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Messages from the Universal House of Justice
2001–2022
The Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age
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Foreword
The messages in this volume chronicle the development of the Bahá’í Faith over the course of two eventful decades—years of critical importance both for the fortunes of humanity and for the worldwide Bahá’í community. To read them is to be deeply struck by the evidences of a community whose “heightened

awareness” from the outset of this period “of the value of process, the necessity of planning and the virtue of systematic action,” would serve as the foundation for rapidly accelerating growth as the period reached its victorious conclusion. Just as significantly, we witness a community increasingly conscious of the infinite spiritual resources at its disposal and of the manner in which to develop and deploy them for the betterment of human society. Though still constituting but a very small proportion of humanity, in the maturation of its institutions, the development of its community life, and the steady increase of its human resources—all advancing together in an organic and increasingly coherent manner—one could discern, as these years came to a close, a pattern of impressive action emerging, portending immense consequence for the future.

Most notable are the range and depth of the messages contained herein, but also striking is their overall coherence with each other. Addressing themes related to the life of the individual believer, the dynamics of the Bahá’í community, the operation of the institutions of the Faith at every level, and the collective interaction of all three with each other and with society, a world-transforming vision is presented in its totality. Further, these messages depict an array of outstanding advancements in the development of the Faith as the result of the ongoing efforts of the Bahá’ís, taking place in seeming counterpoint to a series of crises, including greatly intensified persecution of the believers in Iran and in a few other countries, and the confiscation and destruction of the House of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad.

Among the significant advancements described are the establishment of new National Spiritual Assemblies in various parts of the world, the publication of translations of the Writings of the Faith, the establishment of new Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs in various places, and, at the Bahá’í World Center, the establishment of the Bahá’í International Development Organization. In these years the Universal House of Justice also continued to fulfill its responsibility to contribute to the forces of integration at work in the world at large. Whether in the form of its own direct statements, such as the Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders, or in such publications as For the Betterment of the World, a remarkable example was set of how to relate the teachings of the Faith to a world in desperate need of a new framework through which to understand and act upon the imperatives of the age. In its messages on the occasions of the 200th anniversaries of the births of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, and for the 100th anniversary of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the House of Justice led the way in inviting humanity to work together with the Bahá’ís for the creation of a truly just and prosperous society. These messages were complemented by a range of others, directing attention to such matters as the advancement of women, the processes leading to the achievement of peace, the elimination of racial prejudice, the creation of a just economic system, the relationship of science and religion, the foundations for social action, the profound environmental challenge and the crisis precipitated by the global pandemic, among a number of others.

Among the most soul-stirring features of this compilation are the letters addressed to the believers in Iran, who during these years experienced a wave

of greatly intensified persecution orchestrated by a government whose ultimate goal was, and still remains, the eradication of the Bahá'í community from the land of its birth. In these letters, the House of Justice showers upon these steadfast souls touching expressions of love, appreciation, and confidence. The messages also clearly portray the Bahá'ís of Iran not merely as passive victims of oppression, but rather as true lovers of their native country and active protagonists of its betterment. They also describe how the Bahá'ís pursue their vision of social change, using means that are unifying and inclusive and devoid of partisanship, subversion, and self-aggrandizement. These letters have served as a balm to the sorely tried community of Bahá'ís in that country, as well as a source of inspiration and edification for their brothers and sisters in every corner of the globe.

The same spirit of loving encouragement, together with elucidation of fundamental principles and their practical applications, infuses all of these letters, whether addressed to individuals, national communities, or to the entire world. The result is the continuing progress of a community more focused and more persistent in pursuit of its aims, and poised to exercise an ever greater impact upon the life of society. In no arena was this more apparent than in the prosecution of four consecutive teachings plans, each of five years' duration, followed by a one-year plan. In these plans, the Bahá'í community dramatically built its capacity to advance along three broad areas of endeavor—expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in the discourse of society—and doing so in a systematic manner characterized by an attitude of experimentation and learning. All of this was propelled chiefly by the institute process, in which the application of the Word of God in the life of society is expressed in increasingly complex acts of service as knowledge accrues and growth advances. It is a system of social change, with spiritual and material aspects, involving ever-increasing contingents of active participants, and in which all peoples of the world are welcomed and seen as both contributors and beneficiaries. While focused on learning and capacity building at the grassroots, the Universal House of Justice also stimulated the accelerated evolution of a system capable of disseminating knowledge whereby insights obtained in any part of the world could be shared and applied to the benefit of the entire global community. The continuing maturation of this system is in and of itself an accomplishment with far-reaching consequences.

By the year 2022 the Bahá'í community had evolved into one that was more confident, more outward looking, more conscious of its mission, and had developed a more profound grasp of the principles upon which its future growth would be based. There can be little question that these letters demonstrate the potentialities of a religious movement that is unique in the annals of history: a community protected and guided through the power of a Covenant; undaunted and indivisible in the face of tests; mystic at its heart; scientific in method; united in vision; infinitely diverse in expression; tested and matured by a century and a half of unparalleled experience; increasingly manifesting the transformative powers latent in the Word of God for today; keenly aware of the trials that humanity must face before it realizes its destiny, and yet serenely confident of ultimate victory.

The National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá’ís of the United States
December 2023
Epochs of the Heroic Age
1844–1853
The First Epoch
The Bábí Dispensation
1853–1892
The Second Epoch
The Ministry of Bahá’u’lláh
1892–1921
The Third Epoch
The Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
Epochs of the Formative Age
1921–1944/46
The First Epoch
1921–1936Period of Preparation
1937–1944The first Seven Year Plan of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada
1944–1946Consolidation of victories
1946–1963
The Second Epoch
1946–1953The second Seven Year Plan of the Bahá’ís of the United States and plans of varying duration pursued by nine other regional and national Bahá’í communities (Canada; Central America and South America; Australia and New Zealand; India, Pakistan, and Burma; the British Isles; Germany and Austria; Persia; Egypt; Iraq)
1953–1963The Ten Year World Crusade
1963–1986
The Third Epoch
1963–1964Year of Preparation
1964–1973Nine Year Plan
1973–1974Year of Preparation
1974–1979Five Year Plan
1979–1986Seven Year Plan
1986–2001
The Fourth Epoch
1986–1992Six Year Plan
1992–1993Holy Year Commemorating the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh and the Inauguration of His Covenant
1993–1996Three Year Plan
1996–2000Four Year Plan
2000–2001Twelve Month Plan
2001–2022
The Fifth Epoch
2001–2006Five Year Plan
2006–2011Five Year Plan

2011–2016Five Year Plan
2016–2021Five Year Plan
2021–2022One Year Plan
The Fifth Epoch
Significant Milestones, Anniversaries, and Events
Milestones
Ridván 2001Beginning of the Five Year Plan
Ridván 2006End of the Five Year PlanBeginning of the next Five Year Plan
Ridván 2011End of the Five Year PlanBeginning of the next Five Year Plan
Ridván 2016End of the Five Year PlanBeginning of the next Five Year Plan
Ridván 2021End of the Five Year PlanBeginning of the One Year Plan
Ridván 2022End of the One Year PlanBeginning of the Nine Year Plan
Significant Anniversaries
March 2009Centenary Anniversary of the interment of the remains of the Báb
August 2010Centenary Anniversary of the departure of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on His journey to the West
December 2013Centenary Anniversary of the return of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the Holy Land
2016–2017Centenary Anniversary of the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan
October 2017Bicentenary Anniversary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh
October 2019Bicentenary Anniversary of the Birth of the Báb
November 2021Centenary Anniversary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of the inauguration of the Formative Age
“Period of Special Potency”
2016–2021Opened with the centenary of the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan and closed with the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which marked the conclusion of the first century of the Formative Age and the start of the second
Significant Events
Ridván 2001Beginning of the Five Year Plan
May 2001Dedication of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb
Completion of the projects on Mount Carmel
June 2001Monument placed over the resting place of Amatu’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum
November 2001Establishment of the World Centre Endowment Fund
February 2002Martyrdom of two Bahá’ís in Tajikistan
April 2002Release of the letter to the world’s religious leaders
Publication of The Summons of the Lord of Hosts
June 2002Publication of Gems of Divine Mysteries
April 2003Cancellation of the Ninth International Bahá’í Convention
Ridván 2003Election of the Universal House of Justice
Completion of restoration work on the Cell of Bahá’u’lláh in the prison at ‘Akká
May 2003Appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre
June 2004Launch of the Bahá’í Reference Library website
March 2005By-election to replace two members of the Universal House of Justice

Naw-Rúz 2005Release of One Common Faith
Ridván 2005Establishment of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh
June 2005Creation of the Bahá'í Internet Agency
October 2005Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
December 2005Martyrdom of a Bahá'í in Iran
Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Holy Land
Release of the message regarding the Five Year Plan, 2006–2011
Junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes identified as a fourth core activity
Books of the Ruhi Institute designated as constituting the main sequence of courses for institutes worldwide
April 2006Publication of The Tabernacle of Unity
Ridván 2006Beginning of the Five Year Plan
June 2006Launch of the Bahá'í Media Bank website
March 2007Message on the Bahá'í electoral process
May 2007Passing of His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II
June 2007Release of a compilation on Huqúqu'lláh
August 2007Release of a confidential communication issued by the Central Security Office in Iran expelling Bahá'í university students
September 2007Passing of Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, the last remaining Hand of the Cause of God
November 2007Message paying tribute to the Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God
February 2008Revision of the Codification of the law of Huqúqu'lláh
March 2008Release of a revised compilation on family life
Ridván 2008Convening of the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention and the election ofthe Universal House of Justice
May 2008Appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre
Arrest of the Yárán
Announcement of developments at the Bahá'í World Centre, including the acquisition of property at Bahjí, beautification of the environs of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, restoration of the Ridván Garden, restoration and development of the International Archives Building, and renovation of the Shrine of the Báb
October 2008Call for 41 regional conferences worldwide
Release of Bahá'í prisoners in Yemen after several months of incarceration
March 2009Services of the Yárán and Khádimín in Iran brought to an end
Sending of an open letter from the Bahá'í International Community to the Prosecutor General of Iran
January 2010Establishment of the Disaster Relief Fund, later named the Humanitarian Relief Fund
March 2010By-election to replace two members of the Universal House of Justice
April 2010Five Year Plan goal of 1,500 clusters with an intensive program of growth fulfilled
October 2010Completion of the restoration work on the Ridván Garden
November 2010Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Commencement of the excavation work for the House of Worship in Chile
December 2010Sending of an open letter from the Bahá'í International Community to the head of the judiciary in Iran
Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Holy Land
Release of the message regarding the Five Year Plan, 2011–2016
April 2011Completion of the restoration of the Shrine of the Báb and other projects at the World Centre
Ridván 2011Beginning of the Five Year Plan
May 2011Assault against the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education in Iran
August 2011Sending of an open letter from the Bahá'í International Community to the Minister of Science, Research, and Technology in Iran
Ridván 2012Announcement of the construction of two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs
November 2012Release of a statement on social action prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development
February 2013Call for 95 youth conferences, later to become 114
March 2013Message to the Bahá'ís of Iran on non-involvement in partisan politics
Ridván 2013Convening of the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention and the election of the Universal House of Justice
May 2013Appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre
June 2013Destruction of the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad
August 2013Martyrdom of a Bahá'í in Iran
May 2014Destruction of the old Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz
July 2014Universal implementation of the Badí' calendar
November 2014Acquisition of property adjacent to the Shrine of the Báb
January 2015Release of a new version of the Bahai.org website
March 2015Publication of a revised translation of Some Answered Questions
October 2015Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
December 2015Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Holy Land
Release of the message regarding the Five Year Plan, 2016–2021
Ridván 2016Beginning of the Five Year Plan
Number of programmes of growth established surpasses 5,000
May 2016Appointment of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh
September 2016Sending of an open letter from the Bahá'í International Community to the President of Iran
October 2016Dedication of the House of Worship in Santiago, Chile
Martyrdom of a Bahá'í in Iran
November 2016Number of Auxiliary Board members increased to 1,134
January 2017Publication of Days of Remembrance
March 2017Message on the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life
Announcement of the use of the Payamha website for the release of messages of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran
April 2017Adoption of measures to make pilgrimage more accessible
September 2017Dedication of the House of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia

Release of a compilation on the Institution of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár
October 2017Holding of worldwide celebrations of the bicentennial Anniversary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and release of a message marking the occasion
Ridván 2018Twelfth International Bahá’í Convention and the election of the Universal House of Justice
May 2018Appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre
July 2018Dedication of the House of Worship in Norte del Cauca, Colombia
November 2018Establishment of the Bahá’í International Development Organization
January 2019Message concerning humanity’s progress towards world peace
February 2019Publication of The Call of the Divine Beloved
Release of a compilation on prayer and devotional life
Ridván 2019Announcement of the construction of the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
500 clusters reach the third milestone along the continuum of growth
May 2019Appointment of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu’lláh
Establishment of a website for the publication The Bahá’í World
September 2019Announcement of the design of the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
October 2019Holding of worldwide celebrations of the bicentennial Anniversary of the Birth of the Báb and release of a message marking the occasion
January 2020Introduction of a two-stage electoral process for selected Local Spiritual Assemblies
March 2020Suspension of pilgrimage and brief visits to the Holy Land due to the coronavirus pandemic
August 2020Release of a compilation on social action
October 2020Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and increase in the number of Continental Counsellors to ninety
November 2020Message concerning the One Year Plan
February 2021Release of a compilation on the Universal House of Justice
March 2021Release of English translations of twenty-six prayers revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
April 2021Completion of restoration work on the House of ‘Abbúd
Ridván 2021Beginning of the One Year Plan
Announcement of the conclusion of the second epoch of the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the beginning of the third epoch
1,000 clusters reach the third milestone, surpassing expectations at the outset of the Five Year Plan in 2016, and the number of clusters with intensive programmes of growth more than doubles and stands at approximately 4,000
Voting age in Bahá’í elections lowered to eighteen
Publication of Light of the World
May 2021Dedication of the House of Worship in Matunda Soy, Kenya
October 2021Announcement of the resumption of pilgrimage and brief visits in January 2022 and December 2021, respectively
November 2021Completion of the restoration work on the Mansion of Mazra‘ih
Dedication of the House of Worship in Tanna, Vanuatu
Gathering in the Holy Land to mark the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and release of a message paying tribute to Him

December 2021Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in the Holy Land
Message concerning the Nine Year Plan
January 2022Message concerning the raising of capacity to develop materials and branch courses by training institutes
Series of global conferences launching the Nine Year Plan begins
Ridván 2022Beginning of the Nine Year Plan
Announcement of the conclusion of the fifth epoch of the Formative Age and the beginning of the sixth epoch
2001–2006
The Five Year Plan
1
Ridván Message 2001
Ridván 2001
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
1.1With great joy in our hearts and high expectations, we come to this Ridván season at a change of time, when a new state of mind is evident among us all. Abroad in our world community there is a heightened awareness of the value of process, the necessity of planning and the virtue of systematic action in fostering growth and in developing the human resources by which expansion can be sustained and consolidation assured. The coherence of understanding about these prerequisites of progress cannot be overvalued, nor can the importance of perpetuating them through well-ordered training be overestimated. And so the arrival of our community at such a moment of consciousness is an occasion of significance for us. We are deeply grateful to the Blessed Beauty to be able to recognize and acclaim it at the very beginning of the global enterprise being launched during these festive days.
1.2The power of will generated by this consciousness characterized the conference of the Continental Counsellors and the members of their Auxiliary Boards who gathered last January in the Holy Land. The event produced so illuminating an experience as to signalize the Faith’s entry into a new epoch, the fifth of its Formative Age. Such a freshness of vitality as was displayed at this historic gathering came to be understood as a manifestation of the rising quality of activity throughout the community. Pursuit during the past year of the essentials for advancing the process of entry by troops confirmed this observation. The path was thus paved for the Five Year Plan, the first venture being entered upon in the Fifth Epoch.
1.3In augmenting major efforts of the previous Four Year Plan that brought into being more than 300 training institutes, the Twelve Month Plan achieved its purpose. It gathered significance through the notable responses of institutions and individuals to the call for a greater focus on the spiritual nurturing of children and the involvement of junior youth in Bahá’í community life. The training of teachers of children’s classes and the inclusion of junior youth in the institute process have become a regular part of Bahá’í activity in a number of countries. Despite its brevity, the Twelve Month Plan had an importance beyond the objectives specifically assigned. The Plan was a dynamic

link between a highly eventful epoch in Bahá'í history and the immensely promising prospects of a new one, for which its achievements have so well prepared the community. It has been etched in our annals, too, for the enduring effects of the Faith's activities at the end of the twentieth century—a century that deserves to be reflected upon by any Bahá'í who wishes to understand the tumultuous forces that influenced the life of the planet and the processes of the Cause itself at a crucial time in humanity's social and spiritual evolution. As an aid to so worthy an effort, Century of Light, a review of the twentieth century, was prepared at our request and under our supervision.

1.4On many occasions during this one-year endeavour, the external affairs activities of the Faith were especially visible. Consider, for example, the instances of Bahá'í representatives' having participated prominently in the millennial events that took place in May, August and September at the urging of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The implications of so close and conspicuous an involvement of the Bahá'í International Community with the processes of the Lesser Peace will require the passage of time to be properly understood. Among other highlights was the continental colloquium organized in India by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, a new agency operating under the aegis of the Bahá'í International Community. Adopting the theme of "science, religion and development", the conference featured the participation of leading non-governmental organizations of India, as well as that of institutions of such renown as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and the World Bank. In October, the Bahá'í World News Service (BWNS) was launched on the Internet with the intention of reaching both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í audiences with news stories about developments throughout the Bahá'í world.

1.5The intensive activities at the Bahá'í World Centre during the last year were, for the most part, made known to the friends through previous reports that included references to such achievements as the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel; the Conference of Continental Counsellors and the members of their Auxiliary Boards held in the Holy Land last January; and the completion of the Mount Carmel projects, which are now receiving finishing touches in preparation for the celebratory events in May. Last October, for the first time, pilgrims and visitors were received at the new Reception Centre in Haifa, which became fully operational. At Bahjí the embellishment of the sacred site through the development of its gardens has proceeded continually; the effort has, however, received a boost from the new project initiated last year to construct a Visitors' Centre towards the northern end of the property beyond the Collins Gate. Scheduled for completion in the next few months, the structure is fully in place, and work is progressing in all areas, including finishing and landscaping. The new facilities will improve the ability of the World Centre to receive increasing numbers of pilgrims, short-term Bahá'í visitors, and special guests.

1.6To conclude this summary of the year, we rejoice in informing you that, after the lapse of almost three decades, the National Spiritual Assembly of the

Bahá'ís of Indonesia was restored at the National Convention held in Jakarta last Ridván. A ban imposed on Bahá'í activities in August 1962 severely restricted the actions of the Indonesian Bahá'ís for all that time, but they remained steadfast and wise in their long-suffering until changed circumstances in that country resulted in the lifting of the ban. May we not venture to hope, then, that a similar happy report concerning our beleaguered co-religionists in Iran, Egypt and other countries will not be too far distant?

1.7Dear Friends: Two decades from now the Bahá'í world will celebrate the centenary of the inception of the Formative Age. We look back at the dawning of the Age from the vantage point of attainments that could hardly have been imagined at the outset. Up ahead are horizons that urgently summon the community to even greater achievements in the short span separating it from that centennial. Those heights can and must be scaled. The Five Year Plan, to which we call the urgent and sustained attention of the friends throughout the world, is intended to meet this challenge. It constitutes the first of a series of campaigns that will be pursued during these twenty years. This Plan marks the next phase in the aim to accomplish a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. It demands an acceleration of this vital process and, furthermore, insists upon continuity in systematic endeavour on the part of its three constituent participants: the individual, the institutions, and the community.

1.8No need to elaborate on the requirements of the Plan, for these were set out in our message to the assembled Counsellors in the Holy Land and subsequently shared with all National Spiritual Assemblies. Soon after their conference, the Counsellors began consulting with the National Assemblies about the execution of the Plan in their respective jurisdictions. The Plan's direction is therefore known to the friends everywhere, as regional and local preparations for pursuing its major aim are under way. There is a general awareness by now that efforts will be made to effect a deeper penetration of the Faith into more and more regions within countries. For example, where circumstances permit, local communities that exist in close proximity to each other will be mobilized to participate in intensive programmes of growth. Other approaches will require methodical opening of new areas for which homefront pioneers must be raised up in the same consecrated spirit that prompted those who scattered abroad at earlier times to open virgin territories across continents and seas. Suffice it to say that the process animating this divinely driven enterprise will eventually expand as related features are gradually introduced and systematically integrated into its operation.

1.9A feature of the Fifth Epoch will be the enrichment of the devotional life of the community through the raising up of national Houses of Worship, as circumstances in national communities permit. The scheduling of these projects will be determined by the Universal House of Justice in relation to the advancement of the process of entry by troops within countries. This development will unfold throughout successive stages of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan. Upon the completion of the Mother Temple of the West, the Guardian started a programme of constructing continental temples. The first among these

were the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs in Kampala, Sydney and Frankfurt, which were built in response to Ten Year Plan goals. The Universal House of Justice continued along these lines with the building of Temples in Panama City, Apia, and New Delhi. But this continental stage has yet to be completed: one more edifice remains to be built. It is with profound thankfulness and joy that we announce at this auspicious moment the decision to proceed with this last project. During the Five Year Plan, erection of the Mother Temple of South America in Santiago, Chile, will commence and thus fulfil a wish clearly expressed by Shoghi Effendi.

1.10Meanwhile, the time is propitious that further steps be taken at the World Centre to develop the functions of the institutions occupying the new edifices on the Arc. The International Teaching Centre having advanced significantly in its work, attention will be given particularly to organizing the work of the Centre for the Study of the Texts. Enriching the translations into English from the Holy Texts will be a special object of this attention. The purpose of the institution is to assist the Universal House of Justice in consulting the Sacred Writings and to prepare translations and commentaries on the authoritative texts of the Faith. Moreover, in the Holy Land, a continued effort will be devoted towards the devising of measures to make possible a further increase in the number of pilgrims and visitors to the Bahá'í World Centre.

1.11In our Ridván message five years ago, we announced the holding of a major event at the World Centre to mark the completion of the projects on Mount Carmel and the opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb to the public. The moment is upon us, and we exult in the anticipation of welcoming friends from virtually all countries to programmes that will extend over a five-day period, 21–25 May. We are also happy to say that steps are being taken to connect the Bahá'í world to the proceedings through live transmissions on the World Wide Web and by satellite, about which information is being provided. As the World Centre focuses on the preparations, excitement is building up among the public in Haifa, where municipal authorities have undertaken to publish a book entitled Bahá'í Shrine and Gardens on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel: A Visual Journey to coincide with the event. Moreover, the Israel Postal Authority is pursuing its decision to release at the same time a commemorative stamp featuring the Terraces. The significance of the occasion lies principally in the pause it will allow for a review of the remarkable distance the Cause has covered in its development during the twentieth century. It will be time, too, for considering the future implications of the phenomenal accomplishments symbolized by the rise of the monumental structures on God's holy mountain—a rise that opens the spiritual and administrative centres of our Faith to the gaze of the world.

1.12As our community rejoices in these thrilling considerations, let every member bear in mind that there is no time for resting on laurels. Humanity's current plight is too desperate to allow for even a moment's hesitation in sharing the Bread of Life, which has come down from heaven in our time. Let there be no delay, then, in advancing the process that has every promise of success in ushering to the banquet table of the Lord of Hosts the souls of all

that hunger after truth.

1.13May He Who keeps watch over the destiny of His divine System guide and direct and confirm every effort you make towards the realization of the urgent tasks set before you.

The Universal House of Justice

2

Opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb

22 May 2001

On the occasion of the official opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb

2.1With joyful and thankful hearts, we welcome all who have come from near and far to join us on this auspicious occasion for the Bahá'ís of the world. We acknowledge with deep appreciation the presence of so many distinguished guests.

2.2A century and a half have passed since that unspeakable tragedy in the northwest of Persia when the Báb faced the volley fired at Him from the rifles of 750 soldiers. The soldiers had followed the orders of the highest authorities in the land. The Báb's mangled body was then thrown on the side of a moat outside the city, abandoned to what His cold-blooded persecutors thought would be a dishonourable fate. They had hoped thus to put an end to the growing influence of His teachings on masses of people throughout the country. These masses had accepted, in the face of intense persecution, the Báb's claim to prophethood, and their lives were being transformed spiritually and morally as He prepared them for what He said was the dawn of a new age in which a world civilization would be born and flourish. The expectations that stirred countless hearts were heightened even more sublimely by the Báb's announcement that One greater than He would soon arise, One who would reveal the unparalleled character of the promised world civilization that would signify the coming of age of the entire human race.

2.3We are met not to lament the tragedy of the Báb's martyrdom and the persecutions that followed; rather have we come to celebrate the culmination and acknowledge the meaning of an unprecedented project that had its beginning over a century ago. It was then that Bahá'u'lláh, Whom the Ottoman authorities had banished to Acre to serve out His days in confinement, visited Mount Carmel and selected the spot where the remains of His Herald would be interred. We humbly trust that the wondrous result achieved by the completion of the nineteen terraced gardens, at the heart of which rises the Shrine of the Báb, is a fitting fulfilment of the vision initiated by Bahá'u'lláh.

2.4The sufferings sustained by the Báb so as to arouse humanity to the responsibilities of its coming age of maturity were themselves indications of the intensity of the struggle necessary for the world's people to pass through the age of humanity's collective adolescence. Paradoxical as it may seem, this is a source of hope. The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia. That our Earth has contracted into a neighbourhood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. Death pangs are yielding

to birth pangs. The pain shall pass when members of the human race act upon the common recognition of their essential oneness. There is a light at the end of this tunnel of change beckoning humanity to the goal destined for it according to the testimonies recorded in all the Holy Books.

2.5The Shrine of the Báb stands as a symbol of the efficacy of that age-old promise, a sign of its urgency. It is, as well, a monument to the triumph of love over hate. The gardens which surround that structure, in their rich variety of colours and plants, are a reminder that the human race can live harmoniously in all its diversity. The light that shines from the central edifice is as a beacon of hope to the countless multitudes who yearn for a life that satisfies the soul as well as the body.

2.6This inextinguishable hope stems from words such as these from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh: "This is the Day in which God's most excellent favours have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace has been infused into all created things." May all who strive, often against great odds, to uphold principles of justice and concord be encouraged by these assurances.

2.7In reflecting on the years of effort invested in this daunting project, we are moved to express to the people of Haifa the warmth of the feeling in our hearts. Their city will for all time be extolled by the Bahá'ís everywhere as the place in which the mortal remains of the youthful Prophet-Herald of their Faith finally found refuge, and this after half a century of having to be secretly moved for protection from one place to another in His native land. The patience and cordiality shown towards the Bahá'ís throughout the most difficult years of the construction work exemplify the spirit of goodwill in which so much of the world stands so greatly in need. Haifa is providentially situated on Mount Carmel, with its immortal associations with saintly visionaries, whose concern throughout the ages was largely focused on the promise of peace. May Haifa achieve wide renown not just as a place of natural beauty but more especially as the city of peace.

2.8Let the word go forth, then, from this sacred spot, from this Mountain of the Lord, that the unity and peace of the world are not only possible but inevitable. Their time has come.

The Universal House of Justice

3

Message to the Gathering Marking theCompletion of the Projects on Mount Carmel

24 May 2001

To the Believers Gathered for the Events Marking the Completion of the Projects on Mount Carmel

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

3.1One hundred and forty-eight years have passed since the moment in the darkness of the Síyáh-Chál when Bahá'u'lláh received the Divine summons to rise and proclaim to all on earth the dawning of the Day of God: Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy pen…. Erelong God will raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.

In terms of historical time, it is but the briefest of spaces that separates that primal moment from the splendid victory we celebrate here this week. You who have come together from every corner of the earth and from every segment of the human family represent a cross-section of those whom Bahá'u'lláh has raised up to aid Him, and no one among us can hope to express adequately the gratitude we feel at being in that company.

3.2The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the Cause we serve. They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal institutions of a unique and unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community's life. In the transformation that has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá'í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God's good time, bring about the reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it.

3.3Reflection on what the Bahá'í community has accomplished throws into heartbreaking perspective the suffering and deprivation engulfing the great majority of our fellow human beings. It is necessary that it should do so, because the effect is to open our minds and souls to vital implications of the mission Bahá'u'lláh has laid on us. "Know thou of a truth," He declares, "these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice." "God be praised!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "The sun of justice hath risen above the horizon of Bahá'u'lláh. For in His Tablets the foundations of such a justice have been laid as no mind hath, from the beginning of creation, conceived." In the final analysis, it is this Divine purpose that all our activities are intended to serve, and we will advance this purpose to the degree that we understand what is at stake in the efforts we are making to teach the Faith, to establish and consolidate its institutions, and to intensify the influence it is exerting in the life of society.

3.4Humanity's crying need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls, rather, for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family. Commitment to this revolutionizing principle will increasingly empower individual believers and Bahá'í institutions alike in awakening others to the Day of God and to the latent spiritual and moral capacities that can change this world into another world. We demonstrate this commitment, Shoghi Effendi tells us, by our rectitude of conduct towards others, by the discipline of our own natures, and by our complete freedom from the prejudices that cripple collective action in the society around us and frustrate positive impulses towards change.

3.5The standards set out by the Guardian apply to the entire Bahá'í community, both in its collective life and in the lives of its individual members. They hold, however, particular implications for Bahá'í youth, who are blessed with the enviable advantages of high energy, flexibility of mind and, to a great extent, freedom of movement. The world that Bahá'í youth are inheriting is one in which the distribution of educational, economic and other basic opportunities is grossly unjust. Bahá'í youth must not be daunted by such barriers. Their challenge is to understand the real condition of humanity and to forge among themselves enduring spiritual bonds that free them not only from racial and national divisions but also from those created by social and material conditions, and that will fit them to carry forward the great trust reposed in them.

3.6Bahá'u'lláh encourages us to anticipate from the youth of His community a much earlier advance to maturity than is characteristic of the rest of society. Clearly, that does not in any way diminish the importance of the pursuit of education, of economic realities, or of family obligations. It does mean that Bahá'í youth can accept—and should be encouraged to accept—a responsibility of their own for moral leadership in the transformation of society. In vindication of these words, we invoke the memory of the One Whose Shrine has today set the Mountain of God ablaze with light, and the memory of the band of youthful heroes and heroines whose greatness of soul and sacrifice of self launched on its course the enterprise in which we are engaged.

3.7The achievement we are today celebrating brings into focus two paradoxical realities. Within the Faith itself, the gathering strength of the Bahá'í community presages a great surge forward, intimations of which are already everywhere apparent. Inevitably, as Shoghi Effendi several times emphasized, this advance will excite even more intense opposition than the Cause has so far encountered, opposition that will in turn release the greater forces needed for the still more demanding tasks that lie ahead.

3.8The world in which our efforts are taking place is likewise undergoing profound changes. On the one hand, the vast network of agencies and individuals that promote understanding and cooperation among diverse peoples affirms ever more powerfully the growing recognition that the "earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens". On the other hand, it is equally clear that the world is moving through a period of social paralysis, tyranny and anarchy, a period marked by the widespread neglect of both governmental and personal responsibility, the ultimate consequences of which no one on earth can foresee. The effect of both developments, as Shoghi Effendi also pointed out, will be to awaken in the hearts of those who share this planet with us a longing for unity and justice that can be met only by the Cause of God.

3.9A long and arduous process of struggle, experimentation and construction has led to the victories that lift our hearts as a new century opens. Through the rapidly proliferating system of institutes and the energy being invested everywhere in area growth strategies, the Bahá'í community has moved swiftly to capitalize on what has been achieved. However deep may be the gloom enveloping the world, the future has never looked so bright for the prosecution of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. We who have been privileged to gather here

this week have witnessed, with our own eyes, the dawning fulfillment of the words revealed by the Lord of Hosts on this mountain over a century ago, words which cause the very atoms of the earth to vibrate: “Verily this is the Day in which both land and sea rejoice at this announcement, the Day for which have been laid up those things which God, through a bounty beyond the ken of mortal mind or heart, hath destined for revelation.”

3.10Such a privilege carries with it an equally great responsibility, the responsibility to do our part, whatever the sacrifice, whatever the difficulty, to see that the poignant desire expressed by Bahá’u’lláh on that historic occasion is fulfilled: “Oh, how I long to announce unto every spot on the surface of the earth, and to carry to each one of its cities, the glad-tidings of this Revelation—a Revelation to which the heart of Sinai hath been attracted, and in whose name the Burning Bush is calling: ‘Unto God, the Lord of Lords, belong the kingdoms of earth and heaven.’”

3.11With all the fervour of thankful hearts, we will pray at the Holy Threshold that Bahá’u’lláh will bless and confirm every effort you make to advance His purpose for the redemption of humankind and the healing of its ills.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

4

Completion of the Projects on Mount Carmel

1 June 2001

To the Bahá’ís of the World

4.1A week ago today more than 2,500 representatives of 182 countries and dependent territories gathered, along with the friends serving at the Bahá’í World Centre, on the Arc on Mount Carmel for the last of the events that marked the completion of the projects on that holy mountain. Our hearts overflow with joy, our heads are bowed in gratitude to the Blessed Beauty, as we contemplate the astonishing success of the ceremony that inaugurated the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb. The awe-inspiring, worldwide effects are reflected in the many messages being received here from different parts of the planet where telecasts of the event via satellite were seen.

4.2It is too soon to assess the immediate impact of this unexampled global proclamation of the Faith; nor can its implications for the progress of the Cause be immediately understood. There can be no doubt, however, that so vast a proclamation will accrue towards the advancement of the process of entry by troops, on which the energy of the loved ones of Bahá’u’lláh everywhere must be even more intensively focused than before. During the course of these events, we released two messages conveying our current views of the meaning of what transpired in the Holy Land. These are being sent separately to National Spiritual Assemblies, which will arrange to share them immediately with the friends throughout their communities.

4.3May the manifest wonders of the Lord of Hosts invigorate and fortify the friends throughout the world in their devoted endeavours to pursue the avenues of service that He has so graciously opened before them.

The Universal House of Justice

5

Monument over the Resting Place of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum
19 June 2001
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
5.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to inform you that a few days before the inaugural events associated with the official` opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb, a monument was raised over the resting place of the Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum opposite the House of the Master in Haifa. Landscaping work is being carried out in the surrounding garden.
5.2The monument, commissioned by the House of Justice and designed by Mr. Hossein Amanat, is depicted on the enclosed photograph. The friends, holding such affection and devotion for beloved Rúhíyyih Khánum, will no doubt be delighted to learn of this achievement.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
6
Canada's Second Youth Conference in Sherbrooke
28 June 2001
To the Friends Gathered at Canada's Second Youth Conference in Sherbrooke, 28 June–1 July 2001
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
6.1The rising momentum of the series of youth conferences in the Americas has been a source of great joy to us, and we welcome the opportunity to speak directly to your gathering this weekend in the heart of French Canada.
6.2As you are all certainly aware, the Bahá'í World Centre has just been the scene of a series of extraordinary events marking the successful completion of the great building projects on Mount Carmel, events whose impact on public consciousness throughout the world has far surpassed the brightest hopes of the Bahá'í community. At the conclusion of the conference accompanying the inauguration, we addressed a message to the friends assembled from every part of the world and virtually every segment of humanity. Its central theme, and the perspectives in which that theme is set forth, hold special implications for the youth of the Bahá'í world, and we are therefore moved to forward you a copy of the statement, in the confidence that it will assist in focusing your consultations this weekend.
6.3Historical circumstances have endowed people of North America—and particularly its youth—with opportunities and resources denied to the great majority of the rest of the human family. While the immediate focus of your deliberations must be the needs of the ambitious area growth programs underway throughout Canada and the United States, it is vital that you keep ever in the forefront of your minds the fact that your two communities have been singled out by the unerring pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for a mission that embraces the entire planet. Far from being inhibited by investment of your energies in other parts of the world, the work of the Cause in North America will derive fresh vision and vitality from such contributions.
6.4Be confident of our ardent prayers at the Holy Shrines that

Bahá'u'lláh will inspire the minds and hearts and confirm the resolutions you make to advance His Cause.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

7

International Financial Collaboration Goals Achieved

29 July 2001

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

7.1The approach that was adopted by the Universal House of Justice at the outset of the Four Year Plan for the assignment of international financial collaboration goals, and which was carried forward into the Twelve Month Plan, has proved to be highly effective. Forty-one selected National Spiritual Assemblies were asked to gauge how much they could contribute towards the acquisition and improvement of property and equipment by other national communities over a four-year period. On the basis of their estimates, the House of Justice called upon them to assist communities in various parts of the world as specific needs came to its attention.

7.2In all, a total of US$1,610,331 was assigned as international financial collaboration goals to the National Assemblies which expressed their willingness to take part in this initiative. Some 55 national communities benefited from their assistance, with a total of US$546,671 allocated to 24 countries in Africa; US$223,300 to 4 countries in the Americas; US$303,705 to 13 countries in Asia; US$197,800 to 4 countries in Australasia; and US$338,855 to 10 countries in Eastern Europe. The goals ranged from US$650, applied towards the purchase of office equipment for an institute facility in Africa, to US$110,000 for two parcels of land adjoining the Temple property in Samoa.

7.3The funds disbursed through the financial collaboration initiative have covered the cost of a variety of projects. Three National Centres were constructed, and six buildings purchased to serve as national headquarters. A further ten National Centres were renovated, repaired or improved in some way. Similarly, six institute facilities were built, four properties purchased for this purpose, and seven existing facilities upgraded. A printing press was acquired by one National Assembly in Africa to support its core literature programme, and two vehicles bought to facilitate the work of the national training institutes in two other countries in that continent. Some US$60,000 was allocated for office equipment, greatly enhancing the functioning of National Offices especially in Africa, where at least seven computers were purchased and installed. Temple sites, too, benefited from this initiative, with goals including the purchase of the lands referred to above, the improvement of the staff quarters at the Temple site in Kampala and the acquisition of two lawn mowers to care for the Temple grounds. In Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, lands were purchased and Regional and Local Bahá'í Centres acquired, all in a direct response to the impressive accomplishments of the Four Year and Twelve Month Plans.

7.4Throughout, the Universal House of Justice was greatly heartened by the willingness expressed by the contributing National Assemblies to meet the needs

of the Cause worldwide. Given the success of the initiative, it has decided to adopt the same approach for the Five Year Plan. You are one of 38 selected National Assemblies that it feels are in a position to assist other national communities in this way. We would therefore appreciate receiving from you an estimate of the amount you can offer as financial collaboration during the Five Year Plan. In this connection, it would be helpful if you could give us a breakdown, indicating how much you gauge you can provide each year. To assist you in determining the amount you are able to contribute, we are asked to inform you that the House of Justice anticipates that approximately US$2,500,000 will be required to meet the financial collaboration goals to be assigned during the Plan.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

8

Needs of the International Funds of the Faith

5 August 2001

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

8.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to provide you with the results of an assessment of the present state and needs of the international funds of the Faith which it has conducted following completion of the projects on Mount Carmel.

8.2There can be no doubt that this accomplishment, followed by the spectacular success of the ceremony marking the official opening to the public of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb, has infused the community of the Greatest Name throughout the world with fresh vigour and confidence as it embarks upon the Five Year Plan and seeks to advance the process of entry by troops.

8.3Through the sacrificial contributions of the believers from all parts of the planet, sufficient funds were provided to meet the needs of this historic enterprise and permit the construction to proceed unimpeded to its conclusion. The House of Justice has decided to close the Arc Projects Fund forthwith, with confidence that the funds remaining in it will suffice to meet the outstanding expenses of the construction and the purchase of some required properties on the perimeter of the Terraces.

8.4It is now apparent that the needs of the Bahá'í International Fund have increased substantially as a consequence of a number of recent developments, including the following:

The sharp increase in the tempo of Bahá'í activity throughout the world with the launch of the Five Year Plan has created a pressing need for resources to meet the new opportunities now emerging to promote growth and to influence society.

Adequate resources must be allocated for the maintenance of the Terraces and edifices of the Arc, including the preservation of the high standard of the gardens and lawns, the upkeep of the structures and ornaments, and the provision of appropriate security measures.

Guides must be provided for the rising number of visitors to the Terraces, now estimated to be 35,000 members of the public each week, including those who are

conducted on tours in groups of 60 at a time during the daylight hours, 7 days a week.

Greater attention must be given without delay to the preservation of the precious documents and objects associated with the ministries of the Central Figures of the Faith and of Shoghi Effendi so that deterioration of these irreplaceable items is arrested.

8.5These increased demands have arisen at a time when economic conditions in the world and other factors have caused a significant reduction in the level of income to the Bahá'í International Fund. The House of Justice is confident that the spirit of sacrifice demonstrated by the believers in their support of the Arc Projects Fund will animate their response to the pressing needs of the Bahá'í International Fund in the years immediately ahead.

8.6We have been asked to assure you of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines for your guidance as you deliberate on means by which the flow of the resources necessary to meet the international obligations of the Cause can be augmented.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

9

Appointment of Continental Counsellor

28 August 2001

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

9.1For compelling personal reasons, Mr. Patrick O'Mara has asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe, and we have, with much regret, assented to his request. Mr. O'Mara has earned our deep gratitude for the outstanding contributions he has made to the work of the Faith as a Counsellor, and we pray that he will continue to be guided and strengthened in his future services to the Cause.

9.2To fill the vacancy thus caused, we announce the appointment of Mr. Emilio Egea of Spain to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe for the remainder of the present term. We have called upon Counsellor Paul Öjermark to take up the duties of Trustee of the Continental Fund for Europe, replacing Mr. O'Mara in that function.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

10

Crisis in the Bahá'í International Fund

12 November 2001

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

10.1Further to the letter dated 5 August 2001 sent to you on our behalf, we find it necessary to advise you that the condition of the Bahá'í International Fund has continued to deteriorate since that time, and has become a source of deep concern.

10.2A number of actions are being instituted at the Bahá'í World Centre,

with the aim of effecting a sharp reduction in expenditures. These include
deferment of all projects which, though highly desirable, are not of immediate critical importance;
suspension of functions which can reasonably be held in abeyance for a period without serious detriment to the long-term operation of the World Centre;
reduction in the number of staff serving at the World Centre;
increase in the assigned hours of service each week of World Centre staff;
suspension of the increase in staff allowances that offsets inflation.

10.3Several other measures are also under consideration to further decrease our expenditures during this period of financial crisis.

10.4We enclose a letter addressed to all members of the Bahá'í community, informing them of the needs of the Bahá'í International Fund. Kindly arrange for its distribution without delay to the believers in your area.

10.5We urge you to make a renewed endeavour, with the help of the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Board members, to encourage the friends to intensify their commitment to meeting the vital needs of the World Centre, irrespective of the material circumstances, each according to his or her means.

10.6Universal participation in the sacrificial outpouring of resources to which the friends are now called will attract incalculable blessings upon them, and will be a source of renewed vigour for the believers as they persevere in their pursuit of the Five Year Plan.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

11

Establishment of the World Centre Endowment Fund

12 November 2001

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

11.1The Major Plan of God is at work throughout the world, hastening the disintegration of the old order as the new one unfolds. While it is propelling forward a social transformation of a magnitude never before witnessed, fear and uncertainty grip the consciousness of a majority of the world's people, who remain unaware of God's purpose in this Day. There is a growing sense of a fundamental change of far-reaching dimensions that chills preoccupation with the pleasures and comforts of material existence. In the midst of this turmoil, the Divine Will for humankind is being achieved.

11.2The progress being made by the community of the Greatest Name is a cause for the deepest satisfaction. Its members, undismayed by the surrounding distraction and distress, labour to provide reassurance and insight to those with whom they come in contact, making sure that the confident vision that informs their actions is not clouded by the limited perspective of the mass of humanity. Current world events offer Bahá'ís an opportunity to demonstrate the application of the remedy brought by the Divine Physician.

11.3At this critical moment, we find ourselves compelled to turn to you, our co-workers, to inform you of the pressing need for a marked increase in the contributions to the Bahá'í International Fund. A great portion of the resources in this Fund is expended outside the Holy Land for the advancement of

the Cause of God. These expenditures are of special importance at this time when the Five Year Plan gives every indication of yielding a significant advance in the process of entry by troops in the years ahead. This same Fund must finance the operation of the Bahá'í World Centre, the maintenance of the sacred properties in the Holy Land, the conduct of the pilgrimage programme, and the defence and proclamation of the Faith.

11.4We now appeal for a response to this need from all the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. Our appeal is addressed to all without exception: those of modest means as well as those who possess substantial resources. Your immediate and sustained action is imperative, for the discharge of your spiritual obligation to contribute towards the advancement of the Cause can suffer no delay. The blessings that flow from your sacrificial deeds are assured.

11.5The present crisis in the Bahá'í International Fund is due, in considerable measure, to the sharp reduction in resources available, consequent to the economic downturn afflicting much of the world. It arises also, in part, from the necessity to provide assistance from the Bahá'í International Fund to sustain the work of the Faith in the growing number of countries devastated by warfare, internal division, and endemic poverty. However, a major cause of our present deep concern is the necessity to maintain, at a befitting standard, the buildings and gardens at the World Centre. An indication of the increase of costs is that the area of gardens has now more than doubled.

11.6The Bahá'í International Fund must not fail to meet these needs. To assist it, we have decided to set up the World Centre Endowment Fund, for the preservation, upkeep, and security of the edifices and precincts of the Spiritual and Administrative Centres of the Faith—activities that currently form so large a part of the responsibilities of the Bahá'í International Fund. This decision follows the example of Shoghi Effendi, who during his ministry dedicated the income from lands in the environs of the Jordan Valley for the upkeep of the Holy Shrines.

11.7This Endowment Fund, to which you are urged to contribute, beyond your general support of the Bahá'í International Fund, will initially be used to defray the related expenses, estimated at the present time to be seven million dollars annually. Whatever balance remains unexpended at the end of each year will be retained as an earmarked fund and, as it grows in the years ahead, will provide a continuing source of investment income dedicated to maintaining the magnificent setting of these Holy Places. These precincts were created gradually, during the past century, through the sacrificial outpouring of resources by the believers who responded to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and supported the strenuous endeavours of the Master and the Guardian. It is essential that this splendour, befitting so sacred a place, be preserved undiminished in the decades and centuries ahead.

11.8Our ardent supplication in the Holy Shrines is for the reinforcement of the consecrated endeavours of the lovers of the Blessed Beauty in every land, as they respond to the needs of the ever-advancing Cause of God.

The Universal House of Justice

12

Official Position of the Government of Iran towards the Bahá'í Community

22 November 2001
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
12.1The Universal House of Justice has received a copy of a report issued by the Iranian Department of Justice, dated 15 September of this year, which reiterates the official position of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Bahá'í community in general and the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) in particular.
12.2As you are aware, in 1998 a series of raids on Bahá'í homes was orchestrated in several cities where the BIHE operates, resulting in arrests and the confiscation of property, and dealing a blow to the functioning of the institute's program of higher education. Following the legal channels available to them, the Bahá'ís submitted an appeal against a 1999 verdict issued by the Chief Special Courts Section 49. This verdict declares that "All equipment and properties related to the operations of the misguided sect used for the purpose of reported educational matters (which were unlawful and illegal) must be surrendered to the Staff of the Executive Command of His Holiness the Imám to be used for religiously approved activities, as necessary." The 15 September report is signed by the judge of the Supreme Office of Control and Review, Hamzih Khalílí, and is in response to the appeal lodged by the Bahá'ís….
12.3You will also recall that in 1991, a memorandum on "The Bahá'í Question", issued by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, and approved by Ayatollah Khamenei, stated clearly the position of the Iranian government towards the Bahá'í community. Under the heading of educational and cultural status, the following provisions were listed:
They [the Bahá'ís] can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá'ís.
Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís.
12.4The September report documents the fact that the Iranian authorities are actively seeking not only to prevent Bahá'í children from identifying themselves with their Faith and Bahá'í youth from pursuing a higher education, but also to thwart any program which the Bahá'í community devises on its own for the education of its children and youth.
12.5The United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly called for the emancipation of the Bahá'í community of Iran, and although the Iranian government has been cited as taking positive steps in ameliorating the plight of this beleaguered community, evidence of a change in policy has not been seen. Rather, decisive actions by the authorities underline the established strategy of continued oppression. Only when the Bahá'í community in Iran has been freed from decades of persecution will the Iranian government be able to show that it is committed to the rule of law, and that it respects fundamental human rights….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
13
"Fire in the Pacific" Conference in Honolulu
16 December 2001
To the Friends assembled at the "Fire in the Pacific" Conference in Honolulu
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
13.1With joyous hearts we send our loving greetings to all the dear friends gathered in Honolulu to commemorate the centenary of the arrival of the Bahá'í Faith in the Pacific region.
13.2You assemble at a time when the turmoil and confusion in the world created through the operation of the Major Plan of God is giving rise to apprehension and unease among the mass of humanity. Now, as never before, should the followers of Bahá'u'lláh demonstrate, through both word and deed, their confidence in the future and their awareness that enduring harmony and tranquillity can be found only by aligning oneself with the constructive forces of change at work throughout the planet today.
13.3In the course of your centenary celebration, you are urged to give full consideration to the needs of the Cause of God in the Pacific region at this critical point in the Five Year Plan. The opportunities for the advancement of the Faith through energetic and creative pursuit of the teaching work in all parts of the Pacific are immense. The prospect before you is that of bringing into being vibrant Bahá'í communities which demonstrate the transforming power of the Faith and offer a haven to those in search of unity.
13.4However, the challenges before you should not be underestimated. To attain your objective, a much greater commitment is required to human resource development, so that the number of believers actively engaged in meeting the needs of the Cause is greatly increased. This will require a marked extension of the influence of the training institute, with its associated programs of courses and study circles.
13.5The culture of growth remains to be firmly implanted in the consciousness of the members of the Bahá'í communities of the Pacific, so that individual initiative in teaching the Faith is fostered. Systematic programs of growth remain to be instituted and universally supported, with attention focused on clusters of villages and towns which have been categorized in terms of their present capability for the spread of the Bahá'í message. It should be clearly understood that proclamation events may well attract impressive publicity for the Faith but will only have an ephemeral influence on the strengthening of the Cause if they are unsupported by grassroots involvement in a continuing program of teaching.
13.6The success of all endeavors made for the advancement of the Faith is greatly influenced by the unity of the Bahá'í community. The believers in each national area of the Pacific should give immediate attention to those measures which will further enhance their cohesion and harmony, fully aware that these actions will magnetically attract the spiritual powers necessary for the accomplishment of all to which they aspire. As the institutions of the

Administrative Order throughout this region improve the effectiveness of their functioning, to that extent are they able to play a major role in the promotion and maintenance of the unity that is required.

13.7The dear friends of the Pacific region are fortunate to be living in an area of unlimited potential for the progress of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. Be assured of our ardent supplications in the Holy Shrines for the success of your efforts.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

14

Eighth ASEAN Youth Conference in Thailand

22 December 2001

To the Friends Gathered at the Eighth ASEAN Youth Conference in Thailand

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

14.1We send our loving greetings to all those gathered at the Eighth ASEAN Youth Conference.

14.2The Five Year Plan, which will undoubtedly be the focus of your consultations over the next few days, requires concentrated and sustained attention to two essential movements. The first is the steady flow of believers through the sequence of courses offered by training institutes, for the purpose of developing the human resources of the Cause. The second, which receives its impetus from the first, is the movement of geographic clusters from one stage of growth to the next. That Bahá'í youth must be intensely involved in both of these—indeed, that they must be a driving force behind them—goes without saying. We urge you, then, to cast your deliberations in the framework of these two pressing requirements. Ask yourselves how, as individuals, as members of your local and national communities, and as the vanguard of an entire generation in your region, you can ensure that the advancement in the process of entry by troops, called for by the Five Year Plan, is achieved in each of your countries.

14.3We shall remember you in our prayers in the Holy Shrines.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

15

Naw-Rúz

2 January 2002

To a Local Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

15.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 17 November 2001 requesting guidance on the celebration of Naw-Rúz, and it was pleased to learn that your Local Spiritual Assembly is thoughtfully considering this matter. It has asked us to send you the following reply.

15.2The celebration of the solar New Year is a very ancient custom all over the world and, in Iran, it has been marked as the day of Naw-Rúz since Zoroastrian times. However, no matter what its antecedents are, Naw-Rúz is now a Holy Day in the Bahá'í calendar, in which it falls on the day of Bahá in the month

of Bahá. In paragraph 111 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, it is written:

Happy the one who entereth upon the first day of the month of Bahá, the day which God hath consecrated to this Great Name. And blessed be he who evidenceth on this day the bounties that God hath bestowed upon him; he, verily, is of those who show forth thanks to God through actions betokening the Lord's munificence which hath encompassed all the worlds. Say: This day, verily, is the crown of all the months and the source thereof, the day on which the breath of life is wafted over all created things. Great is the blessedness of him who greeteth it with radiance and joy. We testify that he is, in truth, among those who are blissful.

15.3There are Tablets from both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá referring to Naw-Rúz, but we know of no authoritative text defining how it should be observed, other than the ordinance that work is to cease on that day. It is, therefore, for the friends to use their own discretion in deciding how to mark Naw-Rúz, bearing in mind the station Bahá'u'lláh decrees for it, and being careful, as in all things, not to allow any practice to become a ritual. The Iranian friends have a number of traditional ways of celebrating Naw-Rúz, and there is no reason why they should cease from these, but none of the friends should get thereby the impression that they are integral parts of the Bahá'í Naw-Rúz.

15.4In relation to the celebration of Christian holidays by the believers, the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:

… it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing such holidays as Christmas and New Year, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Rúz.

15.5This in itself indicates the kinds of celebrations that might be appropriate for Naw-Rúz in addition to its sacred character. An additional specific clarification you might find helpful relates to gift-giving. Although it has been a custom among Persian believers to exchange gifts at Naw-Rúz, the exchanging of gifts among believers or the giving of presents to children is not an integral part of any of our nine Bahá'í Holy Days; however, there is no prohibition against it. In this connection, we find in paragraph 16 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the following reference to the Ayyám-i-Há (the intercalary days):

We have ordained that these, amid all nights and days, shall be the manifestations of the letter Há, and thus they have not been bounded by the limits of the year and its months. It behooveth the people of Bahá, throughout these days, to provide good cheer for themselves, their kindred and, beyond them, the poor and needy, and with joy and exultation to hail and glorify their Lord, to sing His praise and magnify His Name; and when they end—these days of giving that precede the season of restraint—let them enter upon the Fast.

15.6In relation to traditional festivities in general, every culture has these, and Bahá'ís should be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities if they wish to, so long as the activities that are involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith or identify them as the followers of other religions. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an

expression of unity in diversity. Although most of these celebrations have no doubt stemmed from religious rituals in bygone ages, the religious meaning has, in very many cases, given way to purely cultural tradition.

15.7While your Assembly should take care not to compromise the interests of the Faith, its integrity and independence, by celebrating the Bahá'í Holy Days in a manner that could be construed as a mere imitation of old cultural forms, it should also be remembered that the weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions, which have been established in their societies for centuries, takes time and is a gradual process.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

16

Call for Pioneers and Travelling Teachers

10 January 2002

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

16.1In the months since the launching of the Five Year Plan, national communities have adopted measures that are giving a dynamic thrust and added coherence to their activities. By now, in most countries the National Spiritual Assembly, or its Regional Councils, will have surveyed the territory under its jurisdiction and divided it into small geographic clusters, in keeping with the criteria set forth in our letter dated 9 January 2001. These clusters are being categorized according to their current stage of development, and plans of action devised to promote in them growth from one stage to the next. We could not be more gratified by the eager response of the institutions everywhere to the requirements of the Five Year Plan.

16.2The clearly defined plans now in place multiply teaching opportunities for those wishing to serve the Faith in the international field as short- or long-term pioneers. Most of the needs of the clusters in a given country should increasingly be met by homefront pioneers as the Plan unfolds. But, given the sheer number of geographic areas which require systematic attention in order to advance, international pioneers will have a notable role to play. Their participation will be especially effective in the programmes of growth spreading throughout the world if they have developed abilities to foster the institute process. Beyond this, international pioneers and travelling teachers can contribute significantly to the work of the Faith in such spheres of activity as administration, proclamation, and social and economic development. A document has been prepared by the International Teaching Centre which briefly describes the conditions of national Bahá'í communities and the endeavours that could benefit from outside assistance. It will soon be available to you through National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors and their auxiliaries.

16.3The movement of pioneers and travelling teachers from one place to another is an indispensable feature of the Bahá'í community. In the Twelve Month Plan alone, over 1,800 believers from nearly 90 countries set out to serve the Faith in the international field. Apart from the services such staunch souls are able to render to the Cause of God, this intermingling of the peoples of

the world is vital to the patterns of life that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are striving to establish and which are destined to provide an example for the rest of humanity to emulate. As the Bahá'í community continues to grow in capacity, it should give increasing attention to bringing together the diverse members of the human race in ever closer association.

16.4At this important juncture in the development of the Faith, when the systematization of the teaching work is gaining momentum in all parts of the globe and integrating forces are propelling society towards Bahá'u'lláh's design, every faithful servant of the Cause must be galvanized by the vision of splendid accomplishments ahead. We call upon you to consider your circumstances, examine the conditions of various countries, determine where you can best serve the needs of the Faith, and take resolute action. Let those who long to partake of the joy of such meritorious service go forth well assured that our prayers will accompany them, and fully expectant of Divine confirmations.

The Universal House of Justice

17

Youth Congress in Brazil

17 January 2002

To the Friends Gathered at the Youth Congress in Brazil

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

17.1We have followed with keen interest the series of youth conferences conducted across the American continent since the beginning of 2000. The enthusiasm generated among the youth by those events, and the spirit of devotion evoked, were noteworthy. This latest gathering is being held at a time when the initial stages of the Five Year Plan have unfolded, giving rise to well conceived plans of action, formulated on the basis of the geographic clusters into which each of your countries has been divided. To move these clusters from one stage of development to the next is the challenge being addressed by your institutions.

17.2As you deliberate in the coming days on your experiences and aspirations, you should keep in mind that the success of the Five Year Plan in your continent will depend, in no small measure, on the wholehearted and sacrificial participation of the youth. You know well that the driving force behind growth in every cluster is the training institute. An enormous task lies ahead of these centres of learning as they strive to help large contingents of people pass through the sequence of courses they offer. Participating in their programmes must rank high among the endeavours you undertake for the Faith. Your contribution to the efforts to multiply the number of study circles will be significant if you constantly seek out receptive souls in your schools, at your universities, and in the workplace and invite them to join you in your exploration of the Writings. But your concern should not end with your own place of residence. You should take advantage of every opportunity to meet the needs of clusters throughout the continent by offering periods of service as short-term pioneers or as travelling teachers. As you do so, you will be able to forge bonds of fellowship with people of diverse backgrounds and bring them together in unified action.

17.3We pray ardently that Bahá’u’lláh will bless and confirm your every effort to serve His Cause.
The Universal House of Justice
18
Release of Summary of Achievements
30 January 2002
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
18.1At the request of the Universal House of Justice we are enclosing two complimentary copies of The Four Year Plan and the Twelve Month Plan, 1996–2001: Summary of Achievements prepared under the supervision of the International Teaching Centre. The volume chronicles the progress of the Faith worldwide during a period of important accomplishments in the Bahá’í community, and its careful reading will provide insights into the processes by which the Faith advances through systematic planning and action….
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
19
Registration of Marriages of Expatriate Bahá’ís Married in Iran
3 February 2002
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
19.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to write to your National Spiritual Assemblies concerning the possibility which should now exist for expatriate Bahá’ís who were married in Iran to have their marriages registered through the Iranian Embassy, in the same way as Bahá’ís are benefiting in Iran under new arrangements made by the government of that country. This registration could in turn facilitate the recognition of their marriages with the government authorities in their countries of residence.
19.2While Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are recognized as religious minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Bahá’ís are not, and therefore could not have their marriages registered in official records. The only method by which this could be done previously was to prepare an affidavit through a notary public who did not require the couple to state their religion. This was, however, blocked by the government by the issuance of an executive circular letter dated 6 March 1978 from the Department of Personal Status, which instructed all registry offices that, “when preparing affidavits, they should specify the couple’s religions, which are recognized in the Constitution of Iran…”.
19.3Two years ago, however, the 1978 circular letter was annulled, providing by extension a de facto opportunity for the Bahá’ís in Iran to register their marriages in their birth certificates. It should be noted that this opportunity was made possible through an administrative act and does not give any recognition to Bahá’í marriage, and that this administrative decision could be rescinded at any time. However, at present, the friends may approach the Iranian Embassies under your guidance and on the basis of the information that follows.

19.4We are enclosing copies of two letters issued by the government of Iran, together with their provisional English translations. The first is a circular letter dated 13 January 2000 from the Tihrán provincial department of the Iranian National Registry of Documents and Properties to the Department of Registry for Tihrán Province, which includes the statement, “there is no objection to preparing the marriage affidavit without stating the religion of the couple”. The second enclosure is a letter dated 26 January 2000 from the Office of the Director of the National Registry of Personal Status to the Department of Registry of Personal Status. You will notice that this document not only confirms the substance of the letter of 13 January, by stating that registry offices should be instructed “to register the marriage of those who present an affidavit stating their marriage, without mentioning the religion of the couple, and also to register them as such in documents and certificates of personal status”, but that copies of it were sent to the Minister of the Interior and other senior government officials.

19.5The friends should take copies of these documents with them and make reference to them when they go to the Embassy. They should request that a similar arrangement be made through the Embassy, so that Bahá’ís who are now resident in your countries and who were married in Iran in accordance with the laws of their Faith may then register their marriages with the government. The Embassy may require some time to make enquiries in Iran about the matter.

19.6Should the friends be hesitant to visit the Embassy, they may instead write a letter to the same effect, enclosing the necessary documents.

19.7The House of Justice looks forward to receiving, in due course, information from you on the outcome of these endeavors.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

20

Countries and Territories in Need of Pioneers and Travelling Teachers

10 February 2002

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

20.1In its message dated 10 January 2002 to the Bahá’ís of the world raising the pioneer call for the Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice referred to the document prepared by the International Teaching Centre describing the conditions of national Bahá’í communities and the endeavours that could benefit from outside assistance. We are pleased to provide you with a copy of that document. Also enclosed is the list of countries and territories in need of pioneers and travelling teachers, which are sorted into four categories that reflect the exigencies of the Bahá’í world today.

20.2The House of Justice hopes that this material will aid those who respond to the call in deciding where they can best serve the Faith. You are encouraged to make it available to the friends in your communities through your national and regional agencies.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

21

Martyrdom of Rashid Gulov and Mosadegh Afshin Shokoufeh
27 February 2002
To National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
21.1With exceeding sorrow, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to announce the martyrdom by assassination of Rashid Gulov and Mosadegh Afshin Shokoufeh, two devoted believers in Tajikistan. They were killed at the hands of fanatical elements in that country who wished to cause harm to followers of Bahá'u'lláh.
21.2On the evening of 23 October last year, Rashid Gulov, a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Dushanbe, was shot and killed while returning from work.
21.3On the morning of 3 December, Mosadegh Afshin Shokoufeh was shot outside his home and died on the way to the hospital. He was a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Dushanbe and had previously served on the National Spiritual Assembly of Tajikistan.
21.4The investigation by the Tajik authorities into the murders has shown that the two Bahá'ís were killed because of their Faith. You will recall the assassination only two years ago of Abdullah Mogharrabi in that same country.
21.5Both of these friends were, with their wives and families, actively involved in raising the banner of Bahá'u'lláh in Tajikistan and rendering services to the Cause. A community so distinguished by the sacrifices of martyrs is bound to attract bountiful confirmations of its efforts from on high. May its members thus be impelled to deepen their loving unity and to reach out even further to their compatriots with the only Message that can bring them true prosperity and peace.
21.6The House of Justice supplicates at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of the souls of Rashid Gulov and Mosadegh Afshin Shokoufeh in the worlds of God, and extends its most loving sympathy to their families and friends.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
22
Gathering at the Native American Bahá'í Institute
19 March 2002
To the friends gathered at the Native American Bahá'í Institute
for the "In Praise of Pioneers" Weekend
22.1We learned with much delight of the event that brings you together at the Native American Bahá'í Institute. The purity of thought that motivated the decision to honor the pioneers who have served among the native peoples is surely an indication of a highly commendable desire not only to celebrate but also to extend the legacy they have richly established. Indeed, the virtue of so notable a moment of thanksgiving is that it lends itself to reflection and to rededication of effort to the great civilizing goal set by the beloved Master in His Tablets of the Divine Plan for the original inhabitants of America, once they are illumined by the Light of Bahá'u'lláh. With confident expectations, He outlined the means for their emancipation from a long history of suffering and frustrated hope.
22.2You illumined ones who like fresh plants have sprung from the seeds sown by

these pioneers face an urgent and inescapable challenge: You must arise by your own effort as never before to carry forward the lines of action of the Five Year Plan, and thus energize the advance of the process of entry by troops among your own people. No nobler task can be undertaken at this time towards the fulfilment of the glorious destiny ordained by the Most Great Spirit for all the peoples of the earth.

22.3While we anxiously await news of the results of your heroic exploits, be assured of our ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that you may be divinely assisted and confirmed.

The Universal House of Justice

23

Letter to the World's Religious Leaders

April 2002

To The World's Religious Leaders

23.1The enduring legacy of the twentieth century is that it compelled the peoples of the world to begin seeing themselves as the members of a single human race, and the earth as that race's common homeland. Despite the continuing conflict and violence that darken the horizon, prejudices that once seemed inherent in the nature of the human species are everywhere giving way. Down with them come barriers that long divided the family of man into a Babel of incoherent identities of cultural, ethnic or national origin. That so fundamental a change could occur in so brief a period—virtually overnight in the perspective of historical time—suggests the magnitude of the possibilities for the future.

23.2Tragically, organized religion, whose very reason for being entails service to the cause of brotherhood and peace, behaves all too frequently as one of the most formidable obstacles in the path; to cite a particular painful fact, it has long lent its credibility to fanaticism. We feel a responsibility, as the governing council of one of the world religions, to urge earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership. Both the issue and the circumstances to which it gives rise require that we speak frankly. We trust that common service to the Divine will ensure that what we say will be received in the same spirit of goodwill as it is put forward.

23.3The issue comes sharply into focus when one considers what has been achieved elsewhere. In the past, apart from isolated exceptions, women were regarded as an inferior breed, their nature hedged about by superstitions, denied the opportunity to express the potentialities of the human spirit and relegated to the role of serving the needs of men. Clearly, there are many societies where such conditions persist and are even fanatically defended. At the level of global discourse, however, the concept of the equality of the sexes has, for all practical purposes, now assumed the force of universally accepted principle. It enjoys similar authority in most of the academic community and information media. So basic has been the revisioning that exponents of male supremacy must look for support on the margins of responsible opinion.

23.4The beleaguered battalions of nationalism face a similar fate. With each passing crisis in world affairs, it becomes easier for the citizen to

distinguish between a love of country that enriches one's life, and submission to inflammatory rhetoric designed to provoke hatred and fear of others. Even where it is expedient to participate in the familiar nationalistic rites, public response is as often marked by feelings of awkwardness as it is by the strong convictions and ready enthusiasm of earlier times. The effect has been reinforced by the restructuring steadily taking place in the international order. Whatever the shortcomings of the United Nations system in its present form, and however handicapped its ability to take collective military action against aggression, no one can mistake the fact that the fetish of absolute national sovereignty is on its way to extinction.

23.5Racial and ethnic prejudices have been subjected to equally summary treatment by historical processes that have little patience left for such pretensions. Here, rejection of the past has been especially decisive. Racism is now tainted by its association with the horrors of the twentieth century to the degree that it has taken on something of the character of a spiritual disease. While surviving as a social attitude in many parts of the world—and as a blight on the lives of a significant segment of humankind—racial prejudice has become so universally condemned in principle that no body of people can any longer safely allow themselves to be identified with it.

23.6It is not that a dark past has been erased and a new world of light has suddenly been born. Vast numbers of people continue to endure the effects of ingrained prejudices of ethnicity, gender, nation, caste and class. All the evidence indicates that such injustices will long persist as the institutions and standards that humanity is devising only slowly become empowered to construct a new order of relationships and to bring relief to the oppressed. The point, rather, is that a threshold has been crossed from which there is no credible possibility of return. Fundamental principles have been identified, articulated, accorded broad publicity and are becoming progressively incarnated in institutions capable of imposing them on public behaviour. There is no doubt that, however protracted and painful the struggle, the outcome will be to revolutionize relationships among all peoples, at the grassroots level.

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23.7As the twentieth century opened, the prejudice that seemed more likely than any other to succumb to the forces of change was that of religion. In the West, scientific advances had already dealt rudely with some of the central pillars of sectarian exclusivity. In the context of the transformation taking place in the human race's conception of itself, the most promising new religious development seemed to be the interfaith movement. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition surprised even its ambitious organizers by giving birth to the famed "Parliament of Religions", a vision of spiritual and moral consensus that captured the popular imagination on all continents and managed to eclipse even the scientific, technological and commercial wonders that the Exposition celebrated.

23.8Briefly, it appeared that ancient walls had fallen. For influential thinkers in the field of religion, the gathering stood unique, "unprecedented in the history of the world". The Parliament had, its distinguished principal organizer said, "emancipated the world from bigotry". An imaginative

leadership, it was confidently predicted, would seize the opportunity and awaken in the earth's long-divided religious communities a spirit of brotherhood that could provide the needed moral underpinnings for the new world of prosperity and progress. Thus encouraged, interfaith movements of every kind took root and flourished. A vast literature, available in many languages, introduced an ever wider public, believers and non-believers alike, to the teachings of all the major faiths, an interest picked up in due course by radio, television, film and eventually the Internet. Institutions of higher learning launched degree programmes in the study of comparative religion. By the time the century ended, interfaith worship services, unthinkable only a few decades earlier, were becoming commonplace.

23.9Alas, it is clear that these initiatives lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment. In contrast to the processes of unification that are transforming the rest of humanity's social relationships, the suggestion that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin is stubbornly resisted by entrenched patterns of sectarian thought. The progress of racial integration is a development that is not merely an expression of sentimentality or strategy but arises from the recognition that the earth's peoples constitute a single species whose many variations do not themselves confer any advantage or impose any handicap on individual members of the race. The emancipation of women, likewise, has entailed the willingness of both society's institutions and popular opinion to acknowledge that there are no acceptable grounds—biological, social or moral—to justify denying women full equality with men, and girls equal educational opportunities with boys. Nor does appreciation of the contributions that some nations are making to the shaping of an evolving global civilization support the inherited illusion that other nations have little or nothing to bring to the effort.

23.10So fundamental a reorientation religious leadership appears, for the most part, unable to undertake. Other segments of society embrace the implications of the oneness of humankind, not only as the inevitable next step in the advancement of civilization, but as the fulfilment of lesser identities of every kind that our race brings to this critical moment in our collective history. Yet, the greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's inhabitants.

23.11The consequences, in terms of human well-being, have been ruinous. It is surely unnecessary to cite in detail the horrors being visited upon hapless populations today by outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion. Nor is the phenomenon a recent one. To take only one of many examples, Europe's sixteenth century wars of religion cost that continent the lives of some thirty percent of its entire population. One must wonder what has been the longer term harvest of the seeds planted in popular consciousness by the blind forces of sectarian dogmatism that inspired such conflicts.

23.12To this accounting must be added a betrayal of the life of the mind which, more than any other factor, has robbed religion of the capacity it inherently possesses to play a decisive role in the shaping of world affairs. Locked into

preoccupation with agendas that disperse and vitiate human energies, religious institutions have too often been the chief agents in discouraging exploration of reality and the exercise of those intellectual faculties that distinguish humankind. Denunciations of materialism or terrorism are of no real assistance in coping with the contemporary moral crisis if they do not begin by addressing candidly the failure of responsibility that has left believing masses exposed and vulnerable to these influences.

23.13Such reflections, however painful, are less an indictment of organized religion than a reminder of the unique power it represents. Religion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. Unquestionably, the seminal force in the civilizing of human nature has been the influence of the succession of these Manifestations of the Divine that extends back to the dawn of recorded history.

23.14This same force, that operated with such effect in ages past, remains an inextinguishable feature of human consciousness. Against all odds, and with little in the way of meaningful encouragement, it continues to sustain the struggle for survival of uncounted millions, and to raise up in all lands heroes and saints whose lives are the most persuasive vindication of the principles contained in the scriptures of their respective faiths. As the course of civilization demonstrates, religion is also capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of any fundamental advance in civilization that did not derive its moral thrust from this perennial source. Is it conceivable, then, that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia-long process of the organization of the planet can be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum? If the perverse ideologies let loose on our world during the century just past contributed nothing else, they demonstrated conclusively that the need cannot be met by alternatives that lie within the power of human invention.

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23.15The implications for today are summed up by Bahá’u’lláh in words written over a century ago and widely disseminated in the intervening decades:

> There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you.

23.16Such an appeal does not call for abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world’s great belief systems. Far otherwise. Faith has its own imperative and is its own justification. What others believe—or do

not believe—cannot be the authority in any individual conscience worthy of the name. What the above words do unequivocally urge is renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence.

23.17It is to this historic challenge that we believe leaders of religion must respond if religious leadership is to have meaning in the global society emerging from the transformative experiences of the twentieth century. It is evident that growing numbers of people are coming to realize that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one. This recognition arises not through a resolution of theological disputes, but as an intuitive awareness born from the ever widening experience of others and from a dawning acceptance of the oneness of the human family itself. Out of the welter of religious doctrines, rituals and legal codes inherited from vanished worlds, there is emerging a sense that spiritual life, like the oneness manifest in diverse nationalities, races and cultures, constitutes one unbounded reality equally accessible to everyone. In order for this diffuse and still tentative perception to consolidate itself and contribute effectively to the building of a peaceful world, it must have the wholehearted confirmation of those to whom, even at this late hour, masses of the earth's population look for guidance.

23.18There are certainly wide differences among the world's major religious traditions with respect to social ordinances and forms of worship. Given the thousands of years during which successive revelations of the Divine have addressed the changing needs of a constantly evolving civilization, it could hardly be otherwise. Indeed, an inherent feature of the scriptures of most of the major faiths would appear to be the expression, in some form or other, of the principle of religion's evolutionary nature. What cannot be morally justified is the manipulation of cultural legacies that were intended to enrich spiritual experience, as a means to arouse prejudice and alienation. The primary task of the soul will always be to investigate reality, to live in accordance with the truths of which it becomes persuaded and to accord full respect to the efforts of others to do the same.

23.19It may be objected that, if all the great religions are to be recognized as equally Divine in origin, the effect will be to encourage, or at least to facilitate, the conversion of numbers of people from one religion to another. Whether or not this is true, it is surely of peripheral importance when set against the opportunity that history has at last opened to those who are conscious of a world that transcends this terrestrial one—and against the responsibility that this awareness imposes. Each of the great faiths can adduce impressive and credible testimony to its efficacy in nurturing moral character. Similarly, no one could convincingly argue that doctrines attached to one particular belief system have been either more or less prolific in generating bigotry and superstition than those attached to any other. In an integrating world, it is natural that patterns of response and association will undergo a continuous process of shifting, and the role of institutions, of whatever kind, is surely to consider how these developments can be managed in a way that promotes unity. The guarantee that the outcome will ultimately be

sound—spiritually, morally and socially—lies in the abiding faith of the unconsulted masses of the earth's inhabitants that the universe is ruled not by human caprice, but by a loving and unfailing Providence.

23.20Together with the crumbling of barriers separating peoples, our age is witnessing the dissolution of the once insuperable wall that the past assumed would forever separate the life of Heaven from the life of Earth. The scriptures of all religions have always taught the believer to see in service to others not only a moral duty, but an avenue for the soul's own approach to God. Today, the progressive restructuring of society gives this familiar teaching new dimensions of meaning. As the age-old promise of a world animated by principles of justice slowly takes on the character of a realistic goal, meeting the needs of the soul and those of society will increasingly be seen as reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.

23.21If religious leadership is to rise to the challenge that this latter perception represents, such response must begin by acknowledging that religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop. Far from being in conflict with one another, these fundamental modes of the mind's exploration of reality are mutually dependent and have been most productive in those rare but happy periods of history when their complementary nature has been recognized and they have been able to work together. The insights and skills generated by scientific advance will have always to look to the guidance of spiritual and moral commitment to ensure their appropriate application; religious convictions, no matter how cherished they may be, must submit, willingly and gratefully, to impartial testing by scientific methods.

23.22We come finally to an issue that we approach with some diffidence as it touches most directly on conscience. Among the many temptations the world offers, the test that has, not surprisingly, preoccupied religious leaders is that of exercising power in matters of belief. No one who has dedicated long years to earnest meditation and study of the scriptures of one or another of the great religions requires any further reminder of the oft-repeated axiom regarding the potentiality of power to corrupt and to do so increasingly as such power grows. The unheralded inner victories won in this respect by unnumbered clerics all down the ages have no doubt been one of the chief sources of organized religion's creative strength and must rank as one of its highest distinctions. To the same degree, surrender to the lure of worldly power and advantage, on the part of other religious leaders, has cultivated a fertile breeding ground for cynicism, corruption and despair among all who observe it. The implications for the ability of religious leadership to fulfil its social responsibility at this point in history need no elaboration.

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23.23Because it is concerned with the ennobling of character and the harmonizing of relationships, religion has served throughout history as the ultimate authority in giving meaning to life. In every age, it has cultivated the good, reproved the wrong and held up, to the gaze of all those willing to see, a vision of potentialities as yet unrealized. From its counsels the rational soul has derived encouragement in overcoming limits imposed by the

world and in fulfilling itself. As the name implies, religion has simultaneously been the chief force binding diverse peoples together in ever larger and more complex societies through which the individual capacities thus released can find expression. The great advantage of the present age is the perspective that makes it possible for the entire human race to see this civilizing process as a single phenomenon, the ever-recurring encounters of our world with the world of God.

23.24Inspired by this perspective, the Bahá'í community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception. Apart from cherished associations that these activities create, Bahá'ís see in the struggle of diverse religions to draw closer together a response to the Divine Will for a human race that is entering on its collective maturity. The members of our community will continue to assist in every way we can. We owe it to our partners in this common effort, however, to state clearly our conviction that interfaith discourse, if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, must now address honestly and without further evasion the implications of the over-arching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.

23.25With every day that passes, danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable. Such a danger civil government, unaided, cannot overcome. Nor should we delude ourselves that appeals for mutual tolerance can alone hope to extinguish animosities that claim to possess Divine sanction. The crisis calls on religious leadership for a break with the past as decisive as those that opened the way for society to address equally corrosive prejudices of race, gender and nation. Whatever justification exists for exercising influence in matters of conscience lies in serving the well-being of humankind. At this greatest turning point in the history of civilization, the demands of such service could not be more clear. "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable", Bahá'u'lláh urges, "unless and until its unity is firmly established.

The Universal House of Justice

24

Publication of The Summons of the Lord of Hosts

8 April 2002

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

24.1It gives the Universal House of Justice the greatest pleasure to present your National Spiritual Assembly with this sample copy of the new volume of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings just published in English by World Centre Publications.

24.2The Summons of the Lord of Hosts brings together for the first time the authorized translations into English of the full texts of Bahá'u'lláh's major Tablets to the kings and rulers of the world. Revealed during His exiles to Adrianople and 'Akká, the Messages summon their recipients to recognize the Day of God and to arise to the challenges it imposes on them as the

trustees of civil authority among the peoples of the world. The volume includes the magnificent Súriy-i-Haykal (Súrih of the Temple), with its messages to individual rulers, and the Súriy-i-Mulúk (Súrih of the Kings), addressed collectively, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, “to the entire company of the monarchs of East and West”….

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

25

Audiovisual Materials

15 April 2002

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

25.1With the successful completion of the most recent phase of the Mount Carmel development work and the straitened financial circumstances created by prevailing world conditions, the Universal House of Justice has embarked on a major programme of retrenchment at the Bahá’í World Centre. While all essential services will continue to be maintained, close attention is being given to those functions that can be quite adequately carried out at the national or local level.

25.2One of these latter is the work of supplying audiovisual materials for a wide range of projects on the part of various Bahá’í agencies or individual believers. In recent years, this work has expanded, in both quantity and diversity, beyond the point where needs can efficiently be met through a centralized operation here. The House of Justice must now look to National Spiritual Assemblies to assume the principal responsibility for supplying photographs, slides, archival materials, audio recordings and videotapes required by members of their respective communities. The Audio-Visual Department will continue to supply photographs and audio and video recordings of major events at the World Centre, at the time these occur. It is in the course also of developing a plan to forward to a number of National Assemblies parts of its current holdings that are of particular relevance to the activities of the communities involved, and looks forward to being in touch with you as this programme is implemented.

25.3Although immediately prompted by the current financial crisis, this development is primarily a feature of the increasing decentralization dictated by the expansion of the Cause. While it will make new demands on national administrative resources, the reinforcement that these resources are everywhere experiencing ensures that the vital needs of the teaching and public information work will be met.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

26

Ridván Message 2002

Ridván 2002

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

26.1The onrush of happenings within and without the Faith at the beginning of

the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age presents a spectacle that is awe-inspiring. Inside the Cause, the historic importance of the events last May that marked the completion of the edifices on Mount Carmel dazzled the senses as their impact was instantly communicated throughout the planet by satellite broadcasts and by the most extensive media coverage ever accorded a Bahá'í occasion. As the latest evidences in the tangible unfolding of the Tablet of Carmel were laid bare in breathtaking splendour before the eyes of the world, the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh leapt to new prominence in its continuing rise from obscurity. An indelible impression was thus registered in the annals of the Dispensation.

26.2This outward manifestation of the vitality animating our irrepressible Faith has had its counterpart in the thrust of the internal processes at work since the inception last Ridván of the Five Year Plan. We are therefore moved to invite the delegates assembled at National Conventions and all other followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world to join us in reflecting on a few potent highlights of the operation of the Plan during its first year—highlights that cannot but rejoice hearts and inspire confidence in the incalculable potentialities of the course on which the Plan is set.

26.3In their eager response to its requirements, National Spiritual Assemblies engaged in a series of planning sessions with Continental Counsellors before and immediately after Ridván. These set the pace for a vigorous launching distinguished by the steps taken to effectuate a new feature of the process of entry by troops. In each national community, Bahá'í institutions began the task of systematically mapping their country with the aim of sectioning it into clusters, each one being of a composition and size consonant with a scale of activities for growth and development that is manageable. Such a mapping, as has already been reported by some 150 countries, makes it possible to realize a pattern of well-ordered expansion and consolidation. Thus it creates as well a perspective, or vision, of systematic growth that can be sustained from cluster to cluster across an entire country. With this perspective, virgin clusters, like virgin territories identified in past campaigns, become goals for homefront pioneers, while opened clusters focus on their internal development mobilized by the mutually reinforcing work of the three constituent components of the Plan: the individual, the institutions and the community.

26.4It is most encouraging to see that the progress of this work is being energized through the training institute process, which was considerably strengthened last year by the campaigns undertaken in many countries to increase the number of trained tutors. Where a training institute is well established and constantly functioning, three core activities—study circles, devotional meetings, and children's classes—have multiplied with relative ease. Indeed, the increasing participation of seekers in these activities, at the invitation of their Bahá'í friends, has lent a new dimension to their purposes, consequently effecting new enrolments. Here, surely, is a direction of great promise for the teaching work. These core activities, which at the outset were devised principally to benefit the believers themselves, are naturally becoming portals for entry by troops. By combining study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes within the framework of clusters,

a model of coherence in lines of action has been put in place and is already producing welcome results. Worldwide application of this model, we feel confident, holds immense possibilities for the progress of the Cause in the years ahead.

26.5These thrilling prospects were made the more viable by the enormous energy the International Teaching Centre invested in enriching the world community's understanding of systematic growth. Seizing the advantage afforded by the recent commencement of a new term of service for Auxiliary Board members, the Teaching Centre called for 16 regional orientation conferences to be held during the closing months of the year. To each of these it dispatched two of its members. In giving much focus to the theme "training institutes and systematic growth", the conferences, attended by all but a few of the Board members throughout the world, provided the participants with a wealth of information that will, through their tireless labours, suffuse the entire fabric of the community.

26.6A community so richly endowed, so experienced, so focused on a divinely-inspired plan of action looks outward to a world whose inhabitants have, since the May 2001 events in the Holy Land, sunk more deeply into a slough of multiple disorders. And yet it is precisely under these seemingly inhospitable conditions that the Cause is meant to advance, and will thrive.

The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, the newly released volume containing English translations of the full texts of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets to the kings and rulers of the world, has come as a propitious reminder of the dire consequences of ignoring His warnings against injustice, tyranny and corruption. The violent shocks being inflicted on the consciousness of people everywhere emphasize the urgency of the remedy He has prescribed. We, the scattered bands of His loyal servants, have thus come again to a time of irresistible opportunities—opportunities to teach His Cause, to build up His wondrous System, to provide sacrificially the urgently needed material means on which the progress and execution of spiritual activities inevitably depend.

26.7Our inescapable task is to exploit the current turmoil, without fear or hesitation, for the purpose of spreading and demonstrating the transformational virtue of the one Message that can secure the peace of the world. Has the Blessed Beauty not empowered and reassured us with potent words? "Let not the happenings of the world sadden you" is His loving counsel. "I swear by God," He continues; "The sea of joy yearneth to attain your presence, for every good thing hath been created for you, and will, according to the needs of the times, be revealed unto you."

26.8Unhampered by any doubts, unhindered by any obstacles, press on, then, with the Plan in hand.

The Universal House of Justice

27

Publication of Gems of Divine Mysteries

26 June 2002

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

27.1As you will recall, one of the goals of the Five Year Plan is the

development of the Centre for the Study of the Texts, with special emphasis on the translation of the Holy Writings. A translation program is now in place, and the Universal House of Justice takes pleasure in forwarding the enclosed copy of the first volume in the new schedule, Bahá'u'lláh's Gems of Divine Mysteries—Javáhiru'l-Asrár.

27.2This short work, which was revealed in Baghdád, contains an exposition of the stages in the path of the spiritual wayfarer which complements that of the Seven Valleys and sets forth some of the doctrinal themes which would later be central to the Book of Certitude.

27.3The volume will further deepen the Western reader's appreciation of a period described by Shoghi Effendi as "the vernal years of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry", and assist students of His Revelation in gaining a more profound insight into its gradual unfoldment. It will doubtless also prove appealing to many non-Bahá'í seekers after truth in a world that offers so little enrichment for the soul….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

28

Revision of Document on Huqúqu'lláh

31 July 2002

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

28.1On 25 March 1987 you were sent a document titled "The Development of the Institution for the Huqúqu'lláh", prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre. At the request of the Universal House of Justice the document has been revised. We now enclose a copy of this revision of the document for circulation to the friends, titled "The Development of the Institution of Huqúqu'lláh", in order to facilitate further a more profound appreciation of the believers for the Institution of Huqúqu'lláh.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

29

Emergence of a New Culture

22 August 2002

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

29.1We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to respond on its behalf to your email letter of 9 August 2002. Your description of the lack of significant numerical growth in Bahá'í communities in Western lands, while more precisely applicable to some countries than others, is largely accurate, and the resulting distress you feel is fully justified. To see important Bahá'í communities markedly lacking in the development of the human resources required to reach populations desperately searching for solutions to the crisis in which society is sinking is painful indeed to believers aware of the potency of Bahá'u'lláh's Message.

29.2This consideration was an important element in the drafting of the relevant

sections of the document “Century of Light”, to which you make reference. These passages of the document seek to acquaint believers everywhere with the profound change in Bahá’í culture that the preceding decades of struggle, achievement and disappointment made possible and that was capitalized on through the agency of the Four Year Plan. The culture now emerging is one in which groups of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers explore together the truths in His Teachings, freely open their study circles, devotional gatherings and children’s classes to their friends and neighbours, and invest their efforts confidently in plans of action designed at the level of the cluster, that makes growth a manageable goal. The enthusiasm with which Bahá’í communities in most parts of the world are responding to this challenge, and the results their efforts are beginning to garner have been a source of great joy to the House of Justice.

29.3Alas, this level of response still falls short of being universal. Where Bahá’í communities are unable to free themselves from an orientation to Bahá’í life that has long outlived whatever value it once possessed, the teaching work will lack both the systematic character it requires, and the spirit that must animate all effective service to the Cause. To mistakenly identify Bahá’í community life with the mode of religious activity that characterizes the general society—in which the believer is a member of a congregation, leadership comes from an individual or individuals presumed to be qualified for the purpose, and personal participation is fitted into a schedule dominated by concerns of a very different nature—can only have the effect of marginalizing the Faith and robbing the community of the spiritual vitality available to it.

29.4As you are certainly aware, the Four Year Plan, the Twelve Month Plan and the current Five Year Plan have been designed as progressive steps in achieving this change of Bahá’í culture. For their part, the Continental Boards of Counsellors around the world have been intensely engaged in assisting National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Councils and other administrative bodies to understand the goals involved and to devise strategies for their achievement. Large-scale consultative sessions that have brought together the members of all of these key institutions have, in most cases, been particularly successful in achieving this objective. Where response has lagged, the House of Justice frequently has intervened to reinforce the efforts of the Counsellors by clarifying issues. Ultimately, the responsibility for ensuring that their own community arises to the challenge must rest with the elected representatives of the believers, at local and national levels.

29.5The advancement of the Cause is an evolutionary process which takes place through trial and error, through reflection on experience and through wholehearted commitment to the teaching Plans and strategies devised by the House of Justice. Believers, like yourself, who appreciate the opportunities thus provided, can be of great assistance by encouraging their respective countries and assemblies to similarly invest themselves in the process….

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

30

Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice
11 November 2002
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Beloved Friends,
30.1Conscious of the increasing burden of advancing years and the effect of this on the services they can render, Mr. Hushmand Fatheazam and Mr. ‘Alí Nakhjavání have, after prayerful consideration of the best interests of the Cause of God, requested permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.
30.2The House of Justice has regretfully accepted the resignation of these beloved members, who have rendered highly valued services in the Holy Land, since 1961 in Mr. Nakhjavání’s case, and since 1963 in that of Mr. Fatheazam. They will thus be able to continue their services to the Cause of God free from the inexorable pressure of work at the World Centre. In view, however, of the imminence of the next international election, we have requested them to remain in office until that time, and to this they have readily agreed.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice
31
Insights Gained in the Unfoldment of the Five Year Plan
17 January 2003
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
31.1We have followed, with immense gratitude to Bahá’u’lláh, the unfoldment of the Five Year Plan in the two years since our message of 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. It is heartening, indeed, to see the culture of learning that is taking root everywhere, as the Bahá’í world community focuses on advancing the process of entry by troops. At this juncture, when the collective experience of the community has taken so significant a step forward, we think it timely to review with you the insights thus far gained and to clarify issues that have arisen.
31.2During the initial months of the Plan, National Spiritual Assemblies proceeded with relative ease to divide the territories under their jurisdiction into areas consisting of adjacent localities, called clusters, using criteria that were purely geographic and social and did not relate to the strength of local Bahá’í communities. Reports received at the World Centre indicate that there are now close to 17,000 clusters worldwide, excluding those countries where, for one reason or another, the operation of the Faith is restricted. The number of clusters per country varies widely—from India with its 1,580 to Singapore, which necessarily sees itself as one cluster. Some of the groupings are sparsely populated areas with only a few thousand inhabitants, while the boundaries of others encompass several million people. For the most part, large urban centres under the jurisdiction of one Local Spiritual Assembly have been designated single clusters, these in turn being divided into sectors, so as to facilitate planning and implementation.
31.3With the various countries and territories divided into manageable areas,

national communities moved quickly ahead to categorize clusters according to the stages of the development of the Faith mentioned in our 9 January message. The exercise afforded a realistic means for viewing the prospects of the community, but the task of refining the criteria needed for valid assessments is proving to be an ongoing challenge to institutions. To assign a cluster to one or another category is not to make a statement about status. Rather, it is a way of evaluating its capacity for growth, in order that an approach compatible with its evolving development can be adopted. Rigid criteria are obviously counterproductive, but a well-defined scheme to carry out evaluation is essential. Two criteria seem especially important: the strength of the human resources raised up by the training institute for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith in the cluster, and the ability of the institutions to mobilize these resources in the field of service.

31.4Focus in almost every country has now turned to stimulating the movement of its priority clusters from their current stage of growth to the next. What has become strikingly clear is that progress in this respect depends largely on the efficacy of the parallel process aimed at helping an ever-increasing number of friends to move through the main sequence of courses offered by the institute serving the area. The rise in activity around the world testifies to the success of these courses in evoking the spirit of enterprise required to carry out the divers actions that growth in a cluster, at whatever stage, demands.

31.5Particularly heartwarming to observe is a growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness throughout the Bahá'í world, along with courage and audacity. Consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity—these are among the qualities that are distinguishing the believers in every continent. They are exemplified by, but are certainly not limited to, those who are arising to pioneer on the home front. As we had hoped, goals for the opening of virgin clusters are being readily met by enthusiastic participants of institute programmes who, equipped with the knowledge and skills acquired through training courses, set out to establish the Faith in a new area and bring a fledgling community into being.

31.6In most clusters, movement from one stage of growth to the next is being defined in terms of the multiplication of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes, and the expansion they engender. Devotional meetings begin to flourish as consciousness of the spiritual dimension of human existence is raised among the believers in an area through institute courses. Children's classes, too, are a natural outgrowth of the training received early in the study of the main sequence. As both activities are made open to the wider community through a variety of well-conceived and imaginative means, they attract a growing number of seekers, who, more often than not, are eager to attend firesides and join study circles. Many go on subsequently to declare their faith in Bahá'u'lláh and, from the outset, view their role in the community as that of active participants in a dynamic process of growth. Individual and collective exertions in the teaching field intensify correspondingly, further fuelling the process. Established communities are revitalized, and newly formed ones soon gain the privilege of electing their Local Spiritual Assemblies.

31.7The coherence thus achieved through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes provides the initial impulse for growth in a cluster, an impulse that gathers strength as these core activities multiply in number. Campaigns that help a sizeable group of believers advance far enough in the main sequence of courses to perform the necessary acts of service lend impetus to this multiplication of activity.

31.8It is evident, then, that a systematic approach to training has created a way for Bahá'ís to reach out to the surrounding society, share Bahá'u'lláh's message with friends, family, neighbours and co-workers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings. This outward-looking orientation is one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place. The pattern of activity that is being established in clusters around the globe constitutes a proven means of accelerating expansion and consolidation. Yet this is only a beginning.

31.9In many parts of the world, bringing large numbers into the ranks of Bahá'u'lláh's followers has traditionally not been a formidable task. It is therefore encouraging to see that, in some of the more developed clusters, carefully designed projects are being added to the existing pattern of growth to reach receptive populations and lift the rate of expansion to a higher level. Such projects accelerate the tempo of teaching, already on the rise through the efforts of individuals. And, where large-scale enrolment is beginning to result, provision is being made to ensure that a certain percentage of the new believers immediately enter the institute programme, for, as we have emphasized in several messages, these friends will be called upon to serve the needs of an ever-growing Bahá'í population. They help deepen the generality of the Bahá'ís by visiting them regularly; they teach children, arrange devotional meetings and form study circles, making it possible to sustain expansion.

31.10All of this opens thrilling opportunities for Local Spiritual Assemblies. Theirs is the challenge, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members who counsel and assist them, to utilize the energies and talents of the swelling human resources available in their respective areas of jurisdiction both to create a vibrant community life and to begin influencing the society around them. In localities where Spiritual Assemblies do not exist or are not yet functioning at the necessary level, a step-by-step approach to the development of communities and Local Spiritual Assemblies is showing excellent promise.

31.11It is especially gratifying to note the high degree of participation of believers in the various aspects of the growth process. In cluster after cluster, the number of those shouldering the responsibilities of expansion and consolidation is steadily increasing. Meetings of consultation held at the cluster level serve to raise awareness of possibilities and generate enthusiasm. Here, free from the demands of formal decision-making, participants reflect on experience gained, share insights, explore approaches and acquire a better understanding of how each can contribute to achieving the aim of the Plan. In many cases, such interaction leads to consensus on a set of short-term goals, both individual and collective. Learning in action is becoming the outstanding feature of the emerging mode of operation.

31.12Let there be no doubt that what we are witnessing is the gathering momentum of that process of the entry of humanity into the Cause by troops, foreshadowed in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to the King of Persia, eagerly anticipated by the Master, and described by the Guardian as the necessary prelude to mass conversion. In the vanguard of the process are those clusters which, although still relatively few in number, are now ready to launch intensive programmes of growth. The scale of expansion that is to mark the next stage of growth in these clusters calls for an intensity of effort yet to be achieved. May the prodigious output of energy devoted to this mighty undertaking be reinforced by the power of Divine assistance.
31.13Be assured of our heartfelt prayers in the Holy Shrines that Bahá'u'lláh may bless and confirm your endeavours to realize, to the fullest, the extraordinary opportunities of these precious days.
The Universal House of Justice

32

Postponement of Pilgrimages and Other Visits

30 January 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

32.1The Universal House of Justice has been following with close attention the development of the situation in the Middle East. Although it is not clear how events will unfold, prudence dictates that precautionary measures be taken with respect to visits of Bahá'ís to the World Centre. The House of Justice has therefore decided to postpone pilgrimages beginning with the group scheduled for 17 February 2003, with the understanding that pilgrimage will resume after the International Convention has been held, as already announced, unless circumstances dictate otherwise. Messages to this effect are being sent to all those who have been invited. Other visits will also be restricted. The Bahá'í World Centre itself will continue to function as usual.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

33

Balloting Instructions for the Ninth International Bahá'í Convention

27 February 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

33.1The preparations for holding the Ninth International Bahá'í Convention in April are proceeding as scheduled, and over 1,000 participants have already registered. Nevertheless, as may be appreciated from the general news, the situation in this area of the world is volatile, and the course of events is unpredictable.
33.2The Universal House of Justice, therefore, asks all delegates, even those who are planning to attend the Convention in person, to send their completed ballots to the Bahá'í World Centre by mail immediately to ensure that they reach Haifa not later than 18 April 2003. Those members of National Assemblies who have not yet done this are urged to do so as soon as possible.
33.3As was stated in the letter from the Universal House of Justice dated

13 November 2002, members who arrive in Haifa for the Convention having voted by mail will be able to retrieve their ballots from the Ballot Desk so that they can vote during the Convention itself.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

34

Cancellation of the International Bahá'í Convention

4 April 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

34.1We have been following closely developments in the world as they affect the Middle East, in the hope that the passage of events would make it possible for the International Bahá'í Convention to be held as planned. However, for the sake of all concerned we can wait no longer. To our regret, current conditions are such that we feel compelled to cancel the holding of the International Convention, and we write to so inform you.

34.2This is the first time we have had to implement the provision of the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice that states: "If at the time of an election the Universal House of Justice shall consider that it is impracticable or unwise to hold the International Convention it shall determine how the election shall take place." The ballots of the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies are arriving daily, and we are arranging for the nineteen delegates chosen to be tellers to come to the Holy Land to count the votes on the Ninth Day of Ridván. Should circumstances make it impossible for these friends to come, we shall adopt another means for the discharge of this task.

34.3National Conventions should continue to be held in May, around the Anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb, as currently planned.

34.4We are confident that the friends, surrounded by the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh, will pursue the aim of the Five Year Plan with undimmed zeal.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

35

Ridván Message 2003

Ridván 2003

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

35.1As the Five Year Plan enters upon its third year, momentum is building: the record of achievement during the year just ended far outdistanced that of the previous twelve months. The thrust of this momentum owes as much to the increased coherence achieved in the Plan's constituent elements as to the animating effect of the spirit of unrest pervading the planet.

35.2The circumstances attending the opening of this new administrative year are at once critical, challenging and extraordinary in their significance. The entire course of the previous year was agitated by a succession of crises that culminated in the outbreak of war in the Middle East. The implications are no

less significant for the progress of the community of the Most Great Name than for the evolution of an increasingly global society in the throes of a turbulent transition. Of necessity, the timing, scale and tendencies of this transition have not been predictable. How swift indeed has been the current change in the tide of world conditions! In the resultant conflict, involving so conspicuously the countries in which the earliest history of the Cause took shape, we see a fresh reminder of Bahá'u'lláh's warning that the "world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order". That the events of this crisis directly affect a territory with as rich a Bahá'í legacy as Iraq is particularly noteworthy.

35.3The disruptions caused by this and other situations in the world have, in one instance, suggested the opening of a new chapter in the history of the highly prized but woefully oppressed Bahá'í community of a land in which the Manifestation of God for this Day resided for a whole decade. In another, they have dashed the preparations for the Ninth International Convention at the World Centre of our Faith. But, however disappointing, this calls for no dismay. When the Major Plan of God interferes with His Minor Plan, there should be no doubt that in due course a way will providentially be opened to an opportunity of stellar possibilities for advancing the interests of His glorious Cause.

35.4The sorrows, fears and perplexities evoked by this latest conflict in the unfoldment of the Lesser Peace have intensified the feelings of grievance and outrage at the recurrent crises agitating the planet. The anxieties of people across the globe are even now being played out publicly in angry demonstrations too overwhelming to be ignored. The issues they protest and the emotions they arouse often add to the chaos and confusion they hope by such public displays to resolve. For the friends of God, there is an unambiguous explanation for what is occurring; they have only to recall the vision and principles offered by the Faith if they are to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the spread of distress and dismay. Let them strive to understand more deeply the Teachings that are relevant by reviewing letters of Shoghi Effendi which have been published in The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, particularly those entitled "The Goal of a New World Order", "America and the Most Great Peace", and "The Unfoldment of World Civilization".

35.5While the world continues on its tumultuous course, the Five Year Plan has reached the operational capacity to enable our community to make giant strides towards its major aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. The details of so encouraging a state of affairs for the Faith on all five continents have already been given in our 17 January letter; to it we invite your further study. Only a few key details need now be underscored: The division of countries into clusters has been completed in 179 of them; there exist some 17,000 of these seedbeds of expansion. Reflection meetings at the level of clusters have become a powerful means of unifying thought and action across institutions and localities; they have lent a potent stimulus to institutional and individual initiatives in a mutually supportive spirit. The institute process has demonstrated even more prominently than before its influence as a

generating force for expansion and consolidation. The core activities of the Plan have attained a scale far outstripping that of the past year. As a result, a growing number of friends are now active in the teaching and administrative work throughout the world, demonstrating the infectious spirit of confidence inspiring the enthusiasm of their efforts. Youth and children have been more systematically involved in the programmes of the community, and non-Bahá'ís have been participating more numerously in study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. It is indeed heartening to note that, in the brief period since the beginning of the Plan, where in many communities these three core activities had been sporadic they have become regular features and have multiplied. Here, then, is a snapshot of a world community focused and on the move as never before.

35.6During the past year, as this pattern of growth became more firmly rooted in the operation of the Plan, other important developments were taking place. In the arena of external affairs, agencies of the Bahá'í International Community engaged in activities too numerous and varied to describe here, but of a collective effect too impressive to let pass without some mention. The highlight of such activities was the message we addressed last April to the world's religious leaders. This has given a fresh impulse to the approach being taken by the Bahá'í community to call the attention of the most influential elements of society to issues of critical importance to ensuring the peace of the world. Through the coordinating efforts of the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information and the prompt efficiency of National Spiritual Assemblies, the message was distributed in a short time to the topmost ranks and other echelons of religious communities across the globe. The purpose of the initiative is to bring to the attention of all concerned the urgent need for religious leadership to address the problem of religious prejudice, which is becoming a steadily more serious danger to human well-being. The immediate reactions from many recipients indicate that the message is being seriously regarded and is even in some places lending new perspective to interfaith activities.

35.7In the field of social and economic development a tempo has been attained that impresses ever more deeply the effects of institutional and individual effort on both the internal development of the community and the community's collaboration with others. The Office of Social and Economic Development reports that during the second year of the Plan eight new Bahá'í-inspired development agencies were established, operating in such diverse fields as the advancement of women, health, agriculture, child education and youth empowerment.

35.8In the Holy Land, the English translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic epistle known as Javáhiru'l-Asrár was released under the title "Gems of Divine Mysteries". The restoration of the Cell of Bahá'u'lláh in the prison at 'Akká was completed, and work began on the remainder of the upper floor of the prison cell area. As of the next pilgrimage season, beginning in October 2003, the number of pilgrims in each group will be raised from 150 to 200.

35.9Furthermore, efforts at fostering the development of institutions operating

at the World Centre were especially evident in the continuing evolution of the institution of Huqúqu'lláh under the distinguished leadership of the Trustee, the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá. Through his wise initiative and constant endeavour, Dr. Varqá has inspired the education of the friends everywhere concerning the law of Huqúqu'lláh. In the decade since the law was universally applied, a network of national and regional boards of trustees has been brought into existence, which provides coordination and direction to the service of an increasing number of deputies and representatives. Knowledge of this great law has spread widely, and friends from all continents are responding to it with a spirit of devotion, which the Trustee hopes will touch those who have not yet availed themselves of the promised blessings flowing from adherence to this law.

35.10In the nearly two years since we announced the special necessity for financial support to maintain, at a befitting standard, the buildings and gardens at the World Centre, the World Centre Endowment Fund has been established. The contributions have not yet reached a level equal to the annual need. However, we have felt obliged to set aside five million dollars of the contributions received as an earmarked fund towards building a corpus to provide a source of investment income dedicated to the original purpose. We have done so by drawing upon the Bahá'í International Fund to assist in covering the necessary expenditures, suspending activities in other fields that it would have been normal to pursue.

35.11We are delighted to advise that, in response to the call issued by the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile, 185 design concepts have been received from architects and designers around the world for the Mother Temple of South America to be constructed in Santiago. A final choice will be announced in due course.

35.12Dear Friends: Gratified by solid evidence of the progress being made far and wide, we trust in the continuing confirmations of our Supreme Lord upon the dedicated efforts you exert within the framework of the Five Year Plan—a Plan designed to fit the requirements of these times. May your persistence in its pursuit release those pent-up forces that, through the grace and favour of the Abhá Beauty, can advance by mighty thrusts the process of entry by troops in every land.

The Universal House of Justice

36

Release of "Building Momentum" Video

22 April 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

36.1As you know from the letter dated 31 January 2003 from the International Convention Office, the Universal House of Justice commissioned the production of a video related to the Five Year Plan, which was to have been presented at the Ninth International Bahá'í Convention. Additionally, one complimentary copy was to have been given to each National Spiritual Assembly in either English, Spanish or French. In this connection, you were asked to provide the International Convention Office with your preferences in terms of language and

VHS cassette format.
36.2We are pleased to inform you that plans are under way to send to each National Assembly, by airmail, one copy of the video in the appropriate language and format. It is hoped that the copies will reach you in time for viewing at your forthcoming National Conventions. A transcript of the video in English is enclosed for those National Assemblies that wish to translate the text into languages other than Spanish and French.
36.3The video, entitled “Building Momentum”, focuses on seven clusters in various parts of the globe, all of which are working in the forefront of Bahá’í activity. The segment on each cluster highlights some distinct aspect of the growth process, so that, in their entirety, the seven stories give a vivid picture of the coherence achieved by the lines of action called for in the Five Year Plan. The House of Justice encourages you to show the video early in the Convention proceedings, with the hope that it will inform the deliberations of the delegates and bring joy to their hearts.
36.4In addition to the video, a few other items were to have been provided to the delegates at the International Convention. These included a small foldout booklet, based on a display created for the occasion, and a brochure entitled “For the Betterment of the World” prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Centre. Arrangements are being made to send copies of the booklet and brochure to each National Assembly, and we will be writing to you about this matter in due course. The Office of Public Information will soon be contacting you regarding the distribution of the volume “The Bahá’í World 2001–2002”, copies of which were also to have been made available at the Convention.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
37
Release of “Building Momentum” Document
27 April 2003
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
37.1Enclosed is a copy of a document entitled “Building Momentum: A Coherent Approach to Growth”, prepared by the International Teaching Centre at the request of the Universal House of Justice for distribution at the Ninth International Bahá’í Convention. The House of Justice commends the document to your study, confident that it will become an invaluable resource to you in your ongoing consultations with the Counsellors.
37.2From time to time, since the beginning of the Four Year Plan, effort has been made to
summarize in documents made widely available to the friends the experience of the Bahá’í world in advancing the process of entry by troops and to frame it within the guidance of the Universal House of Justice as expressed in its letters and messages to individuals and institutions. The first of these documents, entitled “Training Institutes”, was released by the House of Justice at the International Convention in April 1998. The second, prepared by the Teaching Centre at the instruction of the House of Justice in February

2000, was entitled “Training Institutes and Systematic Growth”. The present document should be considered the next of this kind. Using the 17 January message of the House of Justice regarding the Five Year Plan as a starting point, it elaborates with specific examples and in greater detail the broad vision contained in that message. It is the result of the Teaching Centre’s careful analysis of both the guidance of the House of
Justice and the methods and approaches employed by the friends in every part of the globe in meeting the requirements of the Plan.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
38
Election of the Universal House of Justice
29 April 2003
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
38.1The newly elected members of the Universal House of Justice are Peter Khan, Farzam Arbab, Hooper Dunbar, Glenford Mitchell, Douglas Martin, Ian Semple, Kiser Barnes, Hartmut Grossmann, Firaydoun Javaheri.
The Universal House of Justice
39
The Publication “For the Betterment of the World”
5 May 2003
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
39.1At the request of the Universal House of Justice, we are sending to each National Spiritual Assembly ten copies of the brochure prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development entitled “For the Betterment of the World”. The brochure was to have been made available to delegates at the Ninth International Bahá’í Convention. National Assemblies may distribute and utilize the enclosed copies as they deem best.
39.2Since the inception of the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre nearly twenty years ago, great progress has been made in this area of endeavour in all parts of the globe. The brochure offers an overview of the current approach to Bahá’í social and economic development worldwide and describes how basic concepts and strategies are being applied at different levels of complexity. It will no doubt prove useful in stimulating learning among the friends about development principles and practice from a Bahá’í perspective and in raising the general public’s awareness of the steadily evolving work Bahá’í communities and individual believers are performing in service to humanity.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
40
Passing of David Hofman, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice
11 May 2003
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
40.1We have learned, with sorrowing hearts, of the passing, in his ninety-fifth year, of our dearly loved former colleague, David Hofman, a vigorous promoter

of the Faith for nigh on seven decades. From the moment of his acceptance of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh in Montreal, in July 1933, David served with exemplary zeal in Canada, the United States, the British Isles, the World Centre and, finally, to the last reserves of his strength, as a travelling teacher throughout the world. He will be remembered for an adamantine loyalty to the Cause, an unfailing response to the call and guidance of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, a central role in the advancement of the British Bahá'í community and the launching of the brilliant Africa Campaign, and his outstanding contributions to Bahá'í literature both as an author and a publisher. His life was crowned by twenty-five years of distinguished service as a member of the Universal House of Justice from 1963 to 1988.

40.2We are offering ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that his valiant soul may be richly rewarded in the Abhá Kingdom and that the bounties of God may surround his beloved children and grandchildren and his wife, Kathleen. You are advised to hold memorial gatherings in his honour in all Houses of Worship and throughout the Bahá'í community.

The Universal House of Justice

41

Appointment of the Members of the International Teaching Centre

13 May 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

41.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of the Counsellor members of the International Teaching Centre for the five-year term beginning 23 May 2003: Rolf von Czékus, Violette Haake, Paul Lample, Joan Lincoln, Payman Mohajer, Rachel Ndegwa, Zenaida Ramirez, Shahriar Razavi and Penelope Walker. We are profoundly grateful to Lauretta King for her outstanding contribution, over fifteen years of devoted labour, to the development of the worldwide operation of this vital institution.

The Universal House of Justice

42

Appointment of the Architect for the Chile Temple

12 June 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

42.1We are greatly pleased to announce the appointment of Mr. Siamak Hariri of Toronto, Canada, as architect for the Mother Temple of South America to be erected in Santiago, Chile. This important step prompts us to inaugurate the Chilean Temple Fund dedicated to the vital financial support of the construction of this House of Worship. Assemblies and believers everywhere are called upon to contribute generously for this purpose. Their offerings may be sent to the Bahá'í World Centre or the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Chile.

The Universal House of Justice

43

Appointment of Two Continental Counsellors

13 June 2003

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

43.1We joyfully announce the appointment of the following Continental Counsellors to fill the vacancies created by the recent appointments to the International Teaching Centre: in Africa Mrs. Ruth Amos Mnyampi and in Europe Dr. Shirin Fozdar-Foroudi.
43.2We are also happy to announce the appointment of Mr. Stephen N. Hall to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Australasia. He is replacing Dr. Sírús Naráqí who, because of a prolonged illness, has been relieved of his responsibilities as a Continental Counsellor with our most heartfelt regret. We are deeply grateful for the exemplary services Dr. Naráqí has rendered as a member of that Board for nearly two decades, and our fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold will continue to surround him and his precious family.
The Universal House of Justice

44

Message to Representatives of European National Bahá'í Youth Committees
13 November 2003
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the Czech Republic
44.1Kindly convey to the representatives of the European National Bahá'í Youth Committees, gathered in their conference in Prague, our warmest greetings and the assurance of our prayers for their success. Their focus on the major elements of the Five Year Plan and on the importance of the part to be played by youth, building on the achievements made in the past by the European Bahá'í Youth Council, will provide a structure for the work in the coming year. We urge the participants to be outward looking and to consider how to draw non-Bahá'í youth into the three core activities of the Plan.
44.2The vision and enthusiasm produced by this conference, and the eagerness of the participants to enlist the active collaboration of the Bahá'í youth in all the countries of Europe, can affect every community. Our eager hope is that all European Bahá'ís, inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's sovereign remedy for the ills of humankind, will rise above the divisions, prejudices, pessimism and political preoccupations of their fellow citizens and be a centre for united, positive action.
The Universal House of Justice

45

The Challenge of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's The Secret of Divine Civilization for Iran Today
Day of the Covenant
26 November 2003
To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Cradle of the Faith
Dearly loved Friends,
45.1It is now a little over 125 years since 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed His open letter to the people of your country. Because of His vital role in a religious community that had been made the object of intense prejudice, the Author necessarily refrained from attaching His name to the document. His message, however, could not have been more clear. Speaking out of a profound love for a native land that He had not seen during the long years of exile since His childhood, the Master appealed in passionate language for its people

to call to mind those days when Iran “was as the heart of the world”, “the source and centre of sciences and arts, the wellspring of great inventions and discoveries, the rich mine of human virtues and perfections”. The time had come, He insisted, when the heirs of so great a civilization could—and must—arise and reclaim their heritage.

45.2What the letter prophetically laid out was the challenge of modernity. Today, that challenge has become the inescapable preoccupation of populations throughout the planet, not least the peoples of the Islamic world. The meaning of modernity and the features of that rising flood of cultural revolution were explicitly identified in the Master’s message: constitutional and democratic government, the rule of law, universal education, the protection of human rights, economic development, religious tolerance, the promotion of useful sciences and technologies and programmes of public welfare. In praising the achievements of what He termed this “temporal and material apparatus of civilization”, the Master made it clear that He was not proposing simply a credulous imitation of the West. On the contrary. In uncompromising language, He portrayed European society as drowning “in the sea of passion and desire”, trapped in a materialistic perception of reality that could bring in its wake nothing but disillusionment:

Be just: can this nominal civilization, unsupported by a genuine civilization of character, bring about the peace and well-being of the people or win the good pleasure of God? Does it not, rather, connote the destruction of man’s estate and pull down the pillars of happiness and peace?

45.3Readers were urged to look below surface phenomena. As a lengthy exposition of historical processes would have burdened what was intended as an urgent appeal for reflection and action, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confined Himself to a few salient examples of the points He was making. Their common theme was the transformative power that has been responsible for all of humanity’s development over the ages and that would later lend the published edition of the letter its familiar title The Secret of Divine Civilization. Whether in reviewing events of Persian history or touching on passages in the Holy Qur’án, the letter called on its readers to reflect deeply about the unique endowment that promotes the advancement of all human well-being:

Consider carefully: all these highly varied phenomena, these concepts, this knowledge, these technical procedures and philosophical systems, these sciences, arts, industries and inventions—all are emanations of the human mind. Whatever people has ventured deeper into this shoreless sea, has come to excel the rest. The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge.

45.4The Secret of Divine Civilization is a celebration of the creative role played by the rational faculty—God’s greatest gift to humankind—in the advancement of civilization. Among the fruits of the mind that He particularly singled out, the Master laid strong emphasis on scientific and technological development. His readers were encouraged to reflect on the benefits that would accrue to Persian society through taking appropriate advantage of whatever had been accomplished in this respect by peoples of other lands, whether in the West or elsewhere. It had been the free-ranging powers of the human intellect,

He insisted, that had discovered and tested each of the benefits enjoyed by any people, and no legitimate argument could be advanced for imposing cultural or national barriers to the operations of this universal process. Its achievements represent the common possessions of the entire human race, their adoption by a nation or people neither diminishing the users nor reflecting on their native capacities.

45.5At a much deeper level, the Master turned his readers' attention to the spiritual forces shaping and impelling the work of the mind. In one of the most penetrating passages of the letter, He challenged those fundamental errors about the nature of man and society that had already had ruinous consequences in other lands and that could, if not avoided, undermine the capacity of the Iranian people to assess their present situation objectively and seize the opportunities before them. "There are", 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked, "some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and ensure his spiritual and material perfection." On the contrary, He pointed out, it is readily observable that human development depends on education. He then drew the implications of this law for the progress of society. All the evidence inescapably demonstrates that the principal influence in the gradual civilizing of human character, far from being a simple endowment of nature, has been the effect produced on the rational soul by the guidance of the successive Messengers of God. It has been through Their intervention, and through it alone, that the peoples of the world, of whatever nation or religion, have learned the values and ideals that have empowered them to put material resources and technological means at the service of human betterment. It is They who, in each age, have defined the meaning and requirements of modernity. It is They who have been the ultimate Educators of humankind:

Universal benefits derive from the grace of the Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intent, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honour, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every aspect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valour and to unflagging efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization.

45.6We have reviewed briefly here the argument of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's great message because of the remarkable extent to which contemporary events vindicate its diagnosis and prescriptions. The insights it contains illumine both the situation in which the Iranian people currently find themselves and the related implications for you who are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that country. The message was a summons—to the country's leaders and the population alike—to free themselves from blind submission to dogma and to accept the need for fundamental changes in behaviour and attitude, most particularly a willingness to subordinate personal and group interests to the crying needs of society as a whole.

45.7As you well know, the Master's appeal was ignored. Locked in the grip of an antiquated Qájár autocracy restrained only by its incompetence, Persia

drifted ever deeper into stagnation. Venal politicians competed with one another for a share of the diminishing wealth of a country driven to the verge of bankruptcy. Worse still, a population that had once produced some of the greatest minds in the history of civilization—Cyrus, Darius, Rumi, Hafiz, Avicenna, Rhazes and countless others—had become the prey of a clerical caste, as ignorant as it was corrupt, whose petty privileges could be maintained only by arousing in the helpless masses an unreasoning fear of anything progressive.

45.8Little wonder then that, taking advantage of the chaos that followed in the wake of the first world war, an ambitious army officer was able to seize power and establish a personal dictatorship. To him—as to his son after him—deliverance from Persia's ills was assumed to lie in a systematic programme of "Westernization". Schools, public works, a trained bureaucracy and a well-equipped military served the needs of the new national government. Foreign investment was encouraged as a means of developing the country's impressive national resources. Women were freed from the worst of the restrictions that had prevented their development and were given opportunities for education and useful careers. Although the Majlis remained little more than a facade, hope rose that, in time, it might emerge as a genuine institution of democratic government.

45.9What emerged, instead, through the single-minded exploitation of Iran's petroleum resources, was wealth on an almost unimaginable scale. In the absence of anything resembling a system of social justice, the chief effect was to vastly enrich a privileged and self-serving minority, while leaving the mass of the population little better off than they had been before. Treasured cultural symbols and the heroic episodes of a glorious past were resurrected merely to decorate the monumental vulgarity of a society whose moral foundations were built on the shifting sands of ambition and appetite. Protest, even the mildest and most reasonable, was smothered by a secret police unconstrained by any constitutional oversight.

45.10In 1979 the Iranian people threw off this despotism and swept its counterfeit claims to modernity into history's dustbin. Their revolution was the achievement of the combined forces of many groups, but its driving force was the ideals of Islám. In place of wanton self-indulgence, people were promised lives of dignity and decency. Gross inequities of class and wealth would be overcome by the spirit of brotherhood enjoined by God. The natural resources with which providence has endowed so fortunate a land were declared to be the patrimony of the entire Iranian people, to be used to provide universal employment and education. A new "Islamic Constitution" ostensibly enshrined solemn guarantees of equality before the law for all citizens of the republic. Government would endeavour conscientiously to combine spiritual values with the principles of democratic choice.

45.11How do such promises relate to the experience being described 25 years later by the great majority of Iran's population? From all sides today one hears cries of protest against endemic corruption, political manipulation, the mistreatment of women, a shameless violation of human rights and the suppression of thought. What is the effect on public consciousness, one must

further ask, of appeals to the authority of the Holy Qur'án to justify policies that lead to such conditions?

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45.12Iran's crisis of civilization will be resolved neither by blind imitation of an obviously defective Western culture nor by retreat into medieval ignorance. The answer to the dilemma was enunciated on the very threshold of the crisis, in the clearest and most compelling language, by a distinguished Son of Iran Who is today honoured in every continent of the world, but sadly not in the land of His birth. Persia's poetic genius captures the irony: "I searched the wide world over for my Beloved, while my Beloved was waiting for me in my own home." The world's appreciation of Bahá'u'lláh came perhaps most explicitly into focus on 29 May 1992, the centenary of His death, when the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies met in solemn session to pay tribute to Him, to His teachings and to the services rendered to humanity by the community He founded. On that occasion, the Speaker of the Chamber and spokespersons from every party rose, successively, to express their profound admiration of One who was described in their addresses as the Author of "the most colossal religious work written by the pen of a single Man", a message that "reaches out to humanity as a whole, without petty differences of nationality, race, limits or belief".

45.13What has been the response in His native land to a Figure whose influence has brought such honour to the name of Iran? From the middle years of the 19th century when He arose to champion the Cause of God, and despite the reputation His philanthropy and intellectual gifts had won, Bahá'u'lláh was made the object of a virulent campaign of persecution. In recognizing His mission, your forefathers had the imperishable glory of sharing in His sufferings. Throughout the ensuing decades, you who have remained faithful to His Cause, who have sacrificed for it and promoted its civilizing message to the most remote regions of the planet have known your own portion of abuse, bereavement and humiliation—each Bahá'í family in Iran.

45.14One of the most appalling afflictions, in terms of its tragic consequences, has been the slander of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause perpetrated by that privileged caste to whom Persia's masses had been taught to look for guidance in spiritual matters. For over 150 years, every medium of public information—pulpit, press, radio, television and even scholarly publication—has been perverted to create an image of the Bahá'í community and its beliefs that is grossly false and whose sole aim is to arouse popular contempt and antagonism. No calumny has been too vile; no lie too outrageous. At no point during those long years were you, the victims of this vilification, given an opportunity, however slight, to defend yourselves and to provide the facts that would have exposed such calculated poisoning of the public mind.

45.15One example will stand for all the rest. Of the countless accomplishments of the Cause, particularly striking has been the success of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in inculcating, in one generation of believers after another, the highest standards of personal morality. No argument is needed here to defend this assertion. The reputation for integrity that the Bahá'í community has won worldwide—among publics, governments and

international agencies alike—speaks for itself. Thousands of your fellow citizens have also had good cause to appreciate its character at first hand. And yet, driven by ungovernable malice, your self-appointed enemies in Iran have not hesitated to bring against you charges of every form of human depravity, charges which—when recounted in free societies where the Faith is well known—have merely exposed the degeneracy of the minds capable of concocting them.

45.16Parallel with this campaign of moral defamation has been a strategy devised to intimidate all those who, aware of the truth of the matter, were moved to come to your assistance. Having associated you in popular opinion with attitudes and behaviour that are a danger to society, your oppressors then accuse anyone who appeals on your behalf of also being a Bahá'í and therefore lacking in credibility. The extremes to which this systematic corruption of public life extends can be seen in the willingness of those behind the scheme to represent even long-standing opponents of the Cause as being its secret supporters. Have they not gone so far as to claim that a discredited prime minister—whose father had been expelled from the Bahá'í community precisely because of his partisan political involvement, who was himself insistent to his last breath on his Islamic identity and who was the cause of great difficulties for the Bahá'í community—was in fact a clandestine member of the Faith?

45.17Nor have your oppressors been content with slander. For a century and a half you have suffered repeated violence. Most recently, since the 1979 revolution, you have seen some of the noblest men and women whom Bahá'u'lláh has raised up imprisoned on charges too outlandish to warrant comment, subjected to monstrous tortures and murdered after farcical trials, their property plundered by their persecutors and by the hoodlums who serve and protect them. Your elected Spiritual Assemblies, long the most advanced examples of democratic decision-making bodies in the country, were arbitrarily dissolved, many of their members kidnapped and slain. How many the children who have been orphaned. How many the youth who have seen their educational plans and hopes of earning a livelihood brutally extinguished. How many the aged left homeless, the pensions for which they had worked a lifetime confiscated by fatvás issued by men unworthy of respect. How many the parents who have been forced to bury the mutilated bodies of their sons and daughters in whatever barren wastelands were allocated to them for the purpose. What indeed of the flower-bordered Bahá'í cemeteries, tenderly cared for over the years, that have been maliciously bulldozed, the precious remains of countless loved ones shovelled onto heaps of rubble?

45.18Those perpetrating these atrocities are eager to raise a hue and cry—as indeed they have every right to do—if the least offence is given in another land to a location associated with the sacred name of Islám. But what of the Bahá'í Shrines and other Holy Places in Iran? What of the priceless House of the Blessed Báb in Shíráz, centre of pilgrimage for the entire Bahá'í world, destroyed by a municipal wrecking crew acting under the direction of 'ulamá, its sacred precincts paved over as an ultimate desecration? Speaking of persons so base as to commit acts of this evil, Bahá'u'lláh has

declared, “God is wholly quit of them, and likewise are We.”
*
45.19No one would contend that you are alone in the ordeals you are enduring. The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh, “Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression.” What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself.
45.20What is it then, the world is beginning to ask, that has preserved you from spiritual corrosion of this nature? Where have you found the resources to free your hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in your mistreatment? How is it that, after a century and more of unremitting persecution—and the calculated attempt at genocide of these past 25 years—you still retain both a confident mastery of your moral purpose and an abiding love for the land in which you have suffered so greatly? The incomparable words of Bahá’u’lláh supply the answer:
Every fire is seen to be extinguishable except for the fire of the Love of God that is manifest and ablaze in the hearts. Every mighty tree will be uprooted by tempestuous winds except for the trees of the Divine orchard, and every lamp is quenched except for the lamp of the Cause of God, which shineth in the heart of the world. Winds will add to its brightness, and it will never be extinguished.
This is the answer that history will give to those who enquire of your secret. Your lives are the fruit of that Divine orchard, the handiwork of the Creative Word to which you have surrendered your hearts. “O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.” “… love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest.” “Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny he would manifest naught save goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct.” “In this day, all must cling to whatever is the cause of the betterment of the world and the promotion of knowledge amongst its peoples.” “… the tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk.” “Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God.” “One speck of

chastity is greater than a hundred thousand years of worship and a sea of knowledge." "We have enjoined upon all to engage in crafts and trades and have accounted it as an act of worship." "Trustworthiness is the greatest of doors leading to the tranquility and security of the people of the world." "Knowledge is the cause of exaltation and advancement. It enableth man to pass beyond the world of dust to the realms above and leadeth him out of darkness into light. It is the redeemer and the bestower of life. It conferreth the living waters of immortality and imparteth heavenly food."

45.21All of you have, from childhood, been familiar with the exhortation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that so marvellously sums up these ideals: "To be a Bahá'í is to be the embodiment of all human perfections."

45.22The spirit of resourcefulness and practicality you are displaying also brings great comfort to the anguished hearts of your fellow believers in other lands. When your children were expelled from schools because of their Faith, you created classrooms in your homes. Graduates of the institution you founded to meet the needs of university students, who are similarly denied education, are today distinguishing themselves in prestigious universities in other countries where their credentials have been gladly accepted. God willing, the day is not far distant when opportunities for the development of their capacities will be opened for the thousands of other Bahá'í youth still cruelly deprived. The sacrificial pooling of modest incomes is proving not only sufficient to ensure that members of the community are not left in want, but to produce funds for general activities. Under the most arduous conditions, a vibrant community life continues, with the far greater intensity that testing alone can produce.

45.23For over a century this spirit has borne fruit both in Iran and throughout the entire world. There is today no region of the planet where the capacities of Iranian Bahá'ís have not lent a mighty impetus to the expansion of the teaching work and the establishment and consolidation of the Faith's institutions. Nor has the impact been limited to the spiritual life of the Faith. It would be difficult to think of any profession, any field of science or the arts, where Iranian Bahá'ís—particularly youth—are not powerfully manifesting the ideal of excellence so often reiterated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Such qualities do not burst forth in a people overnight, nor are they the product of mere human will. In the lives and work of Persian pioneers around the world today can be seen the fruit of the culture of learning and self-discipline in which they and their parents were lovingly raised in the land of their birth.

45.24To every fair-minded observer, you are the living proof that faith in God and confidence in social progress are in every sense reconcilable; that science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization. Already, you begin to see this realization dawning in the eyes of many Muslims of your acquaintance. These friends and neighbours, who can truly lay claim to being "a people summoning unto goodness", have watched with outrage as those whom they know to be innocent of any crime have been slandered and attacked without recourse to legal protection. They are sensitive—perhaps even more than you are yourselves—to

the spirit of courage and decency that you have displayed throughout these ordeals. And they are also awakening to the real character of those whose abuse of you defiles the honour of Islám, in whose name such crimes are perpetrated. If you are not yet physically free, you are at last beginning to win acceptance as a respected and valued part of the Iranian people. Ahead lies the day when your fellow citizens will have recognized and come to treasure the contribution you are destined to make to Iran's recovery of her rightful place among the nations of the world.

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45.25Ruling elites can make no more serious error than to imagine that the power they have managed to arrogate to themselves provides an enduring bulwark against the relentless tides of historical change. Today, in Iran as everywhere throughout the world, these tides roll in with insistent urgency and tumultuous force. They are not merely at the door of the house, but rise up irresistibly through its floors. They cannot be diverted. They will not be denied.

45.26This is the real reason why Bahá'u'lláh was so desperately opposed by clergy and rulers who recognized in Him—correctly if only dimly—the Voice of a coming society of justice and enlightenment, in which they themselves would have no place. Nor should you have any doubt that it is this same fear that animates the successive waves of persecution you have long endured. Those who investigate the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh with sincerity readily appreciate that the Bahá'í community is a creative minority that is the embodiment of its Founder's vision of the future and of His indomitable Will to achieve it. Through your love, your sacrifices, your services and your very lives, you have proven to be the true promoters of the progress of your dear homeland of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written:

The horizon of Persia hath been illumined with the light of the heavenly Orb. Erelong will the Daystar of the supernal realm shine so brightly as to raise that land even unto the ethereal heights and to cause it to shed its radiance over the whole earth. The imperishable glory of bygone generations shall once more be manifest in such wise as to dazzle and bewilder the eyes….

Iran shall become a focal centre of divine splendours. Her darksome soil will become luminous and her land will shine resplendent. Although now wanting in name and fame, she will become renowned throughout the world; although now deprived, she will attain her highest hopes and aspirations; although now destitute and despondent, she will obtain abundant grace, achieve distinction and find abiding honour.

45.27Each time we visit the Holy Shrines you are in the forefront of our hearts and prayers. Your long night will end, and you will have the joy of witnessing with your own eyes the mighty structure your sacrifices have raised.

The Universal House of Justice

46

Passing of the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Akbar Furútan

27 November 2003

To the Bahá'ís of the World

46.1With profound feelings of loss, we announce the passing, yesterday evening, on the Day of the Covenant, of the dearly loved Hand of the Cause of God

‘Alí-Akbar Furútan. Having addressed the assembled pilgrims as was his practice, he paused to exchange a few words with some of the Russian-speaking friends; then, as he was leaving the room, his heart failed. He had fulfilled his longing to serve the Cause to his last breath.

46.2Born in Sabzivár, Iran, on 29 April 1905, ‘Alí-Akbar Furútan moved with his family to ‘Ishqábád in what was then Russian Turkestan, and, through his years of school and university, he took an active part in the work of the Bahá’í communities of ‘Ishqábád, Baku, Moscow and other parts of Russia. In 1930 he was expelled from the Soviet Union for his involvement in Bahá’í activities and, from that time on, played an ever more significant role in the work and administration of the Iranian Bahá’í community. In December 1951 he was among the first to be appointed by Shoghi Effendi as Hands of the Cause of God. Following the passing of the Guardian, he was one of the nine Hands of the Cause selected, at their first Conclave, to serve as Custodians in the Holy Land. For the remaining forty-six years of his life he laboured strenuously at the World Centre, undertaking journeys throughout the world, assisting, advising and enthusing the friends and their national and local institutions. These journeys culminated in 1990 and 1991 with visits to the newly re-emerging Bahá’í communities of the countries of the Soviet Union.

46.3‘Alí-Akbar Furútan’s single-minded devotion to the Faith and its Guardian, the vital role he played in the establishment of the Administrative Order in Iran, his contribution to the spiritual and material education of children, his services as a Hand of the Cause of God, and his unswerving support of the Universal House of Justice together constitute an imperishable record of service in the annals of the Cause. His penetrating mind, his loving concern and his sparkling humour are ineffaceable memories in the hearts of the thousands of believers with whom he spoke.

46.4While praying in the Holy Shrines for the progress of ‘Alí-Akbar Furútan’s illumined soul in the Abhá Kingdom, we supplicate Bahá’u’lláh to bless likewise the fruition of the seeds he sowed in this world.

46.5We extend our loving sympathy to his daughters, Írán Muhájir and Parvín Furútan, to his granddaughters and to all other members of his family. We advise friends in all lands to commemorate his passing and to hold memorial services in his honour in all Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs.

The Universal House of Justice

47

Duties of Iranian Bahá’ís Living Outside Iran

12 January 2004

To the Iranian believers living outside Iran

Dearly loved Friends,

47.1You will by now have had an opportunity to read our general letter of 26 November 2003 addressed to the followers of Bahá’u’lláh residing in the Cradle of the Faith. The subject has profound implications for those of you who live elsewhere in the world, implications that call for your prayerful reflection.

47.2Although abuses of various kinds continue to limit what the friends in Iran can accomplish and unpredictable dangers could still lie ahead, the organized campaign to destroy the Cause there has clearly failed. “The enemies of God”, Bahá’u’lláh asserts, “seek by oppression to extinguish the Light, heedless of the fact that the Hand of Divine power transmutes their oppression into oil that increases the brightness of the Lamp.” For the victory so far won, the Bahá’í world can thank the interaction of two moral forces. The first has been the heroism of the Iranian believers themselves and their steadfast refusal to compromise their faith in the face of the worst abuses their enemies could inflict on them. The second has been the determination of National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world to mobilize international protest, attract the attention of influential media, and ensure that the crimes committed against their brothers and sisters in Iran became an established issue in the ongoing indictment by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights of Iran’s violation of universally accepted standards.

47.3Parallel with the operation of these forces was an intensive programme implemented in the 1980s to rescue thousands of Iranian refugees who had either been in danger of being singled out for attack or had been stranded without valid passports in lands where they were serving as pioneers. Many of you were the beneficiaries of this highly successful undertaking, and many of you have repaid the national Bahá’í communities who welcomed you by throwing yourselves eagerly into the teaching work. In country after country, your achievements—and those of your sons and daughters—have been vital to the advancement of the Cause.

47.4In Iran, the community of your fellow believers will increasingly be able to turn its attention to the role it is destined to play in the country’s regeneration, as envisioned in the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cited in our general letter: “Iran shall become a focal centre of divine splendours. … although now destitute and despondent, she will obtain abundant grace, achieve distinction and find abiding honour”. Such a contribution will call on all of the capacities, spiritual, moral, and practical, that have been tested in the crucible of suffering.

47.5It would be unthinkable for so noble a struggle to be handicapped by unwisdom on the part of believers outside Iran. It is clear that the enemies of the Faith, having failed to destroy it through violence, now cling to the hope of reducing its influence by encouraging Bahá’í emigration. We call on Iranian Bahá’ís throughout the world to exercise the utmost self-discipline in their communications with their fellow believers in the Cradle of the Faith, to refrain from any suggestions that might undermine, however inadvertently, the historic enterprise Bahá’u’lláh has set in motion. To urge that any of the friends in Iran who have withstood the trials of these recent years should now consider abandoning the field for the ephemeral advantages of life in other lands would be a grave disservice to the Cause of God.

47.6Under present circumstances, visits to Iran should be made only in cases of genuine necessity and after all reasonable precautions have been taken. Some among you may find yourselves facing urgent family or other reasons to make such return visits. In doing so, you will have to ensure that you have properly

discharged whatever obligations you have assumed, as refugees, to the government of your country of residence. In certain cases, you will be able to consider the possibility of remaining in Iran and putting the skills and resources you have earned abroad at the service of the efforts of the community where the Faith was born. Whether such returns are of brief or longer term, however, you should take the utmost care to avoid ostentatious material displays or inappropriate conversation that would create additional tests for friends who have already sustained far more than their share of trials.

47.7The believers in Iran, whom Bahá'u'lláh has raised, nurtured, and prepared for His Purpose, represent a resource of the Cause—not only in Iran but globally—whose potentialities it is impossible today to properly appreciate. They are the pride of the Bahá'í world and a source of joy to our hearts. We are confident that, when you who live in other parts of the world reflect on the issues discussed here, you will resolve to do everything you can to reinforce and encourage the commitment of the company of heroic souls in the Cradle of the Faith on whose steadfastness so much continues to depend.

47.8Our prayers will be offered on your behalf in the Holy Shrines.

With loving Bahá'í greetings

The Universal House of Justice

48

Ridván Message 2004

Ridván 2004

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

48.1Three years of the Five Year Plan have passed. The processes set in motion in the Four Year Plan, strengthened through special attention to the Bahá'í education of children during the Twelve Month Plan, and followed up unflaggingly during these past years, are now fulfilling the high hopes with which they were launched. In every part of the world the three participants in the Plan—the individual, the community and the institutions—each playing a distinctive role, are reinforcing one another's actions. The core activities of study circles, children's classes and devotional meetings have become essential aspects and mutually enhancing achievements lending greater vigour and success to all the other elements of Bahá'í community life. Human resources are being augmented, and the Local Spiritual Assemblies are responding to the fresh demands of this rising vitality.

48.2The capacity built for the Bahá'í education of children throughout the world is extraordinarily impressive. Initial efforts for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth are meeting with success. The movement of clusters from each level of activity to a higher one is well in hand and, as it proceeds, the kernel of avowed believers is being joined by a larger circle of people, still not Bahá'ís but enthusiastically involved in core activities of the Plan. Structures for administering intensive growth are already appearing in certain advanced clusters. National Assemblies, while attending to the needs of all the clusters in their countries, have learned the value of concentrating special attention on certain priority clusters that show high

promise, encouraging and developing them until the human resources they have raised up through the training institutes enable them to become centres of rapid, sustained growth.

48.3As foreseen, the training institute is proving to be an engine of growth. On assessing the opportunities and needs of their respective communities, the great majority of National Spiritual Assemblies have chosen to adopt the course materials devised by the Ruhi Institute, finding them most responsive to the Plan's needs. This has had the collateral benefit that the same materials have been translated into many languages and, wherever Bahá'ís travel, they find other friends following the same path and familiar with the same books and methods.

48.4A chaotic international society, torn by conflicting perceptions and interests, is assailed by rising terrorism, lawlessness and corruption, and eroded by economic failure, poverty and disease. In its midst the Bahá'í community is becoming increasingly visible, inspired by a divinely revealed vision, building on solid foundations, growing in strength through the processes that are now in place, and undaunted by seeming setbacks. An example of the capacity of the Bahá'í world to respond to unexpected conditions occurred a year ago, when multiple dangers required the cancellation of the International Bahá'í Convention; the election of the Universal House of Justice was duly held and the Plan went forward without a missed step. Concurrently, despite the disruption and chaos of life in Iraq, it was possible to contact the Bahá'ís in that land and reconstitute their Local Spiritual Assemblies. Now we announce with great joy the election, this Ridván, of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iraq, restored after more than thirty years of stifling oppression, to take its rightful place in the international Bahá'í community.

48.5What the Divine Plan requires at this stage is for us to continue confidently and dynamically in the present direction, undeterred by storms battering the world of humanity. Be sure that the Blessed Beauty will guide your steps and the Hosts of the Supreme Concourse will reinforce your every effort for the progress of His Faith.

The Universal House of Justice

49

Passing of Aziz Yazdi, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre

22 April 2004

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

49.1Our hearts are heavy with sorrow at the passing, in his ninety-fifth year, of dearly loved, devoted promoter of the Cause Aziz Ismayn Yazdi. His life was characterized by an imperishable record of selfless service, steadfast action and instant obedience. From his earliest days in Egypt, and inspired by his association with the beloved Master in Haifa during his youth, he dedicated himself to the advancement of the Cause as a self-sacrificing pioneer and an outstanding teacher and administrator in various lands. Subsequent to his efforts in the United Kingdom, Iraq and Iran, he responded to the Guardian's call for pioneers to Africa and moved with his family to Kenya in 1951, where his consecrated endeavours included membership on the National Spiritual

Assembly of Central and East Africa and later of Kenya, the Auxiliary Board in Africa, and then the Continental Board of Counsellors in Central and East Africa. Following his appointment to the newly formed International Teaching Centre in 1973, he relocated to the Holy Land where his invaluable services became worldwide in scope. Upon his retirement in 1988 he undertook tireless travels, teaching the Cause and inspiring the believers in various communities throughout the globe to the last reserves of his strength.

49.2With assured hearts we are offering ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that his illumined soul may be richly rewarded in the Abhá Kingdom, that he may be joyously reunited with his beloved wife, Soraya, and that the hearts of his family members may be solaced.

49.3National Spiritual Assemblies are advised to hold befitting memorial gatherings in his honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá'í communities throughout the world.

The Universal House of Justice

50

The Bahá'í Reference Library Web Site

1 June 2004

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

50.1We are pleased to announce the launch of the Bahá'í Reference Library, an authoritative, voluminous Web site housing Sacred Writings of the Faith. In addition to Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in their original Arabic or Persian, the Web site includes the English language translations of Sacred Texts; writings, messages and letters from the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice; and works by other authors. It can be accessed at <http://reference.bahai.org>.

50.2The Bahá'í Reference Library is expected to support researchers, students, and the general public in their investigation of the Faith through access to its Sacred Writings, using materials from authentic sources. As it evolves, other pertinent materials will be added.

50.3The site joins a growing list of Bahá'í International Community Web sites, available to an increasing number of Internet users worldwide. Please inform your community of this Web site for use by them and their colleagues and friends.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Office of Public Information

51

Passing of Gloria Faizi

29 June 2004

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Australia

51.1We are grieved at the passing of Gloria Faizi who rendered outstanding services to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh throughout her life. Her distinguished record of accomplishment includes a number of books translated into many languages which have proved most valuable in attracting inquirers to the Faith and in conveying a deeper understanding of the Bahá'í teachings.

We remember also with appreciation her many contributions to the progress of the Bahá'í communities, including her pioneering in Bahrain with her illustrious husband, her work at the Bahá'í World Centre, and her devoted travels far and wide as a teacher of the Cause.

51.2Kindly convey to the members of her family and to her friends our condolences and the assurance of our prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her soul in the world beyond.

The Universal House of Justice

52

Passing of Elsie Austin

27 October 2004

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United States

52.1We grieve at the passing of dearly loved, keen-sighted, stalwart promoter and defender of the Cause of God Elsie Austin. Having distinguished herself in her early Bahá'í career by outstanding administrative services in North America, she arose in response to the Guardian's call for pioneers during the Ten Year Global Crusade and earned the accolade of Knight of Bahá'u'lláh for Morocco. We recall with deep admiration her wise and dignified teaching and proclamation initiatives on both continents. The shining example of her sacrificial life will remain a source of inspiration to her fellow believers for generations to come. We are offering ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her radiant soul in the Abhá Kingdom. You are advised to hold befitting memorial gatherings in the Mother Temple of the West and throughout the Bahá'í community in your country to celebrate the life and work of this devoted handmaiden of Bahá'u'lláh. The National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda is advised to arrange a memorial service in her honor in the African House of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

53

The Bahá'í Pilgrimage Web Site

4 January 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

53.1It is with great pleasure that we announce the launch of the Bahá'í Pilgrimage Web site. This site, which may be accessed at <http://pilgrimage.bahai.org>, offers information helpful to believers who anticipate making a pilgrimage or a short visit to the Holy Land and provides an online pilgrimage application form. Those friends who do not have access to the Internet may, of course, continue to send their applications for pilgrimage by post or fax.

53.2The Web site contains the following:

Instructions for applying for a Bahá'í pilgrimage to the Holy Land

An online pilgrimage application form

A feature that allows the friends to check the status of their pilgrimage applications

Pilgrimage policies and guidelines

Answers to frequently asked questions about pilgrimage
Hotel and accommodation information
Instructions for applying for other visits to the Bahá'í World Centre
53.3Your assistance in circulating the news of this Web site to the Bahá'í friends in your community would be greatly appreciated.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
54
Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice
17 January 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Beloved Friends,
54.1Considerations of age and the related needs of the Cause have prompted Mr. Douglas Martin and Mr. Ian Semple to request permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.
54.2It is with deep regret that the House of Justice has accepted the resignation of these much-loved members, which will take effect on the date that the by-election to replace them is completed. Mr. Semple was first elected to the Body in 1963 and Mr. Martin in 1993. We wish them well in the next stage of their service to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.
54.3We call upon the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies to cast their ballot for the election of two members to the Universal House of Justice to succeed Mr. Martin and Mr. Semple. We exhort all electors to ponder the sacred responsibility now resting upon their shoulders and to uphold scrupulously and prayerfully the sanctified spirit of Bahá'í elections.
54.4Each National Assembly member should record his or her vote for two male adult believers, each name on a separate piece of plain paper, and enclose them in an unmarked envelope, which should then be sealed. That first envelope should be placed in a second one which should also be sealed, and on which the elector should write his or her own name and the name of his or her National Assembly. The member should then immediately send or take this ballot to the National Assembly's Office.
54.5As soon as all nine ballots have been received at the National Office, they should be airmailed in one package, with a list of the ballots enclosed, to the Universal House of Justice. The National Office should immediately notify the Bahá'í World Centre by email, fax or telephone of this fact.
54.6If fewer than all nine ballots have been received at a National Office by Tuesday, 1 March, the ballots which have been received must be sent that day. Late ballots should be forwarded by the National Office as soon as they are received, and the World Centre should be informed in each case of the number of ballots which have been dispatched.
54.7The results of this by-election will be announced at Naw-Rúz.
54.8Supplications are being offered at the Holy Shrines that Bahá'u'lláh may guide and protect you all in the exercise of this divinely conferred responsibility.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice
55
Newly Elected Members of the Universal House of Justice
20 March 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
55.1With gratitude for the unfailing blessings conferred by Bahá'u'lláh on the community of His followers we are happy to announce that the election to fill the two vacancies on the Universal House of Justice has been completed. We welcome our newly elected members Payman Mohajer and Paul Lample.
The Universal House of Justice
56
Publication of One Common Faith
Naw-Rúz 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
56.1We have been asked to forward to you a copy of the enclosed publication One Common Faith, produced at the request and under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice.
56.2Your Assembly is asked to arrange to make the document available to the members of your national community, translating it into other languages, as required. In the case of French and Spanish, the Bahá'í World Centre is arranging for the translations to be done and supplied to the National Assemblies concerned. For your information, the quotation referred to in the foreword of the publication can be found in Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, section CXXXII.
56.3Believers are free to share the document, on an individual basis, with their families, friends and associates who they believe would find it interesting. One Common Faith has, however, been prepared as a resource for Bahá'í study and should not be used in a public information programme or for distribution to religious leaders or the media.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
57
Appointment of Members of the International Teaching Centre
24 March 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
57.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of Gustavo Correa and Stephen Hall as Counsellor members of the International Teaching Centre.
The Universal House of Justice
58
Revised Edition of "The Bahá'ís" Magazine
5 April 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
58.1We are happy to announce the publication and availability of the newly revised and updated "The Bahá'ís" magazine. The 80-page booklet provides a straightforward account of the history, teachings, and progress of

the Faith in a readable and concise style. A copy is being forwarded to you by post.

58.2The magazine is suited to the needs of journalists, officials, and leaders of thought. It includes, among other features, a section on Bahá'u'lláh, historical accounts, profiles of Bahá'ís, charts and graphs of the growth and spread of the Faith, an examination of the Bahá'í administration, and descriptions of the aims and activities of the Faith's diverse community.

58.3Moreover, like the earlier edition, the magazine is expected to be useful to seekers and casual readers. With nearly 50 articles and more than 80 images—color and black and white photographs, charts, and graphics—the magazine covers a broad range of articles that will help enrich readers' understanding of the Faith….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Office of Public Information

59

Purchase of the Site for the Temple in Chile

14 April 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

59.1It gives us great joy to announce that on 8 April 2005, having finalized a purchase agreement, the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile took possession of the site on which will be built the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs of the Bahá'í world. The land is located north of the capital city of Santiago on a rise nestled in the foothills of the majestic Andes mountains. The way is now open for realizing the intention expressed by Shoghi Effendi that the first House of Worship in South America be erected in Chile.

59.2Following our announcement on 12 June 2003 of the choice of the design presented by the architect Mr. Siamak Hariri, news spread rapidly in the architectural world, arousing favourable interest among influential circles, leading to unprecedented media coverage of the project in Chile, and attracting attention to the Faith of a wide range of its citizens. Much has occurred as a result. In connection with the current decade-long commemoration of Chile's two hundred years of independent nationhood, the Chilean Bicentennial Commission has designated the House of Worship as one of a limited number of official bicentennial projects in the private sector. This clearly reflects the civil authorities' recognition of the significance of this edifice and their confidence in the benefit the undertaking will bring to Santiago and to Chile as a whole. As a consequence, the possible location of the project in the city's central park was explored with the open support of several government officials, but, for various reasons, this proved unfeasible. Meanwhile, substantial progress has been made with technical preparations for the construction work to be initiated in a few months.

59.3A groundbreaking ceremony is planned as part of a three-day gathering to commence Friday, 14 October 2005. Selected representatives from all national Bahá'í communities of the Western Hemisphere, with a special emphasis on the countries and indigenous peoples of South America, will be invited to

attend this event.
59.4The financial implications of this enterprise present the Bahá'í world with a new challenge. Total cost of the project is estimated at twenty-seven million dollars, and the plans now call for its completion within a period of three years. It is vital that the flow of contributions to the already established Chilean Temple Fund be greatly increased to ensure full support to the work. The friends everywhere are called upon to seize the opportunity to contribute sacrificially to an undertaking that holds immense promise for the advancement of the Cause and has already been the object of marvellous confirmations.
59.5Let all reflect on the stirring words of the Master, revealed in connection with the raising up of the first House of Worship of the West, and draw from them inspiration for the great task ahead:
O God, my God! I implore Thee with a throbbing heart and streaming tears to aid whosoever expendeth his energy for the erection of this House, and the construction of this Building wherein Thy name is mentioned every morn and every eve. O God! Send down Thy divine increase on whosoever endeavoureth to serve this edifice and exerteth himself to raise it amongst the kindreds and religions of the world. Confirm him in every good deed in promoting the welfare of mankind. Open Thou the doors of wealth and abundance unto him and make him an heir to the treasures of the Kingdom, which perish not. Make him a sign of Thy bestowals among the peoples and reinforce him by the sea of Thy generosity and bounty, surging with waves of Thy grace and favour. Verily, Thou art the Generous, the Merciful and the Bountiful.
The Universal House of Justice
60
"The Bahá'ís" Web Site, Bahai.org
20 April 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
60.1We are happy to announce the launch of a new Web site, designed to serve as a portal to the entire family of Bahá'í International Community sites. Entitled "The Bahá'ís", it also functions as an introduction to the Bahá'í Faith for general inquirers, researchers, and journalists.
60.2Located at <http://bahai.org>, the site replaces "The Bahá'í World", previously posted at that address, as the official presence of the Bahá'í International Community on the Internet. The content of "The Bahá'í World" will continue to be available as "Bahá'í Topics: An Information Resource" at <http://info.bahai.org>.
60.3The new portal features a better-organized and integrated presentation of the increasing volume of articles, statements, perspectives, and accounts available on the Bahá'í International Community's sites. It provides the user with concise, initial summaries of aspects of the Faith and a directory of articles cross-referenced by topic. The site features a set of frequently asked questions and brief explanations of the essential activities of the institute process. It also enables access to the latest Bahá'í news and feature stories. A map assists visitors to find the official Bahá'í Web sites of

their respective countries.
60.4The portal's inclusive tone and integrated design and organization should enhance its use as a resource by those studying the Faith in their professional, academic, official, or personal capacities. Moreover, inquirers will see clearly that all are welcome to participate in Bahá'í community life, whether in study circles, children's classes, devotional gatherings, or other activities.
60.5Among the sites which can be accessed through the new portal are the following:
"Bahá'í Topics: An Information Resource" at <http://info.bahai.org>—a comprehensive collection of articles about the Bahá'í Faith, its teachings, history, and community
"Bahá'í World News Service" at <http://news.bahai.org>—the latest international Bahá'í news and feature stories
"One Country" at <http://onecountry.org>—news and features from the quarterly newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community
"Bahá'í Reference Library" at <http://reference.bahai.org>—the authoritative online source of the Bahá'í Sacred Writings
"Bahá'í Statement Library" at <http://statements.bahai.org>—an archive of statements by the Bahá'í International Community
60.6Users are still able to access each of these sites directly.
60.7We welcome your comments on the portal's design and contents. We expect that the improved organization, tone, and integration of Bahá'í material on the Web will better support your work in informing the general public, the media, official contacts, and seekers about the Faith.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Office of Public Information
61
Ridván Message 2005
Ridván 2005
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
61.1The breakthroughs that have occurred in the Bahá'í world since the beginning of the fifth epoch of the Formative Age have brought us immeasurable joy. The past twelve months have been no exception. The Bahá'í community has continued its systematic advance and now, as it enters the final year of the Five Year Plan, finds itself in a position of remarkable strength—a strength acquired through strenuous, deliberate exertion by the friends everywhere to promote the process of entry by troops.
61.2While inadequate to express the full significance of the developments taking place, the statistics suggest something of the scope of what is being achieved. The human resources of the Faith have steadily multiplied. Altogether, more than 200,000 worldwide have completed Book 1 of the Ruhi Institute, and many thousands have reached the level where they can effectively act as tutors of the study circles that, with increasing frequency, are held in every part of the globe, over 10,000 at the last count. The number of seekers engaged in the core activities has continued to climb, crossing the 100,000

mark several months ago. Meanwhile, some 150 clusters have developed to the point that intensive programmes of growth either have been launched or stand ready to be initiated. There is every indication that this number will be substantially surpassed by the end of the Plan.

61.3In celebrating these achievements, one should acknowledge, equally, the advances in learning that have given rise to them. Intensive institute campaigns, which pay due attention to the practice required, have remained the vehicle for stimulating growth at the cluster level. As the necessary conditions have thus been created, systematic programmes for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith have been launched accordingly. A valuable body of knowledge about the nature of intensive programmes of growth is accumulating, and certain features of these endeavours are now well understood. Such programmes tend to consist of a series of cycles, each of several months' duration, devoted to planning, expansion, and consolidation. Human resource development proceeds uninterrupted from one cycle to the next, ensuring that the process of expansion not only is sustained but progressively gathers momentum. While undoubtedly many more lessons are still to be garnered, the experience already gained makes it possible to replicate the approach in an ever-increasing number of clusters around the world.

61.4That the victories won have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions is gratifying indeed. At the heart of these accomplishments lies the continual enhancement of the spiritual life of Bahá'í communities everywhere. This new spiritual vitality accounts for the growing participation of people of divers backgrounds in devotional meetings, children's classes and study circles, which, in many cases, has resulted in their recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as God's Manifestation for this Day and in their declaration of faith.

61.5New developments have, likewise, taken place at the World Centre. We have decided that the time is propitious to bring into being an International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh to guide and supervise the work of Regional and National Boards of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh throughout the world. It will operate in close collaboration with the Chief Trustee, the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, and will be able to benefit from his knowledge and counsel in carrying out its duties. The three members now appointed to the International Board of Trustees are Sally Foo, Ramin Khadem, and Grant Kvalheim. Their term of office will be determined at a later date. The members of the Board will not transfer their residence to the Holy Land but will utilize the services of the Office of Huqúqu'lláh at the World Centre in performing their functions.

61.6At all levels and in every direction the Cause is achieving marked progress—from gains in expansion and consolidation at the grassroots to institutional developments of an international scope. Such encouraging signs of the growing solidarity of the community come at a time when evidences of the decline in society are, alas, all too apparent. No need to review here the features of the breakdown in which a demoralized world is entrapped. Yet it should not be forgotten that it is precisely these circumstances which increase receptivity to the Teachings and create new opportunities for their diffusion.

61.7In our message of 26 November 1999, we referred to a series of global enterprises designed to carry the Bahá'í community through the final years of the first century of the Faith's Formative Age. Each Plan, we indicated, would focus on the central aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. The first in the series, the current Five Year Plan, will draw to a close in twelve short months, when we will call upon the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to embark on another Plan of five years' duration. What we ask the friends to do in the intervening period is to bend all their energies to put into resolute action the systematic learning being so vigorously promoted by the International Teaching Centre. No Bahá'í should lose the priceless opportunity afforded by the remaining days of the Plan to reinforce in this way the foundation for the launching next Ridván of an even more ambitious undertaking. Our most fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines will surround you.
The Universal House of Justice

62
Creation of the Bahá'í Internet Agency
16 June 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
62.1Opportunities to spread the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to make known to society at large the activities of the Bahá'í community have grown markedly in recent years, especially with the rise in use of computer technology. Following consultations with the International Teaching Centre, the Universal House of Justice has decided to create an international Bahá'í Internet Agency to assist the Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies in addressing certain issues associated with the propagation and protection of the Faith as they pertain to the Internet. Operating under the direct supervision of the Teaching Centre, the agency is based in the United States, where it has established an office with a full-time director.
62.2In the months ahead, after preliminary preparations have been made, the Bahá'í Internet Agency will contact National Assemblies and provide information about the services it can offer. The Bahá'í Computer and Communications Association (BCCA) and the Security Advisory Group, which have over the years extended technical and Internet-related support to national communities worldwide, will continue to make a valuable contribution to this area of endeavour, functioning now under the direction of the agency.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

63
Message to the Conference of Arabic-Speaking Believers
22 June 2005
To the conference of Arabic-speaking believers, Chicago, July 2005
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
63.1With great joy we extend our loving greetings to you and to the other Arabic-speaking followers of Bahá'u'lláh residing in North America.
63.2You have come together at a moment laden with portents and possibilities of change in the Middle East—far-reaching, positive change. The forces animating

the Major and Minor Plans of God have so accelerated the simultaneous processes of disintegration and of integration operating in the world as to prompt the people of the region to recognize new realities and strive to take their rightful place in an emerging world society. Unprecedented global attention is increasingly focused on them, obliging them to act in awareness of the inescapable transition to a new age. Indeed, in concert with the social, economic, and cultural disorder affecting the entire planet, an array of crises has engulfed the Arab world. Peoples who in a previous age brilliantly advanced culture and civilization, extending the transformative spirit released by Islám far beyond the confines of the land of its birth, which regenerated every society it touched, now find themselves critically impeded by their inability to cope with the exigencies of modernity.

63.3The condition of the Arabian diaspora is not dissimilar. Emigration to Western countries has greatly intensified the inner conflict being experienced between tradition and the values of a changing world. Prevailing attitudes extend from a wholehearted embrace of the goals of Western materialism to a retreat into fundamentalism. Within this spectrum a substantial minority struggles to find an enlightened social order consistent with spiritual ideals, indicating a rise in receptivity among certain Muslim populations.

63.4Concurrently, the Bahá'í community is developing the capacity to involve greater numbers in its spiritual life. Throughout the world, there has been a systematic advance in the process of entry by troops. Believers are learning, through experience, that their families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers welcome and value their participation in the devotional meetings, children's classes, and study circles to which they are invited and through which they are, in ever-larger measure, finding their path to the Beloved of all hearts.

63.5These developments led us to convey to National Spiritual Assemblies in August 2004 that the time had come for the believers to begin inviting trusted Muslims among their acquaintances to join in the core activities of the Five Year Plan, thereby opening to them these portals to the Cause. When applied in a natural manner, such initiatives have, without attracting undue attention from antagonistic elements, enabled those with receptive hearts to gradually move closer to the point of acceptance and formal declaration. This course of action is meeting with notable success in Arab countries, where the wise, dedicated efforts of your Bahá'í sisters and brothers are receiving constant divine confirmations.

63.6We call upon the Arabic-speaking followers of Bahá'u'lláh residing in North America to sharply focus your services to His glorious Cause on attracting souls from amongst the Arab population within your clusters, in keeping with the prescribed approach of the current Plan. Your efforts will reinforce and support those being made in Arab countries, where seeds have been sown so painstakingly over the years. We appeal especially to youth and young adults, for their peers promise to be most receptive to the imperatives of the spiritual revolution ushered in by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

63.7Heroism and sacrifice have marked the progress of the Faith in the Arab world. The inhabitants of these lands have been close associates of the

Manifestation of God Himself, have shown their spiritual capacity to recognize Him, have helped spread His Cause throughout the world, have assisted in establishing His Administrative Order, and have defended His Faith with courage and steadfastness. In a Tablet known as the Súriy-i-A‘ráb, Bahá’u’lláh says, “Render praise unto God for having chosen you for His own Self, in such wise that after the Daystar of Eternity set in its own homeland, it dawned above the horizon of ‘Iráq, your land…. The unveiled Countenance of God was in your midst, shining and resplendent, and over the months and years He continually recited unto you the verses of your Lord. The Ancient Beauty walked among you with a dignity and composure born of God, and at every moment He revealed Himself unto you with a new effulgence. Thus were the favor of God and His grace fulfilled unto you, that ye might be of those who are thankful.”

63.8Further, in poignant tones He describes the grace and the responsibility that flows from this unique bounty: “This indeed is a token of His gracious favor unto you, which naught in the heavens or on the earth can equal.… It behooveth you, therefore, to pride yourselves before all the tribes of the earth, for none have attained that which ye have attained, could ye but perceive it. It behooveth you, moreover, to distinguish yourselves with the virtues of God, that from your hearts the fragrances of holiness may waft upon all created things and that from you the signs of your Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate, may appear. Inasmuch as He hath singled you out from amongst all mankind, make ye an effort to show forth that which none before you have shown forth, that the distinction conferred upon you may be clearly demonstrated unto all men.”

63.9Our prayers at the Sacred Threshold are with you as you promote His Cause among those who share your distinguished heritage and bright destiny.

The Universal House of Justice

64

Passing of David Ruhe, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice

8 September 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

64.1The passing of David S. Ruhe, our dearly loved former colleague, deprives the world community of a steadfast, tireless, long-standing servant of the Blessed Beauty—a loss deeply deplored. Imbued with an enthusiasm for the Teachings based on a vast knowledge of the Cause, and gifted with a capacity to nurture dedication in others, he pursued a wide range of Bahá’í endeavours over a period of more than six decades. These were marked by his work as a member and later as the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and were subsequently highlighted by his outstanding services as a member for 25 years of the Universal House of Justice. Physician, artist, author, film-maker, he devoted the force of his many talents to the promotion of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh with a humanitarian spirit and strength of will characteristic of his approach to the teaching and administrative activities that engaged his energies. Moreover, during his sojourn in the Holy Land, he contributed significantly to educational efforts of the medical institutions in Haifa. We extend our loving sympathy to his beloved wife,

Margaret, who shared in and supported his services throughout the period of his distinguished professional career and his constant labours for the Cause of God, and to his bereaved sons and other family members. May his valiant soul receive a joyous welcome in the Abhá Kingdom and be blessed with perpetual progress throughout the spiritual worlds. We ardently pray in the Holy Shrines for these divine bestowals.

64.2The friends everywhere are advised to hold befitting memorial gatherings, including commemorative services in his honour in all the Houses of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

65

Centenary Anniversary of the Bahá'í Faith in Germany

10 September 2005

To the friends gathered on the occasion of the Centenary of the Faith in Germany

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

65.1It is with jubilant hearts and feelings of deep gratitude that we greet all of you who have gathered to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in Germany. No other community in the Western world can claim to have demonstrated a greater resilience in the face of formidable obstacles that threatened to rob you of the shining triumph, the potent prospects, signalized by your very meeting on so auspicious an occasion.

65.2The spark lit in Stuttgart with the arrival in 1905 of Dr. Edwin Fischer, which was fanned into a flame with the momentous visit of the beloved Master to that city eight years later, has burgeoned into a conflagration that bids fair to enkindle the hearts of troop after troop of your spiritually hungry, fellow citizens. Especially is this evident in the dynamic efforts currently afoot to intensify the expansion and consolidation process at the crux of the Five Year Plan.

65.3This is a moment for reflection, profound reflection—one that recounts the highlights in contrast to the dark aspects punctuating the history of crisis and victory that depicts the evolution of the German community. It should enable you to appreciate more fully than before the outstanding results of the early believers' trust in Bahá'u'lláh and His unfailing guidance, which emboldened them to persevere despite the persecution they suffered and the prohibitions inflicted on their efforts. Their exemplary conduct assured the community of the capacity to rise like a phoenix from the devastation of the Second World War and thenceforward to become vibrant collaborators with their sister communities in prosecuting the great tasks set by the Divine Plan. How brilliantly do the signs of their success shine! Suffice it to mention a few: the erection on German soil of the first European House of Worship; the legal recognition accorded by the highest court in the land to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, underscoring the equality of its status to that enjoyed by other major religions; the wealth of Bahá'í literature translated and published in German; and the dispatch of pioneers to goal countries. Among these distinctions was the emergence of distinguished believers, including two Hands of the Cause of God whose tireless endeavours galvanized the will of the community to accomplish such wonderful feats.

65.4Reflection, too, on the challenges and portents of the present hour is called for, since the remaining months of the current Plan are fleeting fast. This exercise is necessary to ensure that the two essential movements of the Plan are more widely, more consistently pursued, so that in the end the stalwart German community will stand stronger than ever, the better to realize the possibilities of the new Plan to be launched at Ridván 2006.
65.5We are confident that at this stage in the perils of humankind that accompany the evolution of the Lesser Peace, the dearly loved occupants of the mighty stronghold of the Cause in Germany will seize the opportunities open to them to move resolutely to the next chapter of their destiny which is unfolding so brilliantly. May they ever be spurred on by the unforgettable words of encouragement addressed to them by Shoghi Effendi when at an earlier stage in their struggles they faced a fateful moment:
My heart is filled with gratitude for the manifold evidences of the tenacity of faith, the collective efforts, the consolidated unity, the administrative accomplishments and the spiritual fervour so strikingly displayed by its members. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whose special care, love and solicitude for the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in that promising country, most of you have recognized and no doubt still remember, is truly proud of your accomplishments and is well-pleased with the spirit that so powerfully animates you in His service. His spirit will continue to overshadow you in your labours and to sustain and guide you in your exertions. Persevere and be confident.
65.6With deep love, we enfold you all in our fervent supplications at the Holy Threshold.
The Universal House of Justice

66

Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
30 October 2005
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
66.1On the Day of the Covenant, 26 November 2005, a new five-year term of service for members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith will open. We take great pleasure in announcing the names of the Counsellors appointed for the coming term, whose number remains at eighty-one.
AFRICA (19 Counsellors): Selam Ahderom, Desmond Browne, Maziar Djoneidi, Mehraz Ehsani (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Clément Thyrrell Feizouré, Agatha Gaisie-Nketsiah, Isatou Hyde-Forster, Amina Jaouane, Sinuhé Lozano, Eddy Lutchmaya, Enos Makhele, Tsatsi Othaniel Mfete, Maina Mkandawire, Ruth Mnyampi, Zowe Tiba Nganyade, Albert Nshisu Nsunga, Ahmad Parsa, Garth Pollock, Tiati à Zock.
THE AMERICAS (19 Counsellors): Farzin Aghdasi, Eugene Andrews, Stephen Birkland, Ann Boyles, Jorge Henrique Guerreiro, Ehsanollah Hemmat, Deborah Kirton, Ana Hilda de Lemus, Antônio Gabriel Marques, Juan Francisco Mora, Rebequa Murphy, Ganesh Ramsahai, Carmen Elisa de Sadeghian, Daniel Scott, Crystal Shoaie, Marilyn Smith, Leticia de Solano, Rodrigo Tomás (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Gerardo Vargas.

ASIA (19 Counsellors): Fadel Ardakani, Uransaikhan Baatar, Nidavanur Baskaran, Irene Chung, Jabbar Eidelkhani, Bijan Farid, David Huang (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Lee Lee Ludher, Tarrant Mahony, Delafruz Nassimova, Lori Noguchi, Jaya Gopan Ramasamy, Lateef Rasheed, Foad Reyhani, Ayman Rouhani, Omid Seioshanseian, Payam Shoghi, George Soraya, Mehranguiz Tehrani.
AUSTRALASIA (11 Counsellors): Kessia Aisoli Ruh, Beatrice Benson, Soheyla Bolouri, David Chittleborough (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Eric Kingston, Jalal Mills, Manijeh Reyhani, Henry Tamashiro, Robin White, Alan Wilcox, Fereidoun Yazdani.
EUROPE (13 Counsellors): Naisan Azimi, Fevziye Baki, Uta von Both (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Vivien Craig, Olga Dainovskaia, Emilio Egea, Shirin Fozdar-Foroudi, Nadia Jaberi-Koppold, Saba Khabirpour, Firouzeh Moghbel-Naderi, Hannu Tapani Olkkonen, Ilhan Sezgin, Sohrab Youssefian.
66.2The following believers, who have earned our profound gratitude for their contributions to the advancement of the Faith, are being relieved of the duties of membership on the Boards of Counsellors:
Beth Allen, George Allen, Eloy Anello, Beatrice Asare, Asfaw Tessema, Donald Blanks, Alla Borets, Niaz Bushrui, Irma Nelly Dooki, Kobina Fynn, Ibrahim Galadima, Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, Elena Gruzkova, Angélica Huerta, Humaida Jumalon, Moussa Kamaye, Hervé Masrour, Catherine Monajjem, Paul Öjermark, Muhammad Otmani, Arturo Serrano, Heather Simpson, David Smith, Zena Sorabjee, Nosrat Tirandaz, Nicola Towfigh, Rosalie Tran, Larissa Tsutskova, Erama Ugaia, Dorothy Whyte, Ivo Zerbes, Antoinette Ziehi.
66.3These dear friends will no doubt remain a source of encouragement to the believers everywhere through their dedicated efforts to promote the Word of God. We shall offer prayers at the Sacred Threshold on their behalf, that their services to the Cause may continue to be richly blessed.
66.4In our recent Ridván message we expressed the hope that the friends would bend all their energies towards bringing the current Five Year Plan to a triumphant conclusion. The response of the Bahá'í world has been immensely gratifying. A firm foundation is being laid for the successful launching at Ridván 2006 of another global enterprise of five years' duration. We are calling the Counsellors from all continents to the World Centre for a conference from 27 to 31 December 2005, during which deliberations will be held on the features of the next Five Year Plan and on the role the Counsellors will play, together with their auxiliaries, in the critical period leading up to its launch and in the years that follow.
66.5Our fervent prayers will surround these eighty-one souls as they consecrate themselves to the sacred tasks they have been called upon to perform for the protection and propagation of the Faith.
The Universal House of Justice

67

Further Comment on "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith"
14 November 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
67.1Recently, questions have arisen which have prompted the Universal House of

Justice to comment further on matters treated in the compilation “Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá’í Faith”.

67.2The Bahá’í principle calling for investigation of reality encourages an unfettered search for knowledge and truth by whoever wishes to engage in it. When applied to the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, it inevitably gives rise to a wide range of responses. Some, attracted to the Message, embrace the Cause as their own. Some may respond positively to certain precepts or principles and willingly collaborate toward shared aims. Some may find it to be an interesting social phenomenon worthy of study. Still others, content with their own beliefs, may reject its claims. Bahá’ís are taught to be respectful of the views of others, believing that conscience should not be coerced.

67.3Upon becoming a Bahá’í, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one’s knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that “an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds.” Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Bahá’í life, immature ideas yield to a more profound understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Bahá’í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on “problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book”.

67.4In searching for understanding, Bahá’ís naturally acquaint themselves with published materials from a variety of sources. A book written by a disinterested non-Bahá’í scholar about the Faith, even if it reflects certain assumptions and puts forward conclusions acceptable within a given discipline but which are at variance with Bahá’í belief, poses no particular problem for Bahá’ís, who would regard these perceptions as an honest attempt to explore a religious phenomenon as yet little understood generally. Any non-biased effort to make the Faith comprehensible to a thoughtful readership, however inadequate it might appear, would evoke genuine Bahá’í appreciation for the perspective offered and research skill invested in the project. The matter is wholly different, however, when someone intentionally attacks the Faith. An inescapable duty devolves upon the friends so to situate themselves in the knowledge of the Teachings as to be able to respond appropriately to such a challenge as it arises and thus uphold the integrity of the Faith.

67.5The words of Bahá’u’lláh Himself shed light on the proper attitude to adopt. He warns the believers “not to view with too critical an eye the

sayings and writings of men". "Let them", He instructs, "rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this Day, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God."

67.6A different type of challenge arises when an individual or group, using the privilege of Bahá'í membership, adopts various means to impose personal views or an ideological agenda on the Bahá'í community. In one recent instance, for example, an individual has declared himself a "Bahá'í theologian, writing from and for a religious community," whose aim is "to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahá'í community, to enable Bahá'ís to understand their relatively new Faith and to see what it can offer the world". Assertions of this kind go far beyond expressions of personal opinion, which any Bahá'í is free to voice. As illustrated, here is a claim that lies well outside the framework of Bahá'í belief and practice. Bahá'u'lláh has liberated human minds by prohibiting within His Faith any caste with ecclesiastical prerogatives that seeks to foist a self-assumed authority upon the thought and behaviour of the mass of believers. Indeed, He has prescribed a system that combines democratic practices with the application of knowledge through consultative processes.

67.7The House of Justice is confident that the principles herein presented will enable the friends to benefit from diverse contributions resulting from exploration of the manifold implications of Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation, while remaining impervious to the efforts of those few who, whether in an explicit or veiled manner, attempt to divert the Bahá'í community from essential understandings of the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

68

International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh Assumes Full Responsibility for the Institution of the Right of God

20 November 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

68.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to announce that the three-person International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, announced in its message of Ridván 2005, is assuming full responsibility for the work of the institution of the Right of God, including supervision of the work of Regional and National Boards of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh throughout the world and of the Office of Huqúqu'lláh in the Holy Land, effective on 26 November 2005.

68.2The Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá remains Chief Trustee of Huqúqu'lláh and will continue to provide advice and counsel to the International Board of Trustees as the development of this mighty institution proceeds throughout the world.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat
69
Passing of William Hatcher
30 November 2005
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada
69.1We were deeply grieved to learn of the passing of William Hatcher. The Bahá'í world has lost one of its brightest minds, one of its most prolific pens. He will long be remembered for his stalwart faith, forceful exposition, and penetrating insights which characterized well-nigh half a century of ceaseless services marked by his wide travels as a teacher of the Faith and lecturer, his pioneering to Russia and Switzerland, his membership on the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada, Russia and Switzerland, and his vital role in the founding of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America. We extend our loving sympathy to his beloved wife, Judith, their dear children, and other members of his family and assure them of our prayers in the Holy Shrines for the progress of his illumined soul in the spiritual worlds beyond.
The Universal House of Justice
70
Martyrdom of Dhabíhu'lláh Mahramí
20 December 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
70.1With profound sorrow, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to share with you the text of the message of condolence it has just sent to the Bahá'í community of Iran in relation to the death of Dhabíhu'lláh Mahramí in his prison cell in Yazd on Thursday, 15 December 2005. Enclosed is the Persian text of the message of condolence as well as a photograph of Mr. Mahramí and his wife, Mrs. Náhíd Baygí, taken some years ago.
The community of the Most Great Name throughout the world is deeply saddened at the news of the martyrdom of Dhabíhu'lláh Mahramí, who offered up his life with resignation and in submission to his Beloved while wrongfully imprisoned for his beliefs. Mr. Mahramí now partakes of the cup of eternal life at the banquet table of his Lord, his sacrifice once again demonstrating to the world that Bahá'ís —who harbor no intention or desire save service to the world of humanity, the fostering of fellowship and friendship, and the establishment of universal peace—rather than being intimidated by the inhumanity of the enemies of the Cause, embrace with meekness the persecution that is meted out to them through ignorant prejudice. They cling to the cord of patience, magnanimity, serenity, love, and fellowship and beseech God to bestow a sense of justice and fairness upon those who wish them ill or harm them.
The lovers of the Abhá Beauty in Iran should rest assured that whatever may transpire along the path they are following, the divine promises assured by the Ancient Beauty will be fulfilled at the appointed time. The sanctified blood shed by the martyrs and the grievous afflictions suffered by so many precious souls in the Cradle of the Faith, borne through the power of their belief and certitude, cause His Faith to progress and will, ultimately, bring honor to

that land and elicit the profound esteem of its people.
Kindly assure Mr. Mahramí's wife, his mother, his children, and the other members of his family of the abiding love of the Universal House of Justice and of its fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines on behalf of each of them, that they may, with gratitude and patience, remain steadfast in servitude at His Threshold. The prayers of the Supreme Body will also be offered for the community of the Most Great Name in the Cradle of the Faith, that its members may, with unwavering resolve and a new spirit, exert their utmost to fulfil their God-given responsibilities and, with the blessings bestowed by Mr. Mahramí's noble sacrifice, further accelerate the advancement of the interests of the Faith in that land.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

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Additional Information Related to the Death of Dhabíhu'lláh Mahramí
20 December 2005
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
71.1Further to our letter dated 20 December 2005, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to convey to you the additional information related to the death, at age 59, of Dhabíhu'lláh Mahramí in his prison cell in Yazd on Thursday, 15 December 2005.
71.2Mr. Mahramí was arrested in Yazd in late 1995. During the ten years of his wrongful incarceration for his beliefs, Mr. Mahramí received death threats on a number of occasions and was forced to perform arduous physical labour. He had no known health concerns, and the cause of his death is not known. The House of Justice has communicated a request to selected National Spiritual Assemblies to take steps, through their offices of external affairs, to bring this distressing news to the immediate attention of their contacts in government and national media. The Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community is also posting a news-related report on the Bahá'í World News Service Web site.
71.3Mr. Mahramí's funeral was held on Friday, 16 December. He is survived by his aged mother; his wife, Mrs. Náhíd Baygí; his four children; and his grandchildren. It is particularly poignant that on the very day that Mr. Mahramí's body was being laid to rest, a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. The House of Justice is warmly grateful for the diligent, tireless efforts of the staff of the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office in New York and Geneva, as well as the devoted services of the National Spiritual Assemblies and their representatives who are engaged, at the request of the House of Justice, in undertakings in defence of the Bahá'ís in the Cradle of the Faith. The excellence of their work is reflected in the Resolution's substantive references to the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran.
71.4In addition to expressing the General Assembly's serious concern at "the continuing discrimination, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to ethnic and religious minorities", including the

Bahá'ís, the Resolution notes explicitly "the escalation and increased frequency of discrimination and other human rights violations against the Bahá'í[s], including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, the denial of freedom of religion or of publicly carrying out communal affairs, the disregard of property rights, the destruction of sites of religious importance, the suspension of social, educational and community-related activities and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits". The Resolution calls upon the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran not only to eliminate "all forms of discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to minorities, including Arabs, Kurds, Baluchi, Christians, Jews, Sunni Muslims and the Bahá'í[s]" but also to "implement the 1996 report of the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on religious intolerance, which recommended ways the Islamic Republic of Iran could emancipate the Bahá'í community." Although you are not being requested to take action with your government at this time, a copy of the Resolution is enclosed for your assistance in the event that your comments are sought either on it or on Mr. Mahramí's death.

71.5During these fate-laden days, in the face of the continuing machinations of those opposed to the Cause in the land of its birth, the action taken on behalf of the staunch, dearly loved believers in Iran surely alleviates their suffering and gives reassurance to their hearts. May the further knowledge that they are ever in the prayers of the friends throughout the world bring them constant consolation; may great victories won in their name bring them boundless joy.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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The Five Year Plan, 2006–2011

27 December 2005

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

72.1Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the close of the present Five Year Plan will mark a decisive moment in the unfoldment of the historical enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.

72.2Our 26 December 1995 message, which focused the Bahá'í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith, described in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead. As a first step, Bahá'í communities were urged to systematize their efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes. While every national community took measures to create institutional capacity to perform this essential function,

it was not until the outset of the Five Year Plan that the significance of a well-conceived programme of training became widely appreciated. The introduction of the concept of the cluster made it possible for the friends to think about the accelerated growth of the community on a manageable scale and to conceive of it in terms of two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next. This image helped the believers to analyse the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate their findings. Never before have the means for establishing a pattern of activity that places equal emphasis on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation been better understood. Indeed, so consistent has been the experience with intensive programmes of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in divers clusters, that no cause for equivocation remains. The way forward is clear, and at Ridván 2006 we will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.

72.3In presenting to you the features of the coming Five Year Plan, the subject of your deliberations in this conference, we will review the record of recent accomplishments of the Bahá'í world and indicate how current approaches, methods and instruments should be carried to this next stage. What the analysis will make evident is that the wholehearted response of the individual believer, the community and the institutions to the guidance they received five years ago has raised their capacity to new levels. The continued development of this capacity will remain essential to the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops—the focus of the Bahá'í world through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age.

The Individual

72.4There is little need to describe in detail the achievements of the individual believer, for we have already noted these in our message of 17 January 2003 to the Bahá'ís of the world. In that message we highlighted the growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness, as well as the courage and audacity, that have come to characterize believers everywhere. Qualities such as consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity attest to the enhanced vitality of their faith. We have also acknowledged the role played by the training institute in evoking the spirit of enterprise underlying the rise in activity observed around the world—the concrete expression of that vitality.

72.5Developments since then have served only to demonstrate further the efficacy of a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the application of the spiritual insights gained through profound study of the Writings. Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service. Discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of a study circle, raise the level of consciousness about one's duties to the Cause and create an awareness of the joy one derives from teaching the Faith and serving its interests. The spiritual context in which specific deeds are addressed endows them with significance. Confidence is

patiently built as the friends engage in progressively more complex and demanding acts of service. Yet, above all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavours. How abundant the accounts of believers who enter the teaching field with trepidation only to find themselves bolstered by confirmations on all sides. Seeing the possibilities and opportunities before them with new eyes, they witness first hand the power of Divine assistance, as they strive to put into practice what they are learning and achieve results far exceeding their expectations. That the spirit of faith born out of intimate contact with the Word of God has such an effect on souls is by no means a new phenomenon. What is heartening is that the institute process is helping such large numbers experience the transforming potency of the Faith. To extend this edifying influence to hundreds of thousands more should be the object of intense effort over the next five years.

72.6A discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative—initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops. Endeavours are pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan. As a result, activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided. Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.

72.7Nowhere has the rise in individual initiative been more clearly demonstrated than in the field of teaching. Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase. Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's message. From among all those they encounter—parents of neighbourhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances—they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker's needs, employing direct teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.

72.8Most noteworthy in this regard is the spirit of initiative shown by believers who extend the range of their endeavours to assist others also striving to tread a path of service. Having acquired the capacity to serve as tutors of institute courses, they take up the challenge of accompanying participants in their initial attempts to perform acts of service until they, too, are ready to start their own study circles and help others do the same, widening in this way the scope of the institute's influence and bringing eager souls into contact with the Word of God. This particular aspect of the institute process, which serves to multiply the number of active supporters of

the Faith in a self-perpetuating manner, holds much promise, and we hope that its potential will be realized in the coming Plan. “Let him not be content”, are the words of the Guardian referring to every teacher of the Cause, “until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly adopted Faith.”

The Community

72.9The enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the individual believer is equally evident in Bahá’í community life. The degree to which this vitality manifests itself depends, of course, on the stage of development of the cluster. A cluster in an advanced stage of growth offers far greater insight into what can be achieved than one in an earlier stage, where the friends are still struggling to translate the provisions of the Plan into action. It is to these more advanced clusters, then, that we must look in analysing the accomplishments of the community, convinced that their experience will be emulated by others as they continue to progress.

72.10On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children’s classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavours gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enrol in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favourable for launching an intensive programme of growth.

72.11What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community’s collective endeavours. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, “home visits” are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.

72.12As the spiritual foundations of the community are fortified in this way, the level of collective discourse is raised, social relations among the friends take on new meaning, and a sense of common purpose inspires their interactions. Little wonder, then, that a study carried out by the International Teaching

Centre shows that, in some fifty advanced clusters surveyed, the quality of the Nineteen Day Feast has improved. Other reports indicate that contributions to the Fund have increased as consciousness of its spiritual significance expands and the need for material means is better understood. Reflection meetings at the cluster level are becoming a forum for the discussion of needs and plans, creating a collective identity and strengthening the collective will. Where such advanced clusters are flourishing, the influence they exert begins to spread beyond their own borders to enrich regional events, such as summer and winter schools.

72.13As in the case of the individual, learning is the hallmark of this phase of the development of the community. You and your auxiliaries are urged to exert every effort in the coming years to ensure that, in cluster after cluster, learning is woven into the fabric of decision-making.

72.14One of your primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize.

72.15By the same token, desire and willingness to open certain aspects of community life to the wider public should be integrated into a pattern of behaviour that attracts souls and confirms them. Much has been achieved in this respect as the friends have adopted new ways of thinking and acting at a collective level. In welcoming large numbers into its embrace, the community is learning to see more readily the latent potentiality in people and to avoid setting artificial barriers for them based on preconceived notions. A nurturing environment is being cultivated in which each individual is encouraged to progress at his or her own pace without the pressure of unreasonable expectations. At the heart of such developments is a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity. Most gratifying are the endeavours being made to reach receptive populations with the teachings of the Faith. As unrelenting social and political forces continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents, an uncompromising appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds and for the strength it confers on the whole will prove crucial to the expansion and consolidation of the community.

72.16Perhaps the task that will occupy the attention of you and your auxiliaries above all others is to assist the community in its effort to maintain focus. This ability, slowly acquired through successive Plans, represents one of its most valuable assets, hard won through discipline, commitment and foresight as the friends and their institutions have learned to pursue the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. On the one hand, you will find it necessary to discourage the tendency to confuse focus

with uniformity or exclusivity. To maintain focus does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others. Clearly, there are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed. On the other hand, you will want to take every opportunity to reinforce the disposition to prioritize—one which recognizes that not all activities have the same importance at a given stage of growth, that some must necessarily take precedence over others, that even the most well-intentioned proposals can cause distraction, dissipate energy or impede progress. What should be plainly acknowledged is that the time available for the friends to serve the Faith in every community is not without limits. It is only natural to expect that the preponderating share of this limited resource would be expended in meeting the provisions of the Plan.

The Institutions

72.17None of the accomplishments of the individual or the community could be sustained without the guidance, encouragement and support of the third participant in the Plan—the institutions of the Faith. It is heartening to see to what extent the institutions are promoting individual initiative, channelling energies into the teaching field, underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment. In helping the community to remain focused on the aim of the Plan, they are learning in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavours and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set. These priorities include, of course, areas of activity that require the specialized skills of individuals. Worthy of particular mention in this category are the work of external affairs, which National Spiritual Assemblies are following diligently, and ventures of social and economic development, as, for example, undertaken by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. While tending to needs of this kind, the institutions find themselves increasingly capable of directing the thrust of the effort exerted by the generality of the believers towards the prosecution of the central tasks of the Plan.

72.18Encouraging, too, are the determined steps being taken by National Spiritual Assemblies, in collaboration with the Counsellors, to respond to the administrative challenges brought by large-scale growth at the cluster level. Schemes that are emerging tend to call for one or more individuals named by the training institute to coordinate the delivery of courses in the main sequence, as well as programmes for children and junior youth. An Area Teaching Committee appointed by the Regional Council, or by the National Assembly itself, is also required to administer other aspects of systematic effort to achieve accelerated expansion and consolidation. Auxiliary Board members work on both fronts to ensure that the two movements which have come to characterize the process of growth proceed unhampered. While these various components are being established in cluster after cluster, there is still much to be learned about the functions each is to perform and about the relationships among them. What is important is that the current degree of flexibility, which allows for the creation of new instruments as needed, not be compromised so that the scheme of

coordination represents a response to the demands of growth itself. We count on you and National Assemblies to guide this learning process.

72.19Throughout the Plan, we have watched with the keenest interest the effects of these developments on the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies. It gives us pleasure to note that two types of progress are being made in this respect. In those clusters where most of the Local Assemblies have been extremely weak, a growing number are gradually assuming their responsibilities as they learn to guide specific activities of the Plan in the areas under their jurisdiction. At the same time, long-standing Local Spiritual Assemblies are exhibiting signs of added strength as they have come to embrace a vision of systematic growth—this, often following a period of adjustment in which some struggled to understand the new realities being created at the cluster level.

72.20What has brought us particular joy is to see that the process of growth unfolding around the world is gathering momentum in urban centres as well as rural areas. An important step taken in many large cities early in the current Plan was to divide them into sectors. This proved crucial to planning for sustained growth. As communities expand, however, it is not unreasonable to expect that cities will need to be divided into smaller areas—perhaps ultimately into neighbourhoods—in each of which the Nineteen Day Feast is conducted. Maintaining a vision of the potential size of future communities is essential for the further development of Local Assemblies. To administer the affairs of communities whose membership will swell into the thousands, and to fulfil their purpose as the "trusted ones of the Merciful among men", those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead. We intend to monitor the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies closely during the coming Plan and, as the size of the Bahá'í population and other circumstances in a locality demand, authorize a two-stage electoral process on a case-by-case basis, following the pattern developed in Tihrán during the ministry of the Guardian.

Intensive Programmes of Growth

72.21Sustained endeavour on the part of the individual, the community and the institutions to accelerate the institute process in a cluster, while contributing to its movement from one stage of development to another through well-proven means, culminates in the launching of an intensive programme of growth. Indeed, the most significant advances in learning during the present Plan resulted from efforts in some two hundred clusters to implement such programmes. We are convinced that this learning can now be systematically propagated in every continent, and at Ridván 2006 we will call upon Bahá'ís worldwide to establish, during the next Plan, intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters.

72.22As currently conceived, an intensive programme of growth is straightforward, simple and effective, but implies a level of exertion that tests the resolve of the friends. Conforming well to the vision we presented five years ago, it employs a few measures that have proven to be indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation. It consists of cycles of activity, in general of three months' duration each, which proceed according to distinct phases of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning.

72.23The expansion phase, often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them. Although this phase might include some element of proclamation, it should not be seen as a time to hold a few events for this purpose or to undertake a set of activities that merely convey information. Experience suggests that the more closely teaching approaches and methods are aligned with the capacity acquired from the study of the institute courses the more rewarding the results.

72.24Plans being devised for this phase invariably involve the implementation of carefully designed teaching projects and campaigns of home visits and firesides, often through the mobilization of teaching teams. The pattern of expansion that unfolds, however, varies from cluster to cluster. Where the population has traditionally shown a high degree of receptivity to the Faith, a rapid influx of new believers is to be expected. In one cluster of this kind, for example, the goal of enrolling fifty souls over a three-week period in a locality was surpassed by the second day, and the team wisely decided to end the expansion phase in anticipation of activities related to consolidation. One of the primary objectives of this next phase is to bring a percentage of the new believers into the institute process so that an adequate pool of human resources will be available in future cycles to sustain growth. Those not participating in study circles are nurtured through a series of home visits, and all are invited to devotional meetings, to the celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast and to Holy Day observances and are gradually introduced to the patterns of community life. Not infrequently, the consolidation phase gives rise to further enrolments as the family members and friends of new declarants accept the Faith.

72.25In other clusters, enrolments during the expansion phase may not be high, especially in the first few cycles, and the goal is to augment the number of those willing to participate in core activities. This, then, defines the nature of the consolidation phase, which largely involves nurturing the interest of seekers and accompanying them in their spiritual search until they are confirmed in their faith. To the extent that these measures are vigorously followed, this phase can generate a considerable number of enrolments. It should be noted, however, that as learning advances and experience is gained, the ability not only to teach responsive souls, but also to identify segments of the general population with heightened receptivity, develops, and the totality of new believers increases from cycle to cycle.

72.26Whatever the nature of the cluster, it is imperative to pay close attention to children and junior youth everywhere. Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it. What has become especially apparent during the current Five Year Plan is the efficacy of educational programmes aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. When accompanied for three years through a programme that enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of fifteen, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of

spiritual and material civilization. So impressed are we by the results already achieved, and so compelling is the need, that we will urge all National Assemblies to consider the junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

72.27Key to the progress of an intensive programme of growth is the phase dedicated to reflection, in which the lessons learned in action are articulated and incorporated into plans for the next cycle of activity. Its principal feature is the reflection meeting—as much a time of joyous celebration as it is of serious consultation. Careful analysis of experience, through participatory discussions rather than overly complex and elaborate presentations, serves to maintain unity of vision, sharpen clarity of thought and heighten enthusiasm. Central to such an analysis is the review of vital statistics that suggest the next set of goals to be adopted. Plans are made that take into account increased capacity in terms of the human resources available at the end of the cycle to perform various tasks, on the one hand, and accumulated knowledge about the receptivity of the population and the dynamics of teaching, on the other. When human resources increase in a manner proportionate to the rise in the overall Bahá'í population from cycle to cycle, it is possible not only to sustain but to accelerate growth.

72.28To meet the ambitious goal of establishing 1,500 such intensive programmes, the Bahá'í world will have to draw fully upon the experience gained and capacity built over the past ten years. Following your departure from the Holy Land, you will need to enter into thorough consultation with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils and together carefully assess conditions in each national community in order to identify the clusters that will receive focused attention and to map out strategic plans.

72.29Implementation of these plans should begin as soon as possible after Ridván 2006. Experience in advancing the movement of clusters from one stage to the next is now so widespread that the methods and instruments are well understood. The institute process must be strengthened so that a sizeable number of friends proceed through the main sequence of courses. Intensive institute campaigns that pay adequate attention to the practice component will be essential in this respect. The number of core activities should be steadily multiplied, and outreach to the wider community systematically extended. Meetings of reflection will have to be held periodically in order to monitor progress, maintain unity of thought and mobilize the energies of the friends. And schemes for administering the growth process should gradually be put in place, as circumstances demand. While capacity at the level of the cluster to sustain growth will remain the most compelling concern in the coming years, the ongoing development of regional and national structures to facilitate the flow of information and resources to and from the field of action cannot be neglected.

72.30Equally important will be the support lent to a cluster through an influx of pioneers. The desire to pioneer arises naturally from deep within the heart of the individual believer as a response to the Divine summons. Whosoever forsakes his or her home for the purpose of teaching the Cause joins the ranks

of those noble souls whose achievements down the decades have illumined the annals of Bahá'í pioneering. We cherish the hope that many will be moved to render this meritorious service during the next Plan, whether on the home front or in the international field—an act that, in itself, attracts untold blessings. The institutions, in turn, will have to exercise sound judgement to ensure that such friends are strategically placed. Priority should be given to settling short-term and long-term pioneers in those clusters that are the focus of systematic attention, whether as a means of reinforcing endeavours to lay the groundwork for accelerated growth or stabilizing cycles of activity under way. It is not unreasonable to assume that a concerted effort to build on strength will result in the eventual outflow of pioneers from such clusters to areas destined to become the theatre of future conquests.

72.31Dear Friends: In the weeks and months ahead and over the course of the Plan, you and your auxiliaries will be a constant source of encouragement to the believers as they rise to the challenge being presented to them. We ask that you take every opportunity to convey to them our confidence in their capacity to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably appear in their path. They should not fail to recognize the scope of what they have achieved through the sustaining grace of Bahá'u'lláh over the past decade. In the course of the first four years, they created the institutional capacity throughout the planet to impart spiritual education to growing contingents of believers. Building on this accomplishment, they engaged in a rigorous process of learning that opened before their eyes vistas of great yet attainable possibilities. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in multiplying the number of devotional meetings sixfold over the past five years, that classes for children and junior youth have increased more than threefold during the same period, that the number of study circles worldwide has surpassed eleven thousand—these provide a measure of the extraordinary strength the believers can draw upon in shouldering the responsibility entrusted to them.

72.32Above all, the friends need to remain ever conscious of the magnitude of the spiritual forces that are at their disposition. They are members of a community "whose world-embracing, continually consolidating activities constitute the one integrating process in a world whose institutions, secular as well as religious, are for the most part dissolving". Of all the peoples of the world, "they alone can recognize, amidst the welter of a tempestuous age, the Hand of the Divine Redeemer that traces its course and controls its destinies. They alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity whose fabric they themselves are weaving." It is their institutions that "will come to be regarded as the hallmark and glory of the age" they have been called upon to establish. The "building process," to which they are consecrated, is "the one hope of a stricken society." For, it is "actuated by the generating influence of God's changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith." And remind them that they are the illumined souls envisioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His prayer: "Heroes are they, O my Lord, lead them to the field of battle. Guides are they, make them to speak out with arguments and proofs. Ministering servants are they, cause them to pass round the cup that brimmeth

with the wine of certitude. O my God, make them to be songsters that carol in fair gardens, make them lions that couch in the thickets, whales that plunge in the vasty deep."

The Universal House of Justice

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Curriculum of the Training Institute

28 December 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

73.1In the coming weeks you will be engaged in consultations on the features of the next Five Year Plan as described in our message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. We feel that these deliberations will benefit from the following comments regarding the curriculum of the training institute.

73.2When in our message dated 26 December 1995 we underscored the need for a formal programme of training, we were aware that certain elements of a curriculum meeting the necessary requirements existed in the materials of the Ruhi Institute. It was our conviction, however, that the accumulated experience at that point did not justify our recommending a specific set of materials to be used by training institutes throughout the world. Therefore, the messages written by us and on our behalf in the early part of the Four Year Plan encouraged National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors to open the way for training institutes to follow whatever curriculum they deemed appropriate. Yet, conscious of the inherent difficulty in creating comprehensive programmes, we repeatedly expressed the view that the execution of plans should not await protracted decisions on the question of curriculum and that materials readily available should be used. The availability of such materials was limited worldwide, and National Spiritual Assemblies and institute boards began to adopt the books of the Ruhi Institute as they became aware of them, often through the Counsellors. By the time the Four Year Plan came to a close, it was all too apparent that national communities which had vigorously set out to implement the sequence of courses designed by the Ruhi Institute were far ahead of those who had attempted to develop their own programme.

73.3It was the Five Year Plan, however, that served to convince Counsellors, National Assemblies and boards everywhere of the merits of the Ruhi Institute curriculum. The introduction of the seventh book in the Institute's main sequence at the start of the Plan enabled many to appreciate more the intimate connection between the flow of individuals through a sequence of courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of growth to the next. Indeed, as progress was achieved in hundreds of clusters, it became clear to institutions at all levels that the content and order of the main sequence prepared the friends to carry out those acts of service required by the pattern of growth being established in a cluster. We have, in fact, described the dynamics of this relationship in our message of 27 December 2005.

73.4We have now familiarized ourselves with the Ruhi Institute's present plans for curriculum development, which increasingly draw on experience worldwide in sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. We welcome the

decision of the Institute, for example, to move the book currently occupying the fifth position in the sequence to a set of courses branching out from Book 3 for preparing Bahá'í children's class teachers and to insert in the fifth place a new book for raising up animators of junior youth groups. That the eighth book in the main sequence, initiating a series concerned with the institutional aspects of service to the Cause, will address the all-important question of the Covenant is noted with equal pleasure. With these thoughts in mind, we have reached the conclusion that the books of the Ruhi Institute should constitute the main sequence of courses for institutes everywhere, at least through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age when the Bahá'í community will be focused on advancing the process of entry by troops within the framework for action set forth in our 27 December message.

73.5To select one curriculum to be used by training institutes worldwide for a certain period of time is not to ignore the variety of needs and interests of the friends as they endeavour to better equip themselves to understand and apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Nor does it in any way diminish the value of the efforts made to develop courses and materials to respond to these needs. It is not intended to suggest, either, that one curriculum should necessarily appeal to everyone. What this decision does imply, however, is that the present demands of the growth of the Faith are such that, for some years to come, training institutes should not attempt to meet all of the needs and interests of the friends.

73.6The institutions of the Faith will continue to respect the wishes of those who, for whatever reason, do not feel inclined to participate in the study of the books of the Ruhi Institute. Those not so disposed should recognize that there are many avenues of service open to them, including, above all, individual teaching which is the paramount duty of every Bahá'í. Local deepening classes and summer and winter schools, which remain an important feature of Bahá'í community life, will provide ample opportunities for them to deepen their knowledge of the teachings. What we ask of such friends, as we have in the past, is that they not allow their personal preferences to hamper in any way the unfoldment of an educational process that has shown the potential to embrace millions of souls from divers backgrounds. Regarding the materials that have been developed in other contexts over the years, and which will continue to emerge, these surely have their proper place in the Bahá'í community. Some, for example, form the basis for deepening classes at the grassroots, while others, with the necessary modifications, can be situated along one of the branches of courses stemming out from the Ruhi Institute's main sequence.

73.7In this connection, we feel that the subject of branch courses deserves a few words of explanation. In our message dated 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we indicated that the main sequence could be likened to the trunk of a tree, which supports other courses branching out from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. A set of health materials being developed in Africa offers a good illustration of a few features of such courses. Following years of training community health

workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several Bahá'í agencies decided to elaborate a series of modules aimed at preparing individuals to deal with progressively more complex health issues at the local level. By the time the first module began to be used in its initial form, the institute process had gained in strength, and it became evident that those who had studied Books 1 and 2 of the Ruhi Institute were better prepared to visit members of their extended families and friends and speak on health-related subjects. The design of the modules was modified so that they could constitute a branch after Book 2, which participants study while they continue along in the main sequence. Efforts in this direction have met with definite success. This example illustrates that branch courses are not a disconnected collection of materials randomly placed at various points. Rather, they must emerge out of actual experience and adhere to a certain logic, both internally and in the context of the overall institute programme, if they are to be pedagogically sound. Further, the very concept of a branch course suggests that it provides training for an area of service which will interest only some of those who are studying the books of the main sequence. We hope that the development of such courses to address specific needs, defined by action on the ground, will be a natural consequence of the endeavours of burgeoning communities which are avidly striving to translate into reality the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to use training materials as a means of systematizing their experience and sharing with increasing numbers the insights they gain.

The Universal House of Justice

74

Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors

31 December 2005

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

74.1As the gathering of the Continental Counsellors in the Holy Land draws to a close, we are moved to share with you the feelings of joy, triumph and confidence which have characterized several days of focused deliberation on the present Five Year Plan and on the global enterprise that will succeed it.

74.2The Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá opened the conference with a stirring appeal for resolute action, infusing the proceedings with a spirit of unwavering determination. Stories poured forth of the inspiring activities of the friends and the longing and responsiveness of the peoples of the world, conveying assurances that the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is blossoming more abundantly in all parts of the globe. Persistent questions of how to sustain the process of growth, of how to achieve a balance between expansion and consolidation, that have engaged the Bahá'í community for nearly half a century found clear answers in the experiences shared from diverse clusters on all continents. Accounts of obstacles surmounted, fresh learning acquired, and creative insights discovered made it evident that the Army of Light is prepared to advance towards new horizons.

74.3There can be no doubt that the Plan soon to end marks an upturn in the fortunes of the Faith. We look to the next decade and a half, the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, with great expectations of what will

be accomplished. From this vantage point, the Bahá'í world can readily appreciate the significant extent to which the International Teaching Centre provided the impetus so indispensable to blazing the course set over these past few years and can, as well, discern the rich possibilities that its consecrated endeavours portend for the future.

74.4Our message of 27 December addressed to the conference, which has already been transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies, summarizes the learning about growth to date and delineates the priorities for the next Plan. Careful study of the message by all believers and institutions will be an essential requisite for the upcoming consultations that will take place at every level of the community upon the return home of the Counsellors.

The Universal House of Justice

75

Next Stage in the Evolution of the Cause in Egypt

9 March 2006

To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Egypt

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

75.1Since the inception of the fifth epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith in January 2001, the operations of the Major Plan of God and His Minor Plan have steadily gained impetus and have already created far-reaching changes in the world at large and transformed the Bahá'í community. During this period, your own community has, as have others in the Bahá'í world, engaged in activities and processes that have enhanced your learning about effective promotion of the Faith. Your dearly loved, sorely tried community, established during the days of the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, blessed by the visits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and whose members were praised by Shoghi Effendi as "heroes in the arena of servitude", is now called to take stock and see the way forward as you stand poised to enter a new stage in the evolution of the Cause in your country.

75.2Your brilliant record of past achievements is marked by heroism and sacrifice. The Guardian lovingly extolled you as "the second most persecuted yet resolute community established in the heart of both the Arab and Muslim worlds". In your country "the banner of the independence of the Religion of Bahá" was first raised—a feat, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "whose like has never been recorded in the history of ages past", and which was accomplished "valiantly, with dauntless courage and complete detachment from the world". In response to the vital responsibilities assigned in the global teaching plans of the Faith, you raised up exemplary teachers, pioneers, and administrators, as well as scholars and translators who helped enrich and disseminate Bahá'í literature in Arabic. In a special tribute to the "valiant endeavours" of your spiritual forebears, the Guardian lauded their qualities and summarized their many accomplishments, including

… their exemplary loyalty to both the spiritual and administrative principles of the Cause they have espoused … their strenuous efforts for the emancipation and recognition of their Faith … their assiduous labours for its propagation in their homelands … their fearless defence of its tenets and institutions…

75.3Your noble heritage gives stimulus to your efforts as you steadfastly carry on the work of the Cause today. Two priorities demand the attention of your community. The first is the protection and defence of the Faith, which is ably carried out by the members of the Core Group and others who have been specifically assigned to undertake this specialized work. The second, which reinforces the effectiveness of the first, is acceleration in the growth of your community, which is the responsibility of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh in that land. The accomplishment of the latter objective is urgent; it depends on individual effort and single-minded consecration to the teaching work.

75.4The processes of the Five Year Plan—with their emphasis on study of the sequence of institute courses and the multiplication of core activities—provide you with all the means necessary to hasten and sustain a sizeable yet quiet expansion of your community. Success will require focused dedication that is expressed in regular, systematic action. At this moment in the history of your nation, your divine mission cannot be postponed. Arise, then, to engage more and more trusted members of your families, friends, neighbours and co-workers in the sequence of courses and assist them to walk the path of service. The time for action is now. Press on without delay, lest opportunities slip from your grasp.

75.5Ultimately, success is assured by the faith in Bahá'u'lláh that animates every conscientious believer. Faith is a state of conscience imbued with a compulsion to express itself in word and deed. Teaching combines these two aspects. Surely, the forces of the Concourse on High are ever ready to confirm your endeavours.

75.6In pursuing your activities, you will appreciate the need to act with discernment and wisdom. Do not seek publicity for your efforts. Nor should you be unduly anxious to announce the names of newly enrolled believers; bearing in mind prevailing circumstances, make known only gradually the enlistment of those whose hearts are illumined with the light of the Revelation. Be guided by the counsels of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

O ye servants of the Blessed Beauty!

It is a well-known fact that, owing to the frequency of disturbances, the work of delivering the Message hath been for a short time discontinued.… It is clear that in this day, confirmations from the unseen world are encompassing all those who deliver the divine Message. Should the work of teaching lapse, these confirmations would be entirely cut off, since it is impossible for the loved ones of God to receive assistance unless they teach.

Under all conditions, the teaching must be carried forward, but with wisdom. If the work cannot proceed openly, then let them teach in private, and thus engender spirituality and fellowship among the children of men.…

The object is this, that in the time of peace and safety this work of delivering the Message should be carried on with the utmost fervour. But when there is no peace and safety, extreme wisdom should be exercised, though no complete cessation of effort is permissible, for in that case the divine assistance shall be entirely cut off.

… one must teach with the utmost wisdom. Should one succeed in illumining a

soul through the light of guidance, one should as far as possible conceal his identity. That soul should in turn teach another and conceal the matter. My meaning is that many souls are most eager to enter the Kingdom, yet they fear exposure and publicity. For no sooner hath a soul embraced the Cause than the friends broadcast, with blasting trumpets and pounding drums, his allegiance to the Faith! Therefore, act with circumspection and purify the hearts. Behave in such wise as to become renowned throughout the world for your circumspection. Were ye to act according to that which is being written, that is, should the teacher neither mention the other believers to the guided soul nor reveal the latter's identity, no clamour would be raised, no agitation would result….

75.7To lose no opportunity to teach, yet exercise an appropriate measure of care and circumspection, was further emphasized by the Guardian in a letter written on his behalf, in which he conveyed his wish that the Egyptian friends "should persevere in their work quietly, and seize every chance to grow, but be wary and circumspect as well, so as not to open the way for any persecutions or difficulties in Egypt".

75.8We will supplicate at the Sacred Threshold that you may be richly confirmed in your continued endeavours. May the Hosts of the Supreme Concourse rush to your aid, and may Bahá'u'lláh bless and guide every step you take for the advancement of His Cause.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

76

Heightened Threat to the Bahá'ís in Iran

22 March 2006

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

76.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to forward to you the enclosed copies, in English and Persian, of a letter addressed to Iranian believers living outside their native land. As you will note, its purpose is to share with them information concerning the heightened threat to the Bahá'ís in Iran and to encourage them to consider what part they can play, within their adopted homelands, to ameliorate the suffering of the believers in the Cradle of the Faith.

76.2It will be appreciated if your National Spiritual Assembly will take steps to ensure that the contents of the letter are brought to the attention of all believers of Iranian origin resident in your country, as soon as possible.

76.3The well-being of the believers in Iran is of concern to every Bahá'í, and you are, accordingly, encouraged to share the enclosed message with all of the believers in your jurisdiction. The House of Justice hopes that they will derive inspiration from it as they consider what they can do to express their love and support for their Bahá'í sisters and brothers in that land. Their prayers and the efforts they make to reconsecrate themselves to the prosecution of the Plan will surely solace the friends in the birthplace of the Faith and hasten the day when all will witness the emancipation of the Cause in that country.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat
Ameliorating the Suffering of the Bahá'ís in Iran
22 March 2006
To the Iranian believers living outside Iran
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
76.4As you may be aware, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has recently issued a statement raising grave apprehension regarding government actions being taken against the believers in the Cradle of the Faith, which she characterizes as "impermissible and unacceptable". There can be no doubt that the Blessed Beauty watches over His oppressed followers in Iran and enfolds them in His tender embrace. For our part, we are directing systematic action at the international and national levels to place before the world our concern over this heightened threat to that much-cherished Bahá'í community. As a result of the swift efforts of those who have been assigned responsibility for this work, the plight of the Bahá'ís in Iran is receiving attention from United Nations agencies, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and the media in many countries around the world. May a mighty outcry be raised everywhere to stay the hands of the aggressors.
76.5These current developments mark another moment of intensity in the persecution besetting the Bahá'ís of Iran, an unending adversity that has ebbed and surged ever since the inception of the Faith in that land more than a century and a half ago. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 opened a new phase of this oppression. When in recent years the pressures on the friends seemed to lessen, they decided to join with their fellow believers throughout the rest of the world in establishing the institute process in their country. In November 2003, we addressed a message to the Bahá'ís of Iran in which we expressed our admiration and that of the Bahá'í world for their steadfastness in the face of continuous persecution and focused their attention on the spiritual enterprise Bahá'u'lláh Himself has assigned to them. A year later, they addressed a letter to the former president seeking redress for the long-standing infringement of their human and civil rights. The response of the authorities to all of this was to instigate a spate of arbitrary arrests and detentions.
76.6With the most recent political changes in the country, the situation has further deteriorated. The government demanded the institute be suspended—an order with which the community complied. Yet the believers cannot submit to unacceptable demands nor succumb to the pressure of the enemies of the Faith to entirely suspend their personal teaching efforts. Teaching is, after all, an indispensable duty enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh on His followers. Moreover, on the exigency of teaching, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "no complete cessation of effort is permissible, for in that case the divine assistance shall be entirely cut off." Indeed, proclaiming one's religious beliefs to others is an individual right upheld by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Teaching efforts are the only way to combat the distortions circulating about the Faith and to preserve the community. Of course, in carrying out this duty, the believers are conscious of the need to act with

wisdom and are naturally using the spiritual insights and skills they have gained through the institute process.

76.7The peril surrounding the believers has mounted to a scale not witnessed since the early 1980s. All signs indicate that the authorities are redoubling efforts to strangle the Bahá'í community by implementing the nefarious strategy originally set forth in a secret document issued in 1991 by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was signed by Hujjatu'l-Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, and approved by the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. From late October to the end of November 2005 alone, the influential Tihrán newspaper "Kayhan" ran dozens of articles attacking the Bahá'í Faith. During this same period, the national radio network began a weekly series of programmes with similar focus and intent. The Faith was likewise attacked in television broadcasts and on the Internet. The odious fabrications about the Faith, its Central Figures, and its adherents disseminated through these media could have no purpose but to foment suspicion and hatred. The campaign of propaganda against the Faith, recent reports of an escalation in the harassment of individual Bahá'ís throughout the country, efforts undertaken by the Association of Chambers of Commerce (Ettehadiyeye Asnaf) to compile a list of Bahá'ís in every type of trade and employment, and the fears voiced by the Special Rapporteur that instructions "to identify persons who adhere to the Bahá'í faith and monitor their activities … will be used as a basis for the increased persecution of, and discrimination against, members of the Bahá'í faith, in violation of international standards", when viewed together, heighten apprehension about the intentions of the perpetrators of these acts.

76.8For three decades now, the Iranian Bahá'ís have received unfailing encouragement and support from the Friends in Iran, who have managed the affairs of the Bahá'í community wisely and effectively in the absence of a National Spiritual Assembly and have bolstered the spirits of the believers in a manner that has earned our profound appreciation. The believers' steadfast loyalty to the Cause in the face of the tumult that engulfs their community is a deep source of pride for the Bahá'í world. Confident in the protection that envelops them, the Bahá'ís continue to discharge their spiritual obligations with courage, determination, and a depth of commitment that evokes our highest praise. Their willingness to endure untold hardship for the sake of upholding divine principles and the rights of the Bahá'í community in the Cradle of the Faith propels that land onward towards the glorious destiny foreshadowed in our Sacred Writings. They are the fitting heirs of their spiritual forebears, who were extolled by the Blessed Beauty in words such as these:

All these stainless hearts and sanctified souls have, with absolute resignation, responded to the summons of His decree. Instead of complaining, they rendered thanks unto God, and amidst the darkness of their anguish they revealed naught but radiant acquiescence to His will.… Methinks patience was revealed only by virtue of their fortitude, and faithfulness itself was begotten only by their deeds.

76.9The ordeals afflicting the believers in Iran must, however, be seen within a larger context, for the convulsions that beset that nation are the consequence of forces at work throughout the entire planet. The inexorable advance of the world towards the unification of the human race is driven by irrepressible processes of integration and disintegration. On all sides can be heard “the call of humanity itself crying out for deliverance at a time when the tide of mounting evils has destroyed its equilibrium and is now strangling its very life.”

76.10In the midst of this turbulence, the believers in Iran are giving their all for the Cause, and the institutions of the Faith in other countries are exerting every effort to defend them. The response each of you can make, wherever you reside, is to renew your determination to serve the manifold needs of the Cause and particularly rededicate yourselves to the major aim of the Five Year Plan. Through the core activities of the Plan you have the possibility to intimately engage receptive souls, including, as appropriate, those among your trusted compatriots, expose them to the Word of God, confirm them in the Faith, and guide their steps in initial acts of service. Consider how apt is the Blessed Beauty’s promise that should the progress of His Cause be restrained in one land, it would raise its head elsewhere to proclaim His life-giving Message.

76.11Through the workings of the Major Plan of God a spotlight now shines on Iran. In prior ages, through the impetus of the teachings of Zoroaster and Muhammad, her citizens applied spiritual principles to build a nation, whose “power and glory”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “shone out like the morning above the world’s horizons”.

She was as the pivot of the world, she was the source and centre of sciences and arts, the wellspring of great inventions and discoveries, the rich mine of human virtues and perfections. The intellect, the wisdom of the individual members of this excellent nation dazzled the minds of other peoples, the brilliance and perceptive genius that characterized all this noble race aroused the envy of the whole world.

76.12How regrettable, then, is Iran’s plight today! Its current state can hardly be reconciled with its glorious past. Notwithstanding the suffering inflicted on them, the Bahá’ís of that land are determined to contribute towards building a society founded on enlightened spiritual and social principles, a society destined to reclaim and indeed outshine that nation’s noble antiquity.

76.13Dearly loved co-workers: the machinations of those who believe themselves capable of obliterating that community will, inevitably, come to naught. Your own efforts undertaken on behalf of your cherished sisters and brothers in Iran will hasten the day when this “perspicuous and luminous Revelation” banishes forever the deep gloom that now encompasses the land of its birth. There is no time to lose. “The fleeting hours of man’s life on earth pass swiftly by and the little that still remaineth shall come to an end, but that which endureth and lasteth for evermore is the fruit that man reapeth from his servitude at the Divine Threshold.”

76.14We are fervently supplicating at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf.

The Universal House of Justice
77
Publication of The Tabernacle of Unity
20 April 2006
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
77.1The Universal House of Justice is pleased to announce the completion of a new volume of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, entitled "The Tabernacle of Unity", providing the world with yet another work of translation into English from the Holy Writings, one of the goals of the current Five Year Plan.
77.2This small book contains Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to Mánikchí Sáhib, a prominent Zoroastrian, and a companion Tablet addressed to Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl, the secretary to Mánikchí Sáhib at that time. These, together with three shorter, inspirational Tablets, offer a glimpse of Bahá'u'lláh's relationship with the followers of a religion that had arisen, many centuries before, in the same land that witnessed the birth of His own Faith.
77.3Currently being published by World Centre Publications, this work will be available for purchase near the end of June through the Bahá'í Distribution Service in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A.…
77.4You will find enclosed a flyer, providing details of this new release, which you may share with the delegates to your National Conventions and throughout your respective communities so that the believers may be informed of the availability of this new English volume.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
2006–2011
The Five Year Plan
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Ridván Message 2006
Ridván 2006
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
78.1Ridván 2006 is a moment charged with a spirit of triumph and anticipation. The followers of Bahá'u'lláh everywhere can take rightful pride in the magnitude of their accomplishments during the Five Year Plan now drawing to a close. And towards the future they can look with a confidence that is conferred only on those whose resolve is steeled through experience. The entire Bahá'í world is stirred at contemplating the scope of the five-year enterprise that lies ahead, the depth of consecration it will demand, and the results it is destined to achieve. Our prayers join yours as you turn in gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the privilege of witnessing the unfoldment of His purpose for humanity.
78.2In our message of 27 December 2005 to the Counsellors gathered in the Holy Land, transmitted on that same day to all National Spiritual Assemblies, we delineated the features of the Five Year Plan that will stretch from 2006 to 2011. The friends and their institutions were urged to study the message

thoroughly, and its content is no doubt well familiar to you. We now call upon each and every one of you to bend your energies towards ensuring that the goal of establishing over the next five years intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide is successfully met. That in the months following the Counsellors' departure from the World Centre the groundwork for the Plan's launch was laid so rapidly and systematically in country after country is an indication of the eagerness with which the Bahá'í community is taking up the challenge presented to it. While there is no need for us to elaborate further on the requirements of the Plan here, we feel compelled to offer for your reflection a few comments on the global context in which your individual and collective efforts will be pursued.

