

1995 U.S. National Baha'i Convention

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As many of you will remember, during the most recent US National Bahá'í Convention I posted coverage of the proceedings on Talisman. Subsequently, after encouragement from several people, I sent a letter drawn from my Talisman follow-up editorial to the National Spiritual Assembly. This morning I received their replies, both appended below. -David Langness

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States
Office of the
Secretary July 25, 1995

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

We have been asked to inform you that because your May 11, 1995 letter raises questions of general interest to the community, the National Spiritual Assembly has decided to publish the letter and the response in the American Bahá'í.

With Loving Bahá'í Greetings, Mrs. Janet Rubenstein Office of the
Secretary

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States July 23,
1995

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The National Spiritual Assembly appreciates your taking the time to share with it your impressions of the 86th National Convention and your ideas for stimulating the growth and development of the American Bahá'í community. At its

June meeting, the National Assembly discussed the points raised in your May 11, 1995 letter and offers the following responses for your consideration.

The National Assembly regrets that your experience as a visitor to the National Convention did not leave you with the same "spiritual lift" that you have experienced from other National Conventions. Most disappointing was that you attribute this to "spin doctoring" done by the National Spiritual Assembly on the May 19, 1994 letter of the Universal House of Justice, in order to make a more favorable impression on the delegates and visitors.

You allege that the National Assembly has sought to avoid responsibility for the May 19 letter of the Universal House of Justice by suggesting that the letter was intended for others. Yet, the letter itself testifies that it was written in direct response to questions raised by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Supreme Body. As noted in the letter, the National Assembly requested a meeting with the House of Justice to present its concerns about the growth and development of the American Bahá'í community. The House of Justice states that the meetings were, "a new fact of history," and that their

"...hearts were touched by the candour, courage, and sincerity with which your members presented your concerns, as well as by the spirit of optimism you displayed despite the overwhelming challenges and burdens which prompted your request for a meeting with us."

Their response, the May 19 letter, while applicable in principle to Bahá'ís everywhere, speaks specifically to the challenges facing the National Assembly and the American Bahá'í community. Moreover, the entire structure of the National Assembly's Annual Report, and of the National Convention itself, was conspicuously altered in response to issues raised in the May 19 letter, as is stated in the opening paragraph of the Annual Report.

The statements made at the Convention about the difficulties of administering the affairs of the Bahá'í community and that no university for Bahá'í administration exists, cannot be understood out of the context in which they were presented. Likewise, the statements about the intended recipients of the May 19 letter, which you heard "second-hand without attribution," cannot be accepted as a sound indicative of the position of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Since the National Assembly itself posed the questions and issues to the Universal House of Justice addressed in the letter, it would be unreasonable to conclude that the National Assembly would not ponder deeply and take action on the answers that it received. Indeed, the May 19 letter's specific relevance to the circumstances and conditions of the American Bahá'í community is precisely what prompted the National Assembly to share it immediately with the friends.

You complain that, "for the most part, open and frank consultation did not obtain during the Convention, because the Convention seemed structured to avoid it." You cite as an example that the consultation on the May 19 letter was "restricted" to the "closed Saturday morning post-balloting session only." The Convention agenda was presented to the delegates and ratified at the first session. Moreover, before the opening of the National Convention, the delegates attended a day-long deepening on consultation, conducted by the Counselors. The goal was the refinement of the delegates' consultative skills, and the fostering of an environment at the National Convention in which delegates would feel completely free to express their hopes, concerns and grievances. The results of this kind of training, conducted for the last several years, were noticeable in the frank inquiries from the delegates and the recommendations and suggestions they offered. That this Convention was no different can be observed on the highlights tape sent to every delegate for his/her post-Convention report. Moreover, this year, in the light of the May 19 letter, the National Assembly went to great lengths to survey the issues of concern to the delegates before the Convention, to provide question and answer sheets on troubling questions that circulate in the community but might not be raised on the Convention floor, and to open a room in which delegates could review the financial records of the National Assembly with the help of its Controller.

No restrictions were placed on the discussion of the May 19 letter. The May 19 letter was the sole focus of consultation in the session after the delegates voted for the National Spiritual Assembly. However, frequent reference to its contents was made throughout the Convention. National Assembly members who spoke during the discussion of the May 19 letter, did so in response to questions posed by delegates. Toward the end of that session, the Convention Chairman asked the delegates whether they wished to extend the discussion into the afternoon session. The delegates voted not to do so.

Both the Counselors and the National Spiritual Assembly were deeply moved by the candor of the delegates. Perhaps the restraint that you stated you sensed in some of the delegates can be attributed, as one of the delegates said, to their consciousness of the need to present their views in a manner that reflects the spirit of the House of Justice's December 29, 1988 letter concerning individual rights and freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The Supreme Body instructs us that, "content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously."

