the institutions and the local community are urged to focus their attention on these essential tasks, so as to be fully prepared for the five-year enterprise to begin at Ridvan 2001--an enterprise that will take the Baha'i world to the next phase in the advancement of the process of entry by troops.

But beyond giving attention to these tasks, there is a pressing challenge to be faced: Our children need to be nurtured spiritually and to be integrated into the life of the Cause. They should not be left to drift in a world so laden with moral dangers. In the current state of society, children face a cruel fate. Millions and millions in country after country are dislocated socially. Children find themselves alienated by parents and other adults whether they live in conditions of wealth or poverty. This alienation has its roots in a selfishness that is born of materialism that is at the core of the godlessness seizing the hearts of people everywhere. The social dislocation of children in our time is a sure mark of a society in decline; this condition is not, however, confined to any race, class, nation or economic condition--it cuts across them all. It grieves our hearts to realize that in so many parts of the world children are employed as soldiers, exploited as labourers, sold into virtual slavery, forced into prostitution, made the objects of pornography, abandoned by parents centred on their own desires, and subjected to other forms of victimization too numerous to mention. Many such horrors are inflicted by the parents themselves upon their own children. The spiritual and psychological damage defies estimation. Our worldwide community cannot escape the consequences of these conditions. This realization should spur us all to urgent and sustained effort in the interests of children and the future.

Even though children's activities have been a part of past Plans, these have fallen short of the need. Spiritual education of children and junior youth are of paramount importance to the further progress of the community. It is therefore imperative that this deficiency be remedied. Institutes must be certain to include in their programmes the training of teachers of children's classes, who can make their services available to local communities. But although providing spiritual and academic education for children is essential, this represents only a part of what must go into developing their characters and shaping their personalities. The necessity exists, too, for individuals and the institutions at all levels, which is to say the community as a whole, to show a proper attitude towards children and to take a general interest in their welfare. Such an attitude should be far removed from that of a rapidly declining order.

Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults

constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, the manner of treating them, the quality of the attention shown them, the spirit of adult behaviour toward them--these are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude. Love demands discipline, the courage to accustom children to hardship, not to indulge their whims or leave them entirely to their own devices. An atmosphere needs to be maintained in which children feel that they belong to the community and share in its purpose. They must lovingly but insistently be guided to live up to Baha'i standards, to study and teach the Cause in ways that are suited to their circumstances. Among the young ones in the community are those known as junior youth, who fall between the ages of, say, 12 and 15. They represent a special group with special needs as they are somewhat in between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them. Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programmes of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities for teaching and service, and involve them in social interaction with older youth. The employment of the arts in various forms can be of great value in such activity.

And now we wish to address a few words to parents who bear the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children. We appeal to them to give constant attention to the spiritual education of their children. Some parents appear to think that this is the exclusive responsibility of the community; others believe that in order to preserve the independence of children to investigate truth, the Faith should not be taught to them. Still others feel inadequate to take on such a task. None of this is correct. The beloved Master has said that "it is enjoined upon the father and mother, as a duty, to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son," adding that, "should they neglect this matter, they shall be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord." Independent of the level of their education, parents are in a critical position to shape the spiritual development of their children. They should not ever underestimate their capacity to mold their children's moral character. For they exercise indispensable influence through the home environment they consciously create by their love of God, their striving to adhere to His laws, their spirit of service to His Cause, their lack of fanaticism, and their freedom from the corrosive effects of backbiting. Every parent who is a believer in the Blessed Beauty has the responsibility to conduct herself or himself in such a way as to elicit the spontaneous obedience to parents to which the Teachings attach so high a value. Of course, in addition to the efforts made at home, the parents should support Baha'i children's classes provided by the community. It must be borne in mind, too, that children live in a world that informs them of harsh realities through direct experience with the horrors already described or through the unavoidable outpourings of the mass media. Many of them are thereby forced to mature prematurely, and among these are those who look for standards and discipline by which to guide their lives. Against this gloomy backdrop of a decadent society, Baha'i children should shine as the emblems of a better future. Our expectations are alive with the thought that the Continental Counsellors

will gather in the Holy Land in January 2001 on an occasion that will celebrate the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on the Hill of God. Auxiliary Board members from throughout the world will participate with them in what will undoubtedly turn out to be one of the historic happenings of the Formative Age. The coming together of such a constellation of Baha'i officers must by its very nature produce untold benefits for a community which will again be close to ending one Plan and embarking on another. As we contemplate the implications, we turn our hearts in gratitude to the very dear Hands of the Cause of God 'Ali-Akbar Furutan and 'Ali Muhammad Varqa, who by their residence in the Holy Land hold aloft the torch of service which the beloved Guardian lit in their hearts.

With this Twelve Month Plan, we cross a bridge to which we shall never return. We launch this Plan in the earthly absence of Amatu'l-Baha Ruhyyih Khanum. She remained with us to the virtual end of the twentieth century as a beam of the light that had shone during that incomparable period in the history of the human race. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Master lamented His inability to travel throughout the world to raise the Divine call, and in the intensity of His disappointment He penned the hope: "Please God! Ye may achieve it." Amatu'l-Baha responded with boundless energy, touching far-flung spots of the earth in the 185 countries that were privileged to receive her inimitable gifts. Her example, which will retain forever its splendour, illumines the hearts of thousands upon thousands throughout the planet. Against the inadequacy of any other gesture, might we all not dedicate our humble efforts during this Plan to the memory of one for whom teaching was the primary purpose, the perfect joy of life?

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE