

Community Functioning

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ISSUES CONCERNING COMMUNITY FUNCTIONING

Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

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A number of questions have recently been raised about how to assist malfunctioning local Baha'i communities, specifically those communities that have difficulty in responding to the needs and problems of their members, whose Spiritual Assemblies are unable to reach decisions, are unwilling to entertain frank and open consultation and which fail to acknowledge the existence of problems within the community. As a contribution to the development of such communities, we offer the following comments.

1. Facilitating Change within the Baha'i Community

1.1 The Nature of Change

Before addressing the issue of the kinds of steps that might be taken to bring about change within the Baha'i community, it is useful to consider the Baha'i perspective on the nature of change. Shoghi Effendi, in letters written on his behalf, underlines the evolutionary nature of the growth and development of Baha'i communities. He characterizes the inevitable difficulties associated with the immaturity of both individual believers and institutions as "growing pains" which, he confidently affirms, will eventually be overcome, because of the perfection of the system introduced by Baha'u'llah. We cite, below, a selection of extracts from these letters:

You have complained of the unsatisfactory conditions prevailing in the ... Baha'i Community; the Guardian is well aware of the situation of the Cause there, but is confident that whatever the nature of the obstacles that confront the Faith they will be eventually overcome. You should, under no circumstances, feel discouraged, and allow such difficulties, even though they may have resulted from the misconduct, or the lack of capacity and vision of certain members of the Community, to make you waver in your faith and basic loyalty to the Cause. Surely, the believers, no matter how qualified they may be, whether as teachers or administrators, and however high their intellectual and spiritual merits, should never be looked upon as a standard whereby to evaluate and measure the divine authority and mission of the Faith. It is to the Teachings themselves, and to the lives of the Founders of the Cause that the believers should look for their guidance and inspiration, and only by keeping strictly to such a true attitude can they hope to establish their loyalty to Baha'u'llah upon an enduring and unassailable basis. You should take heart, therefore, and with unrelaxing vigilance and unremitting effort endeavour to play your full share in the gradual unfoldment of this Divine World Order. (23 August 1939 to an individual believer)

The friends must be patient with each other and must realize that the Cause is still in its infancy and its institutions are not yet functioning perfectly.

The greater the patience, the loving understanding and the forbearance the believers show towards each other and their shortcomings, the greater will be the progress of the whole Baha'i Community at large.

--Community Functioning, Page 2

The Guardian feels that, through attracting new souls, the Cause will outgrow its present limitations and function more efficiently. (27 February 1943 to an individual believer)

He was very sorry to learn of the inharmony amongst the friends there; and he feels that the only wise course of action is for all the believers to devote themselves to teaching the Faith and co-operating with their National Body. Often these trials and tests which all Baha'i communities inevitably pass through seem terrible, at the moment, but in retrospect we understand that they were due to the frailty of human nature, to misunderstandings, and to the growing pains which every Baha'i community must experience. (25 November 1956 to an individual believer)

It is very unfortunate that some of the believers do not seem to grasp the fact that the administrative order, the Local and National Assemblies, are the pattern for the future, however inadequate they may sometimes seem. We must obey and support these bodies, for this is the Baha'i law. Until we learn to do this we cannot make real progress....

The Baha'is are far from perfect, as individuals or when they serve on elected bodies, but the system of Baha'u'llah is perfect and gradually the believers will mature and the system will work better.... (1 November 1950 to an individual believer)

1.2 Fostering Change

With regard to the means of fostering change within a Baha'i community, we attach a compilation of extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. While these extracts do not deal specifically with strategies for assisting communities that are chronically malfunctioning, they do provide useful guidance concerning actions that can be taken to bring about change within Baha'i communities. Before considering these approaches, it is useful to reflect on the fact that the implementation of any approach must be guided by the exercise of wisdom and patience, and the avoidance of an adversarial attitude in relation to the Assembly and the Baha'i community. In "Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah", +F1 p. 343, Baha'u'llah counsels the believers to avoid two extremes of behaviour in relation to the Faith. He states:

In this Day, We can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behaviour of the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause. Both should observe the dictates of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the Faith.

Note His emphasis on observing "the dictates of wisdom" and striving "to serve the best interests of the Faith".