In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice further comments that the principle of judicious use of language also applies to the written word. In this context, we address your suggestion that The American Bahá'í become an "objective newspaper" conducting "real journalism," with its own independent board of Bahá'í professional journalists responsible for editorial decision-making. It was never the intention of the National Assembly for the American Bahá'í to serve as a "regular" newspaper. Though it is produced on newsprint as a cost-saving measure, The American Bahá'í is a periodical for publishing information on the policies and priorities of the Universal House of Justice, the Counselors and the National Spiritual Assembly and its agencies. In addition, it publishes news of the activities and opinions of the believers in response to the goals of the community. All articles are edited and reviewed following the publications review policies of the Universal House of Justice.

The National Spiritual Assembly will always require an organ for the dissemination of institutional and community news.

To change The American Bahá'í into an "objective newspaper," not "simply a house organ of the NSA" would not only deprive the National Assembly of a necessary institutional publication, but would also ignore certain cautions of the Supreme Body. You will recall that in its December 29, 1988 letter, after stating that the Bahá'í community's emergence from obscurity does not mark its attainment of maturity, the House of Justice asked:

Has he [Shoghi Effendi] not advised us all that the subsequent stage of oppression must precede the stages of its emancipation and its recognition as a world religion? ... Those who are anxious to relax all restraint, who

invoke freedom of speech as the rationale for publishing every and any thing concerning the Bahá'í community, who call for the immediate termination of the

practice of review now that the Faith has emerged from obscurity -- are they not aware of these sobering prospects?

You asked that the National Spiritual Assembly decentralize and restructure "with an increased emphasis on teaching and refocusing finances.

Decentralization is a major goal of the National Assembly. You may recall that the plan for reorganization of the national administration and the decentralization of several functions was first published in *The American Bahá'í* in September 1992. Most aspects of that plan have been implemented. However, financial restraints prevented the establishment of the Regional Teaching and Administrative Committees which the National Assembly had envisioned. In its letter of June 21, 1995, the National Spiritual Assembly announced its intention to proceed with the decentralization plans. Assemblies were invited to submit, by August 1, 1995, their suggestions, proposals and comments about how regional committees might best serve the Bahá'í communities,

groups and isolated believers in their areas. Feedback from the Assemblies will be analyzed by the National Spiritual Assembly's Decentralization Task Force, discussed with the Continental Counselors and reported to District Conventions for further comments from the friends.

Decentralization, however, will not reduce the National Budget. It will expand the Bahá'í community's capacity better to manage the growth and development of

the community as a whole. Throughout its discussions of this subject, the National Assembly has been mindful of Shoghi Effendi's admonition to strive for balance in order to avoid the "evils of overcentralization" and the "perils of utter decentralization with the consequent lapse of governing authority from the hands of the National Representatives of the believers..."

It may interest you that virtually all of the national agencies directly serve key aspects of the teaching and community development functions; this is not solely the work of the National Teaching Committee's Office. Decentralization of some teaching and administrative functions will reduce the heavy burden on the Bahá'í National Center and strengthen greatly the administrative foundation of the national community.

Currently, the agencies of the national administration are understaffed and under funded. Years of Fund deficits and repeated staff reductions have resulted in extreme austerity, with most of the friends at the National Center performing several functions at significant sacrifices to themselves and their families.

You state the "many NSA members serve as full-time paid employees, and some receive substantial perquisites." The reality is that three members of the

National Assembly are compensated for their services -- the Secretary-General, the Assistant Secretary and the Secretary for External Affairs. The National Assembly annually reviews their status and establishes their compensation based on need, just as it does with other employees. There are no perquisites included.

The average level of compensation for staff of the National Assembly is \$23,400, quite low considering the cost of living in Greater Chicagoland.

Moreover, despite an annual inflation rate in the Chicago area of 4%, the National Center personnel have only received increases totaling 3% over the last 14 years. A more detailed discussion of these and other questions can be found in the materials distributed at the National Convention.

We are saddened that the subject of compensation of the friends who serve the National Spiritual Assembly, at significant financial and professional sacrifice, has become a point of conjecture and contention among some of the believers.

The primary burden of the National Fund is properties, not staff, or the 3% spent on travel and other expenses. Maintenance and repair of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, the permanent schools and institutes, and the Bahá'í National Center costs millions of dollars each year. These funds are almost never available when needed and, therefore, must be borrowed. The accumulation of funds borrowed over time for building repairs accounts for the deficit in the National Fund. What you describe as "extraneous properties" are routinely sold, with the exception of those of negligible value for which buyers are difficult to find.

We hope that this information, and the detailed reports distributed at the National Convention will dispel the concerns held by a few members of the community.

The National Assembly agrees with your suggestion to create an "idea forum" to tap the creative talent of the community. As we stated in the Annual Report, the community regularly contributes volunteer services valued at over \$4 million dollars per year. Among those volunteers are Bahá'ís with expert knowledge and experience in a wide range of fields, who are regularly called upon to help evaluate and refine the function of the National Center offices, the Teaching Committee, the Treasury, Fund Development, the schools, the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, the Bahá'í Home, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, property repairs and virtually all other functions.

In addition, social development efforts such as race unity, gender equality, and community development depend on the enthusiastic participation of a large number of believers. To help identify such human resources across the community, the National Assembly is establishing an electronic talent network.

Our Fund Development plans are described in detail in the National Convention materials.

Citing the assessment of the National Spiritual Assembly that too few of the friends are infected with a passion for teaching and, therefore, our progress is slow, you recommend that the National Assembly "stop blaming the Bahá'ís" and "take responsibility." The National Assembly's cares about the progress of the teaching work arise from an analysis of the patterns of teaching and proclamation in the community developed from the reports of the visits around the community by members of the National Spiritual Assembly and the National Teaching Committee, repeated surveys, and regular discussions with the Counselors and the National Teaching Committee.

The purpose of that segment of the Annual Report was to remind the friends that only the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have been given the "duty and privilege" of teaching His Cause and to call their attention to the need to intensify their teaching efforts and increasingly organize their activities around this important work. As for the activities you suggest, these are within the competence of Local Spiritual Assemblies to undertake.

We are in complete agreement with your suggestion to "take the Bahá'í teachings outside." Greater involvement in the life of society is one of the major goals of the Three Year Plan. As stated in the Annual Reports, the National Assembly is pleased with the community's progress on two fronts in this regard. The first is the Faith's leadership role in helping to shape national policy such as the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The second is the national prominence the American Bahá'í community has gained through its leadership in race unity. Bahá'í communities sponsored over 1200 race unity events last year, in conjunction with other organizations, institutions and municipalities.

The pattern of practical application of Bahá'í principles has become one of the brightest aspects of Bahá'í life in the United States. As the pattern continues to grow, the teaching work will accelerate and the influence of Bahá'í thought will become evident.

Likewise, the National Spiritual Assembly agrees that there is the need for activities that would enrich the spiritual life of the believers. The Bahá'í Writings repeatedly stress the importance of the friends' obedience to the laws of God and application of the teachings and principles to their daily lives as the true means to becoming more spiritual. When the friends study deeply and put into practice the Sacred Scriptures their spiritual lives cannot help but

be enriched. Also recommended for such study are the compilations entitled, *Trustworthiness, Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude, the Bahá'í Life and The Importance of Deepening our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith.*

'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that the Nineteen Day Feast provides the means for helping the individual believer and the community attain a more spiritual life. In time, the friends will come to appreciate the significance of the Feast more fully.

As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this Feast be held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endowed with a power that is not of this world.

The Master also encouraged the friends to conduct "spiritual meetings" of prayer and music.

As you noted, the study of mysticism represents a fertile field for spiritual growth. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly, the following statement is made about mysticism:

...The Guardian feels ... should study more deeply the teachings, and meditate on what he studies. We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the Souls of the manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them to such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from.

At the end of your letter you indicate that you are offering your comments with "love, obedience and respect." The National Spiritual Assembly finds it difficult, however, to reconcile this with the words you have chosen to use in your letter and with its overall tone. You have implied that the National Spiritual Assembly has deliberately misled the friends to serve its own purpose, has acted improperly and has lost the trust of the American Bahá'í community. To allege that the National Assembly would employ the political device of "spin doctoring" information that it presents to the believers is unconscionable and contrary to the spirit and form of Bahá'í Administration. Turning again to the National Assembly's Annual Report, you will note that it follows the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in the May 19 letter:

Do as Shoghi Effendi advised you: 'Banishing every vestige of secrecy, of undue reticence, of dictatorial aloofness, from their midst, they [the National Spiritual Assembly] should radiantly and abundantly unfold to the eyes of the delegates, by whom they are elected, their plans, their hopes, and their cares. They should familiarize the delegates with the various matters that will have to be considered in the current year, and calmly and conscientiously study and weigh the opinions and judgement of the delegates.'

The aspersions that were cast on the integrity of the National Spiritual Assembly and its members by a slanderous mailing that had been distributed throughout the community, created an atmosphere of distrust that even made a few believers withhold contributions from the National Fund. To dispel their doubts, the National assembly made available to the delegates its financial records and made an effort to answer any questions that the delegates may have had while setting before them the "plans, hopes and cares" of the National Assembly for the final year of the Three Year Plan.

In the conclusion of the May 19 letter, the Universal House of Justice offers the National Spiritual Assembly and the American Bahá'í community assurance and

encouragement that we can meet the increasingly difficult challenges we face with "undiminished hope and confidence."

The divine promises to your community are certain; the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh are assured as you strive to fulfill His purpose. The wings of the beloved Master remain spread over you that you may succeed in discharging the tasks He has especially entrusted to your care. And our love ever surrounds you and your cherished community, growing stronger at every moment. Step forward then to meet the requirements of the hour with undiminished hope and confidence.

The National Spiritual Assembly appreciates the seriousness of your issues and hopes that its remarks will allay your concerns.

You are in our prayers and in our hearts.

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (signed)
Robert C. Henderson