F1. (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983)

--Community Functioning, Page 3

Based on the attached extracts, there appear to be a number of actions which individual believers can take to foster the next steps in the evolution of the Baha'i community. These include:

1.2.1 Individual Example

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter dated 30 September 1949 written on his behalf to an individual believer, states that "the first and best way" to remedy the malfunctioning of a Baha'i community is for the individual to "do what is right". See extract [1].

In addition to deepening, teaching and service to the Faith, the beloved Guardian stresses the importance of, and the benefits that derive from, such qualities as persistence, self-sacrifice, patience and loving forgiveness. See extracts [2] and [3].

1.2.2 Assisting the Local Spiritual Assembly

Shoghi Effendi indicates that individual believers can foster the development of the Local Spiritual Assembly by such means as participating in its election, supporting and upholding its decisions and turning towards it for the resolution of problems. See extracts [4] - [7].

1.2.3 Recommendations to Institutions

Individual believers have "the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy", and to offer suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of the local community, provided the criticisms and suggestions are offered in a constructive way and the authority of the Assembly is not undermined. See extracts [8] and [9].

The Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated 3 August 1982 written on its behalf to an individual believer, provided the following guidance concerning the manner in which individual views should be offered within the Baha'i community:

It is important to note, however, that individuals who wish to present their views should do so in a way compatible with the Baha'i spirit of consultation. It sometimes happens that a believer insists on expounding his views at Baha'i meetings, and frequently disrupts such gatherings, and may even display such behaviour in the presence of non-Baha'is. If he stubbornly persists in this conduct, despite exhortations and warnings given to him by the proper Baha'i institutions, he will somehow have to be prevented from taking the law into his own hands and jeopardizing Baha'i interests. When differences such as these arise, it is important that frank and loving consultation between the person concerned and the Local Spiritual Assembly, and if need be the National Spiritual Assembly, should take place, or perhaps the institution of the Counsellors could help resolve the problem.

--Community Functioning, Page 4

1.2.4 Consultation with Auxiliary Board Members

The Auxiliary Board members and their assistants are charged with stimulating

the grassroots of the Baha'i community and with encouraging and assisting the maturation of Local Spiritual Assemblies. An individual believer or a Local Spiritual Assembly might profitably seek the advice of the Board members for ideas about how to resolve the specific difficulties that exist in a community.

1.2.5 Appeal to the National Spiritual Assembly

Individual believers have the right to appeal a decision of the Local Spiritual Assembly to the National Assembly. See "The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice", +F2 pp. 14-15, for details of the appeal process. The decision as to whether to exercise this right rests with the individual. The following extract from a letter dated 12 September 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice pertains to this subject:

As you know, you are free to request the Assembly to reconsider its decision. However, you may wish to weigh this course of action against the reaction it could produce, and which may cause you further stress. In some cases, it is preferable if one accepts humbly the view of the Assembly in a spirit of sacrifice, and without further dispute. Then, any wrong decision will eventually be set right. When the believers act submissively and in a spirit of self-effacement it attracts the good pleasure of God, which in itself serves as a consolation to their hearts.

2. Consultation and the Expression of Feelings

The view has been put forth that the open expression of feelings and the honest expression of ideas are fundamental to productive Baha'i consultation, and, further, that the Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) 12-Step programme can make an important contribution to honest and open communication. In this regard, guidance was sought concerning the expression of feelings in the course of consultation.

While there may well be similarities between elements of the process of consultation and the 12-Step programme, they differ in their overall goals. The intent of the open expression by the individual as practiced in A.A. is, by and large, to effect a healing and a release from the habit of drinking.

Consultation, on the other hand, has as its object "the investigation of truth".

The distinction between the purpose of consultation and therapeutic endeavours is made explicit in the following extracts from letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

It should be borne in mind that all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem and is quite different from the

F2. (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1972)

--Community Functioning, Page 5

sort of group baring of the soul that is popular in some circles these days and which borders on the kind of confession that is forbidden in the Faith.

(From a letter dated 19 March 1973 from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, published in "Consultation: A Compilation" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 22)

In regard to your question about the fifth step in the "A.A. 12-Step Programme", we have been asked to share with you the following extract from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice on 26 August 1986 to an individual believer:

...there is no objection to Baha'is being members of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is an association that does a great deal of good in assisting alcoholics to overcome their lamentable condition. The sharing of experience which the members undertake does not conflict with the Baha'i prohibition on the confession of sins; it is more in the nature of the therapeutic relationship between a patient and a psychiatrist.

(From a letter dated 5 November 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The honest expression of feelings in general communication requires both wisdom and moderation. In "Gleanings", Baha'u'llah counsels the believers thus:

They who are the people of God have no ambition except to revive the world, to ennoble its life, and regenerate its peoples. Truthfulness and goodwill have, at all times, marked their relations with all men.... (pp. 270-71)

Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation.... (p. 279)

Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence.... (p. 216)

And Shoghi Effendi, in a letter dated 5 July 1947 written on his behalf, the following statement about the importance of "balance in all things":

One might liken Baha'u'llah's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.

We believe in balance in all things; we believe in moderation in all things we must not be too emotional, nor cut and dried and lacking in feeling, we must not be so liberal as to cease to preserve the character and unity of our Baha'i system, nor fanatical and dogmatic.

Concerning the open expression of feelings during consultation, clearly the expression of feelings and the emotional tone of the interaction make an

--Community Functioning, Page 6

important contribution to the consultative process. In one of His talks, 'Abdu'l-Baha describes "love and fellowship" as the "foundation" of "true consultation". He states:

...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation.

("The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 72-73)

The Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha that are cited in "Baha'i Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", 3 pp. 20-23, provide helpful guidance concerning the expression of feelings during consultation. For example:

'Abdu'l-Baha calls upon the members of a Spiritual Assembly to unite such that

their "thoughts", "views", and "feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world...." (pp. 20-21)

The Master advises the members to "take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise". He affirms that:

This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.... (p. 21)

It is important to note that truth emerges after the "clash" of carefully articulated views (which may well be expressed with enthusiasm and vigour), not from the clash of feelings. A clash of feelings is likely to obscure the truth, while a difference of opinion facilitates the discovery of truth.

'Abdu'l-Baha provides the following advice concerning the manner in which views should be expressed in the course of consultation. It is suggested that this guidance could also pertain to the expression of feelings:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.... (p. 22)

For additional statements from the Writings which could be pertinent to the subject of the expression of feelings in the consultative process, reference could be made to "Consultation: A Compilation".

F3. (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980)

[End of Memorandum]

Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi on
Fostering the Development of Baha'i Communities

1. Individual Example

You must not make the great mistake of judging our Faith by one community which obviously needs to study and obey the Baha'i teachings. Human frailties and peculiarities can be a great test. But the only way, or perhaps I should say the first and best way, to remedy such situations, is to oneself do what is right. One soul can be the cause of the spiritual illumination of a continent.

Now that you have seen, and remedied, a great fault in your own life, now that you see more clearly what is lacking in your own community, there is nothing to prevent you from arising and showing such an example, such a love and spirit of service, as to enkindle the hearts of your fellow Baha'is.

He urges you to study deeply the teachings, teach others, study with those Baha'is who are anxious to do so, the deeper teachings of our Faith, and through example, effort and prayer, bring about a change.

(30 September 1949 to an individual believer) [1]

The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of

any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule.

The believers, loving the Cause above all else and putting its interests first, must be ready to bear the hardships entailed, of whatever nature they may be. Only through such persistence and self-sacrifice can we ever hope to preserve on the one hand our divine institutions intact, and on the other force ourselves to become nobler, better instruments to serve this glorious Faith. (20 November 1941 to an individual believer) [2]

Regarding your question about the need for greater unity among the friends there is no doubt that this is so, and the Guardian feels that one of the chief instruments for promoting it is to teach the Baha'is themselves, in classes and through precepts, that love of God, and consequently of men, is the essential foundation of every religion, our own included. A greater degree of love will produce a greater unity, because it enables people to bear with each other, to be patient and forgiving.

(7 July 1944 to an individual believer, quoted in "Baha'i News", no. 173, February 1945, p. 3) [3]

2. Assisting the Local Spiritual Assembly

Meantime we must do all we can to strengthen and support the Local and National Assemblies by exercising great care in the elections, so as to secure the return of the wisest and most suitable members, then by loyal cooperation and obedience. If we disapprove of their decisions we must be careful to avoid discussing such matters with other believers who have no authority to put them right. We must put our views frankly before the Assembly itself and only in the case of not getting a satisfactory reply appeal to the National Assembly, if it is a question of the conduct of the Local Assembly, and to Shoghi Effendi if the National Assembly is concerned.

(4 March 1925 to an individual believer) [4]

--Community Functioning, Page 2 (Extracts)

The situation in ..., about which the National Spiritual Assembly has already written him in detail, has very much grieved and afflicted his heart, as he is convinced that nothing short of complete unity among the friends, whether in their individual or collective labours, particularly in these days of administrative organization and development in the Cause, can ensure the steady progress of the Faith in that centre. There is no task more urgently necessary than the assurance of perfect harmony and fellowship among the friends, especially between the Local Assemblies and individual believers. The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly. The two must learn to cooperate, and to realize that only through such a co-operation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function. While obedience to the Local Assembly should be unqualified and whole-hearted, yet that body should enforce its decisions in such a way as to avoid giving the impression that it is animated

by dictatorial motives. The spirit of the Cause is one of mutual co-operation, and not that of a dictatorship.

The believers should have confidence in the directions and orders of their Assembly, even though they may not be convinced of their justice or right. Once the Assembly, through a majority vote of its members, comes to a decision the friends should readily obey it. Specially those dissenting members within the Assembly whose opinion is contrary to that of the majority of their fellow-members should set a good example before the community by sacrificing their personal views for the sake of obeying the principle of majority vote that underlies the functioning of all Baha'i Assemblies.

(28 October 1935 to an individual believer) [5]

The Assemblies have been established to administer the affairs of the Cause with authority. The believers have the right to vote for whoever they please. If they do not like their Assembly's acts, they must, for the sake of the unity of the Faith, abide by its decisions. The individual has the right to make suggestions, to protest, but he has no rights over the Assembly; his force is his vote. If one of the friends is dissatisfied over the local situation he should nevertheless co-operate with his Spiritual Assembly and do all he can to help it. He can pray for it, he can show through his own deeds a noble Baha'i example. The system is perfect, but if the instruments are imperfect we must still uphold the system, knowing God will watch over and protect His Cause, and that such conditions are only temporary and will pass away as the Cause grows and the Baha'is mature. i

He urges you not to lose heart, and never to stop serving the Faith. No matter what the attitude of others may be, it cannot exonerate you from showing the right attitude; your duty is to God, and you should rest assured in the end He will solve all these problems.

(14 November 1948 to an individual believer) [6]

Over and over, in going through the correspondence he received from your Assembly, he was struck by the fact that the friends acted so unadministratively. Instead of taking up their accusations and problems and unhappy feelings with their Local Assembly, or the National Assembly, they referred to individuals or individual members of the Assembly, or they refused

--Community Functioning, Page 3 (Extracts)

to meet with the Assembly. The first thing a believer should do is to turn to an Assembly--that is why we have Assemblies! He feels this trouble would never have arisen if the Baha'is utilized their Assemblies as they should. One of the healing remedies Baha'u'llah has given to a sick world is the Assembly (which in future will become a House of Justice); its members have very sacred and heavy responsibilities, its power to steer the Community, to protect and assist its members is likewise very great.

(30 June 1949 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [7]

3. Recommendations to Institutions

Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly

action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Baha'i Community.

But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.

(13 December 1939 to an individual believer) [8]

Regarding the matter of Mrs. ... and the inharmony that seems to exist among certain of the friends in ...: when Baha'is permit the dark forces of the world to enter into their own relationships within the Faith they gravely jeopardize its progress; it is the paramount duty of the believers, the Local Assemblies, and particularly the National Spiritual Assembly to foster harmony, understanding and love amongst the friends. All should be ready and willing to set aside every personal sense of grievance--justified or unjustified--for the good of the Cause, because the people will never embrace it until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking in the world: love and unity.

The Baha'is are fully entitled to address criticisms to their Assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the Assembly, Local or National, but then they must wholeheartedly accept the advice or decision of the Assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Baha'i administration.

(13 May 1945 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [9]