78.3More than seventy years ago Shoghi Effendi penned his World Order letters in which he provided a penetrating analysis of the forces operating in the world. With an eloquence that was his alone, he described two great processes that have been set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, one destructive and the other integrative, both of which are propelling humanity towards the World Order He conceived. We were cautioned by the Guardian not to be "misled by the painful slowness characterizing the unfoldment of the civilization" being laboriously established or to be "deluded by the ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity which at times appear to be capable of checking the disruptive influence of the chronic ills afflicting the institutions of a decaying age." No review of the course of events in recent decades can fail to acknowledge the gathering momentum of the processes he analysed then with such precision.

78.4One need only consider the deepening moral crisis engulfing humanity to appreciate the extent to which the forces of disintegration have rent the fabric of society. Have not the evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear and of fraud, which the Guardian perceived with such clarity, become so widespread as to be readily apparent to even the casual observer? Does not the threat of terrorism of which he spoke loom so large on the international scene as to preoccupy the minds of young and old alike in every corner of the globe? Have not the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches and pleasures so consolidated their power and influence as to assume authority over such human values as happiness, fidelity and love? Have not the weakening of family solidarity and the irresponsible attitude towards marriage reached such proportions as to endanger the existence of this fundamental unit of society? "The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions," about which Shoghi Effendi forewarned, are sadly revealing themselves "in their worst and most revolting aspects."

78.5The Guardian lays the greatest share of the blame for humanity's moral downfall on the decline of religion as a social force. "Should the lamp of religion be obscured," he draws our attention to the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine." The decades that followed the writing of his letters have seen not only a continued deterioration in the ability of religion to exercise moral influence, but also

the betrayal of the masses through the unseemly conduct of religious institutions. Attempts at reinvigorating it have only given rise to a fanaticism that, if left unchecked, could destroy the foundation of civilized relationships among people. The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, recently intensified, is ample evidence alone of the determination of the forces of darkness to quench the flame of faith wherever it burns brightly. Though confident in the ultimate triumph of the Cause, we dare not forget the warning of the Guardian that the Faith will have to contend with enemies more powerful and more insidious than those who have afflicted it in the past.

78.6There is no need to comment extensively on the impotence of statesmanship, another theme treated so masterfully by the Guardian in his World Order letters. The widening economic divide between the rich and the poor, the persistence of age-old animosities among nations, the swelling numbers of the displaced, the extraordinary rise in organized crime and violence, the pervasive sense of insecurity, the breakdown of basic services in so many regions, the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources—these are but a few of the signs of the inability of world leaders to devise viable schemes to alleviate humanity's ills. This is not to say that sincere efforts have not been exerted, in fact, have not multiplied decade after decade. Yet these efforts, no matter how ingenious, fall well short of removing "the root cause of the evil that has so rudely upset the equilibrium of present-day society." "Not even," the Guardian asserted, "would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world … provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigour of organized peoples and nations." "What else," he confidently affirmed, "but the unreserved acceptance of the Divine Programme" enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, "embodying in its essentials God's divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age, coupled with an indomitable conviction in the unfailing efficacy of each and all of its provisions, is eventually capable of withstanding the forces of internal disintegration which, if unchecked, must needs continue to eat into the vitals of a despairing society."

78.7Penetrating, indeed, is Shoghi Effendi's depiction of the process of disintegration accelerating in the world. Equally striking is the accuracy with which he analysed the forces associated with the process of integration. He spoke of a "gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society" as an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind. This spirit of solidarity has continued to spread over the decades, and today its effect is apparent in a range of developments, from the rejection of deeply ingrained racial prejudices to the dawning consciousness of world citizenship, from heightened environmental awareness to collaborative efforts in the promotion of public health, from the concern for human rights to the systematic pursuit of universal education, from the establishment of interfaith activities to the efflorescence of hundreds of thousands of local, national and international organizations engaged in some form of social action.

78.8Yet for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh the most significant developments in the process of integration are those directly related to the Faith, many of which were nurtured by the Guardian himself and which have advanced tremendously since their modest beginnings. From the small nucleus of believers to whom he imparted his first teaching plans has grown a worldwide community with a presence in thousands of localities, each following a well-established pattern of activity that embodies the Faith's principles and aspirations. Upon the foundation of the Administrative Order he so painstakingly laid during the early decades of his ministry has been raised a large, closely knit network of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies diligently administering the affairs of the Cause in more than one hundred and eighty countries. From the first contingents of Auxiliary Board members for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith brought into being by him has arisen a legion of nearly one thousand stalwart workers serving in the field under the direction of eighty-one Counsellors ably guided by the International Teaching Centre. The evolution of the World Administrative Centre of the Faith, within the precincts of its World Spiritual Centre, a process to which the Guardian consecrated so much energy, has crossed a crucial threshold with the occupation by the Universal House of Justice of its Seat on Mount Carmel and the subsequent completion of the International Teaching Centre Building and the Centre for the Study of the Texts. The Institution of Huqúqu'lláh has steadily progressed under the stewardship of the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, appointed Trustee by Shoghi Effendi fifty years ago, culminating in the establishment in 2005 of an international board designed to promote the continued widespread application of this mighty law, a source of inestimable blessings for all humanity. The efforts of the Guardian to raise the profile of the Faith in international circles have developed into an extensive external affairs system, capable of both defending the interests of the Faith and proclaiming its universal message. The respect the Faith enjoys in international fora, whenever its representatives speak, is a most noteworthy accomplishment. The loyalty and devotion that the members of a community reflecting the diversity of the entire human race evince towards the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh constitute a storehouse of strength the like of which no other organized group can claim.

78.9The Guardian foresaw that, in succeeding epochs of the Formative Age, the Universal House of Justice would launch a series of worldwide enterprises which would "symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities" of National Spiritual Assemblies. Over the course of three successive epochs now, the Bahá'í community has laboured assiduously within the framework of the global Plans issued by the House of Justice and has succeeded in establishing a pattern of Bahá'í life that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards the spiritual revival of society. It has acquired the capacity to reach large numbers of receptive souls with the message, to confirm them, and to deepen their understanding of the essentials of the Faith they have embraced. It has learned to translate the principle of consultation enunciated by its Founder into an effective tool for collective decision-making and to educate its

members in its use. It has devised programmes for the spiritual and moral education of its younger members and has extended them not only to its own children and junior youth but also to those of the wider community. With the pool of talent at its disposition, it has created a rich body of literature which includes volumes in scores of languages that address both its own needs and the interest of the general public. It has become increasingly involved in the affairs of society at large, undertaking a host of projects of social and economic development. Particularly since the opening of the fifth epoch in 2001, it has made significant strides in multiplying its human resources through a programme of training that reaches the grassroots of the community and has discovered methods and instruments for establishing a sustainable pattern of growth.

78.10It is in the context of the interplay of the forces described here that the imperative of advancing the process of entry by troops must be viewed. The Five Year Plan now opening requires that you concentrate your energies on this process and ensure that the two complementary movements at its heart are accelerated. This should be your dominant concern. As your efforts bear fruit and the dynamics of growth reach a new level of complexity, there will be challenges and opportunities for the World Centre itself to address in the coming five years in fields such as external affairs, social and economic development, administration, and the application of Bahá'í law. The growth of the community has already necessitated that new arrangements be put in place to double the number of pilgrims to four hundred in each group beginning in October 2007. There are several other projects that will also have to be pursued. Among these are the further development of the gardens surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as the Ridván Garden and Mazra'ih; the restoration of the International Archives Building; structural repairs to the Shrine of the Báb, the full extent of which are not yet clear; and the construction of the House of Worship in Chile as envisioned by the Guardian, the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. As these endeavours advance, we will call on you from time to time for assistance, both in the form of financial support and specialized talents, mindful that the resources of the Faith should, to the greatest measure possible, be channelled to the requirements of the Plan.

78.11Dear friends: That the forces of disintegration are gaining in range and power cannot be ignored. It is equally clear that the community of the Greatest Name has been guided from strength to strength by the Hand of Providence and must now increase in size and augment its resources. The course set by the Five Year Plan is straightforward. How can those of us aware of the plight of humanity, and conscious of the direction in which history is unfolding, not arise to the fullest of our capacity and dedicate ourselves to its aim? Do not the words of the Guardian that "the stage is set" hold as true for us today as they did when he wrote them during the first Seven Year Plan? Let his words ring in your ears: "There is no time to lose." "There is no room left for vacillation." "Such an opportunity is irreplaceable." "To try, to persevere, is to insure ultimate and complete victory." Be assured of our continued prayers at the Sacred Threshold for your guidance and protection.

The Universal House of Justice
79
International Financial Collaboration Programme
15 May 2006
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
79.1The approach adopted by the Universal House of Justice for the assignment of international financial collaboration goals over the past ten years has proved to be highly effective. Selected National Spiritual Assemblies were asked to assess how much they could contribute toward the acquisition and improvement of property and equipment by other national communities over the period of the current Plan. On the basis of their estimates, the House of Justice called upon them to assist communities in various countries as specific needs came to its attention.
79.2During the recently concluded Five Year Plan, 37 National Spiritual Assemblies participated as donors of a total exceeding US$2,000,000 to national Bahá'í communities in all parts of the world. These funds were used to meet a variety of needs: the acquisition of land and buildings for national and local Bahá'í Centres and for future Temple sites, renovation of Bahá'í buildings damaged through warfare, and the purchase of office equipment necessary for the efficient functioning of Bahá'í administrative institutions. Beyond that, the bonds of unity between geographically distant national communities have been strengthened, and the worldwide solidarity of the believers enhanced.
79.3Your National Spiritual Assembly is one of 42 now being invited to participate in the international financial collaboration programme for the new Five Year Plan. You have been selected because the House of Justice believes you are in a position to assist other national communities which have not been endowed materially to the same extent. We would therefore appreciate receiving from you by 30 September 2006 an estimate of the amount you can offer as financial collaboration during this Five Year Plan. In this regard, it would be helpful if you could provide a breakdown of the total sum you can make available, indicating how much you believe you can provide each year. To assist you in making your determination of the amount you can contribute for this purpose, we have been asked to inform you that the House of Justice anticipates that at least US$2,500,000 will be required to meet the financial collaboration goals to be assigned during the current Plan.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
80
The "Bahá'í Media Bank" Web Site
15 June 2006
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
80.1We are pleased to announce the launching of yet another Bahá'í International Community Web site, entitled "Bahá'í Media Bank". This new site serves as a repository of publication-quality photographs of

Bahá'í-related themes, and will eventually house video and audio material.
80.2Located at <http://media.bahai.org>, the "Media Bank" has over 2,500 high resolution images categorized by community activities, people and institutions, buildings and places, and history and events ready for free downloading to use in publications and media presentations. New images will be added to the site on a regular basis.
80.3Visitors to the Web site can browse the collection of photographs without obligation. Image files can be downloaded from the site from a free account, which provides the user with the opportunity to review the terms of use of copyrighted material and offers such services as a "My Downloads" holding area, where up to 20 images can be collected and then downloaded all at the same time in a single ZIP file. The account keeps track of the user's download history so that previous collections can be retrieved or shared with other users of the "Media Bank".
80.4As with the other official Bahá'í Web sites, we welcome your comments on the "Bahá'í Media Bank's" design and functionality. We are confident that the new Web site will provide institutions and individuals alike with easy access to a large collection of Bahá'í-related images and prove to be of great utility to both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í publishers and other media producers.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Office of Public Information
81
Passing of Marguerite Sears
20 July 2006
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States
81.1We are moved by a deep sense of loss in the passing of Marguerite Sears. Her more than six decades of outstanding, tireless endeavor in promotion of the Cause of God were impelled by a flame of faith that warmed countless hearts in various parts of the world. Among the efforts that distinguished her record of service, two highlight the intensity of her exemplary dedication: one on the American home front when, encouraged and accompanied by her then non-Bahá'í spouse, she went to Utah in response to the beloved Guardian's call for "nine holy souls" to settle in one of nine states that were yet unopened to the Faith; the other, in South Africa, where she and her much-loved companion, now a believer later to be elevated to the rank of Hand of the Cause of God, established residence as the first pioneers to that country during the Ten Year Crusade. We recall with abiding appreciation her contributions to the work in the Holy Land for the period he served as one of the Custodians of the Faith at its World Centre, her extensive teaching trips and her valuable assistance to Bahá'í communities in numerous lands.
81.2Kindly convey to the members of her dear family and bereaved friends our heartfelt condolences and assure them of our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold that her illumined soul may be rewarded with joyous progress throughout the divine worlds.
The Universal House of Justice
82

Situation at the Bahá’í World Centre following the Conflict in the Holy Land

17 August 2006

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

82.1By the grace of a merciful Providence, the month-long crisis that posed a grave danger to life in this region, and a clear threat to the safety of the World Centre of our Faith, subsided a few days ago. Our hearts reach out to the innocent victims on both sides of the fiery conflict it entailed. Their relief from grief is the object of our ardent prayers.

82.2We affirm with gratitude to Bahá’u’lláh that no damage was done to the Holy Places and that the friends here remained in safety, pursuing their tasks with steadiness of purpose and exemplary perseverance.

82.3During the early days of this perilous period our spirits were uplifted by the radiant resolve of the 172 friends who were able to come as participants in the last programme for the 2005–2006 pilgrimage season. Hailing from 16 countries, they arrived as the clouds of strife hung heavy over the Holy Land. Given the unpredictability of the situation, it was not until the ninth night of their sojourn that the pilgrims attained to the Sacred Threshold at Bahjí. This was for them an unexpected bounty marking the high point of a pilgrimage experience unlike any other thus far recorded. And so they returned to the fields of service from whence they came with fulfilled hearts, their souls quickened, ready to focus the enhanced measure of their spiritual energy on realizing the global aim of the Five Year Plan.

82.4The recent turbulence once again involving the Holy Land was only the latest among the recurrent upheavals so characteristic of unsettled conditions that have long obtained in the Middle East; it was only one among a mounting tide of world-shaking afflictions. To the followers of the Blessed Beauty imbued with a world-healing vision of the Divine Plan in its current phase, the disquiet intermittently affecting this Land of the Prophets may well be regarded, beyond all other contexts, as a reminder of—indeed, a spur for—the efforts to be made, the tasks urgently to be done. Press on, then, undeterred by any trouble, confident of the promised glory of the divinely assured outcome.

82.5Just two days ago, we went to Bahjí and bowed down at the Sacred Threshold to give thanks to the Beloved on behalf of every one of you for the protection He had vouchsafed to the World Centre of His Faith, and we continue to pray for His confirmation of every step you take to advance His mighty Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

83

Passing of Ramnik Shah

8 December 2006

To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of India

83.1Our hearts are filled with grief at the news of the passing of outstanding, long-time servant of Bahá’u’lláh Ramnik Shah. We recall with deep admiration his noble-hearted, steadfast and self-effacing devotion to the needs of the Cause for over six decades and his many years of dedicated service on

the National Spiritual Assembly of India. His indefatigable labours for the propagation of the Faith and the establishment of the Bahá'í administrative institutions, which contributed in no small measure to the rise of the Indian Bahá'í community from a few scattered localities to the admirable achievements of the present day, have won for him an enduring place in the annals of the Cause in India. He will also long be remembered for his warm and loving spirit, his generosity and his kindness to all with whom he came in contact. Not content to rest in his later years, he remained committed until the very end of his life to the advancement of the Faith, continuing his travels throughout India to encourage and inspire the friends. He has left as a legacy his example of selfless service, of visionary outlook, of thirst for learning, of boundless enthusiasm and of ceaseless effort, which will doubtless inspire the rank and file of believers in India for generations to come.

83.2Kindly convey to his dear family and his many friends our loving sympathy and the assurance of our fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines for the progress of his luminous soul in the Abhá Kingdom.

83.3We advise your National Assembly to arrange a memorial service in his honour at the Bahá'í House of Worship in New Delhi.

The Universal House of Justice

84

Bahá'ís Prohibited from Obtaining Identification Cards in Egypt

21 December 2006

To the Bahá'ís of Egypt

Dearly loved Friends,

84.1We have received the distressing news that on 16 December, the Supreme Administrative Court in Cairo ruled against the decision of a lower court that permitted Bahá'ís to obtain officially issued identification cards. We wholly sympathize in your disappointment that justice was not served by a ruling that robs the members of your community of so critical a right of Egyptian citizens owing only to your beliefs. But you must stand firm and persevere in your effort to win affirmation of this right. To do less would be to deprive the authorities in Egypt of the opportunity to correct a wrong which has implications for many others, no less than for yourselves. Moreover, to relent would be to disregard the moral courage of those organizations, media, and persons of goodwill who have joined their voices to yours in the quest for a just solution to a serious inequity.

84.2In explaining the court's decision to the press, the presiding judge stated that the Egyptian constitution recognizes only three religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. This argument misses the essence, obscures the issue. Surely you are not asking here for the Bahá'í Faith to be recognized. Like other Egyptian citizens, you simply wish to be free to carry out the requirement of the civil law that you must obtain identification cards without making a false statement about your religious beliefs. Possessing such a card is a common right to which every native-born Egyptian is entitled. But how strange it is that the custodians of the law would themselves oblige you to violate a government policy that all citizens without exception are expected to observe! It is, of course, worthy of praise that the judges so publicly upheld

the validity of three of the divine religions. As a community that believes that all God's chosen Messengers are "seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith", the Bahá'ís of Egypt have no difficulty embracing the truths of the three religions mentioned. But to what purpose were their names invoked? Was it to justify the exclusion of certain citizens from exercising their civil rights? Would this not amount to a misuse of the authority of these Faiths to perpetrate an injustice that offends the high standard of justice to which they hold their adherents? But your interest is not in a theological tug-of-war with the Egyptian judiciary, despite its gross misrepresentation of the Bahá'í Faith: it is in the application of the principles of equity, fairness, and honesty that are so vital to those of all faiths and no faith. The ruling was unreasonable not only because it is contrary to prescriptions set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a signatory, but more especially because the sacred scriptures of Islam extol tolerance as a precept of social stability.

84.3This incident calls to mind the occasion more than eight decades ago when Egyptian judicial and ecclesiastical authorities considered the claims of our Faith, not in a sympathetic effort but with the intent to oppose. A case involving three Muslim men who had become Bahá'ís in a village prompted their interest. As a result, the appellate religious court of Beba delivered a verdict on 10 May 1925 that denounced the Bahá'í Faith and annulled the marriages of these men. Nevertheless, from the judges' scrupulous study of Bahá'í scriptures, they arrived at the accurate conclusion that the Bahá'í Faith was "a new religion", "entirely independent", with "beliefs, principles and laws" of its own. This verdict was sanctioned at the time by Egypt's highest ecclesiastical authorities. If Egyptian magistrates were capable then of such clear perception, and others in a local court have so recently shown a similar awareness, it seems reasonable to trust that this capacity will in the future reassert itself positively at the highest level of authority in your country.

84.4Well beyond a century ago, during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh, His Faith took root in your homeland. Despite instances of opposition, it flourished in a climate of intellectual ferment. As early as 1934 your National Spiritual Assembly was incorporated, thus assuming a legal personality that enabled it to function according to Bahá'í procedures and to hold properties, including a National Center and a cemetery. Then suddenly in 1960, without forewarning, Presidential Decree no. 263 was issued, banning your national and local institutions and confiscating your properties and other assets. For nearly five decades now the members of your community have been subjected to humiliation of all kinds, including the harassment of police surveillance and false arrests. Until now no evidence has been adduced to prove that you have been unworthy of the public's trust, while there is much to confirm that you made noteworthy contributions towards fostering the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural character of the Egyptian people.

In this regard, we recall with deep emotion and pride the distinguished services to your country and community of your late Bahá'í compatriot

Hussein Bikar, who, despite having received a presidential award honoring his outstanding achievements as an artist, was denied an Egyptian identification card up until the time of his death.

84.5This is no time, however, to dwell on a litany of the vexations your community has for so long sustained. It is, rather, an appropriate occasion for reflection on the broad context in which the recent action of the Supreme Administrative Court occurred, that from it you may derive an ever-larger sense of meaning and purpose.

84.6Injustice is rife. Throughout the world it afflicts every department of life whether in the home, at the workplace, or in the public sphere as a consequence of the ill conduct of individuals, groups, or governments. Lamenting the horrors it breeds, Bahá'u'lláh made this poignant remark: "Justice is, in this day, bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples." So grave a situation exists at a time of unprecedented change: opposite processes of chaos and of order interact in a spiral of turbulence that signals a transition in the spiritual and social agenda of the world as a whole.

84.7Human society has arrived at a stage in its evolution when unity of the whole human race is imperative. To not appreciate this reality is to not grasp the meaning of the current crisis in world affairs. The principle of the oneness of humankind identifies the code for resolving the far-reaching issues involved. As Bahá'ís, you understand that this principle implies not only the ultimate peaceful goal that it signifies but involves, as well, your participation in the painful tasks entailed in attaining it. Hence, you appreciate the global connotations of instances of oppression at home or abroad and accept the responsibility of striving, guided by the principles of the Faith and in collaboration with others whenever possible, to combat injustice, for the common good.

84.8Those groups supporting you in your current encounter are of a world-embracing vision and are themselves prepared to withstand the harsh resistance to their selfless occupation, sustaining blows of injustice in the process. As the rise of justice ensures the appearance of unity in the world, all who take on the formidable challenges of struggling for it have indeed captured the spirit of the age epitomized in the principle of oneness. To the extent that the fight for justice contributes to the establishment of a single global standard of human rights, the organizations in Egypt so engaged are working towards achieving the unification of their nation's peoples. They are thus committing themselves in large measure to the vital task of reconciling the tensions that bedevil their society and delay the attainment of its unity. Such reconciliation should not be impossible to Egypt's people, who can take pride in the celebrated enlightenment that in a glorious past ensured their unity in a flourishing society. Undoubtedly, Egypt will rise to participate, as befits its stature, in the fruition of that destiny of world peace and prosperity of which all nations dream.

84.9Be assured of our ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines on behalf of each and every one of the members of your community and for the progress of all your

compatriots in that land of ancient splendor.
The Universal House of Justice
85
Summary of Achievements and Learning for the Five Year Plan, 2001–2006
19 February 2007
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
85.1At the request of the Universal House of Justice, we enclose three complimentary copies of The Five Year Plan, 2001–2006: Summary of Achievements and Learning, prepared under the supervision of the International Teaching Centre. While this work describes many of the Bahá'í community's activities in the areas of social and economic development, external affairs, and achievements at the Bahá'í World Centre, its primary focus is on advances made in promoting the central aim of the recent Five Year Plan through the concerted efforts of the three participants—the individual, the community and the institutions. Through careful reading, one may gain an appreciation of the progress made to date and be inspired to meet the opportunities that lie ahead….
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
86
Call for Pioneers
9 March 2007
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
86.1Our message of 27 December 2005 delineating the features of the Five Year Plan stressed the particular role that pioneers would play in meeting the challenge of establishing at least 1,500 intensive programmes of growth worldwide. In this connection, we expressed the hope that those who would arise to serve in this capacity, whether on the home front or in the international field, would settle in clusters receiving systematic attention, either to help lay the groundwork for accelerated growth or to strengthen cycles of activity already under way. As efforts intensify across the globe towards the realization of the goal that has been set, we ask the followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world to reflect on their participation in this mighty enterprise and decide how they can best contribute to the successful execution of the Five Year Plan. Let those souls able to join their co-workers in the forefront of activity hesitate not a moment longer.
86.2A document prepared by the International Teaching Centre will soon be issued from the World Centre offering an overview of national communities that would benefit most from the reinforcement of pioneers. It includes information on the status of clusters and describes other needs that must be met to support the work at the grassroots. Moreover, it further demonstrates how the various elements of the Plan provide a coherent framework for action. Friends responding to the call for pioneers are encouraged to turn to the institutions as a first step; this will help them determine where their services can most effectively be directed.

86.3The Five Year Plan that concluded at Ridván 2006 witnessed the movement of more than 3,000 international pioneers. National Spiritual Assemblies are now being asked to set numerical goals for those to be dispatched beyond their borders during the current Plan. Some 3,500 will be required in all. To these will be added the thousands who will have to be deployed to clusters on the home front. Though but a fraction of the manpower needed to propel the process of entry by troops worldwide, such a number of pioneers can lend the process an impetus that should not be underestimated. Indeed, they who cast away their attachments and forsake their homes for the love of God are assured of divine assistance. “Now we must not consider our ability and capacity,” are ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, “nay, rather, we must fix our gaze upon the favours and bounties of God, in these days, Who has made of the drop a sea, and of the atom a sun.”
86.4On behalf of all believers who, committing their lives to His care, issue forth from their homes to promote His Cause, we shall offer ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.
The Universal House of Justice
87
The Bahá’í Electoral Process
25 March 2007
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
87.1One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.
87.2The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Báb in the Persian Bayan, its foundational features prescribed by Bahá’u’lláh Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.
87.3Throughout the entire planet the devoted followers of Bahá’u’lláh are labouring to develop further the Bahá’í Administrative Order described by the Guardian “not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World

Order", thus setting the foundation for a world civilization destined to yield its dazzling splendour in the centuries to come. They do so notwithstanding the conditions of turmoil and disorder alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh in affirming that "the world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."

87.4With the concerted worldwide endeavour to advance the process of entry by troops gathering momentum through implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan, it is now opportune that the believers everywhere give greater attention to strengthening the process by which Assemblies, national and local, are elected. The manner of participation by all adult members of the community in these elections is a distinguishing feature of the System of Bahá'u'lláh; for it is a bounden duty that confers a high privilege upon every Bahá'í to select, as a responsible citizen of the new world being brought into existence, the composition of the institutions having authority over the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In this regard, indifference and neglect on the part of any believer are alien to the spirit of the Cause. The friends must strive ceaselessly to avoid being contaminated with these destructive attitudes, which have inflicted such damage on the integrity and authority of the institutions of a declining world order.

87.5In describing Bahá'í elections, Shoghi Effendi, through a letter written on his behalf, conveyed that "Bahá'í electoral procedures and methods have, indeed, for one of their essential purposes the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of maintaining his full freedom in the elections, they make it incumbent upon him to become an active and well-informed member of the Bahá'í community in which he lives."

87.6The manner in which the elector exercises the right and privilege to cast his vote is therefore of great significance. Shoghi Effendi's instruction in this passage further explains that "to be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá'í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station."

87.7While there should be no mention of personalities in connection with Bahá'í elections, it is quite appropriate for believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected. Shoghi Effendi offers clear guidance on this point: "I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get

thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals." Among the "necessary qualities" specified by the Guardian are those "of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience". With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.

87.8When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, "they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections."

87.9Through their wholehearted embrace of the Bahá'í electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

The Universal House of Justice

88

Ridván Message 2007

Ridván 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

88.1The first year of the Five Year Plan bears eloquent testimony to the spirit of devotion with which Bahá'u'lláh's followers have embraced the framework for action presented in our message of 27 December 2005 and their commitment to advancing the process of entry by troops. Where this framework has been applied coherently in all its dimensions in a cluster, steady progress is being achieved, both in terms of the participation of the believers and their friends in community life and in terms of numerical growth, with some clusters reporting enrolments in the hundreds every few months and others in scores. Vital to this development has been a heightened awareness of the spiritual nature of the enterprise, together with an increased understanding of those decision-making instruments that are defined by the principal features of the Plan.

88.2Prior to our launching the current series of global Plans focused on the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, the Bahá'í community had passed through a stage of rapid, large-scale expansion in many parts of the world—an expansion which ultimately was impossible to sustain. The challenge, then, lay not so much in swelling the ranks of the Cause with

new adherents, at least from populations of proven receptivity, but in incorporating them into the life of the community and raising up from among them adequate numbers dedicated to its further expansion. So crucial was it for the Bahá'í world to address this challenge that we made it a central feature of the Four Year Plan and called upon National Spiritual Assemblies to spend the greater part of their energies creating institutional capacity, in the form of the training institute, to develop human resources. Ever-increasing contingents of believers, we indicated, would need to benefit from a formal programme of training designed to endow them with the knowledge and spiritual insights, with the skills and abilities, required to carry out the acts of service that would sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation.

88.3Today as we observe the workings of those clusters which are in a robust state of growth, we note that in every one of them the friends have continued to strengthen the institute process, while learning to mobilize their expanding nucleus of active supporters of the Faith, to establish an efficient scheme for the coordination of their efforts, to weave their individual initiatives and collective endeavours into an effective pattern of unified action, and to draw on the analysis of pertinent information in planning the cycles of their activities. That they have found the means for carrying forward the work of expansion and consolidation hand in hand—the key to sustained growth—is demonstrable. Such evidence will surely inspire every devoted believer to remain resolute on the path of systematic learning that has been set.

88.4The accomplishments of these years of prodigious effort have not been confined to those clusters where the work of large-scale expansion and consolidation is being thus revitalized. The approach taken during the Four Year Plan, followed by the Twelve Month Plan and the previous Five Year Plan, proved instrumental in creating conditions for the believers to extend their endeavours to a wide circle of people, engaging them in various aspects of community life. The benefits of the decade-long process of capacity building in the three participants of the global Plans are now broadly apparent. Everywhere there was a need to gain an understanding of the dynamics of human resource development. Everywhere the friends had to learn the requirements of steady growth—to promote systematic action and to avoid distractions, to bring certain elements of collective decision-making close to the grassroots and to create communities with a sense of mission, to encourage universal participation and to accommodate different segments of society in their activities, particularly children and junior youth, the future champions of the Cause of God and builders of His civilization.

88.5With so firm a foundation in place, the foremost thought in the mind of each and every believer should be teaching. Whether in their personal efforts they teach their friends in firesides and then involve them in the core activities or use these activities as their primary instrument for teaching, whether as a community they make their work with children and junior youth the initial thrust in a cluster or focus first on the older generations, whether in their collective endeavours they visit families in teams as part of an intensive campaign or call on seekers in their homes periodically over time—these are decisions that can only be made according to the circumstances

and possibilities of the friends and the nature of the populations with whom they interact. What all must acknowledge, irrespective of circumstance, are both the crying need of a humanity that, bereft of spiritual sustenance, is sinking deeper into despair and the urgency of the responsibility to teach with which we each have been entrusted as members of the community of the Greatest Name.

88.6Bahá'u'lláh has commanded His followers to teach the Cause. Already thousands upon thousands are energetically applying the provisions of the Plan to open up avenues for them to guide souls to the Ocean of His Revelation. We look with expectant eyes to the day when teaching is the dominating passion in the life of every believer and when the unity of the community is so strong as to enable this state of enkindlement to express itself in unremitting action in the field of service. This, then, is our ardent hope for you and the object of our most fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

89

Passing of His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II

13 May 2007

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

89.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to provide you with a copy of the following message it sent today to the National Spiritual Assembly of Samoa.

We share deeply in the sorrow of your bereaved nation at the passing of His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II and extend to all its citizens our heartfelt condolences. His service to the people of Samoa as Head of State was distinguished by the high principles, genuine compassion and personal humility that characterized the constancy of his concern for the welfare of all. As the first reigning sovereign to accept the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, he set a record that will forever illumine the annals of our Faith, one that future generations will increasingly extol. His great interest for well-nigh four decades in the Faith's progress was reflected in the enthusiastic affirmation of his belief whenever the opportunity presented itself and in the abiding joy with which he regarded the construction in 1984 of the Mother Temple of the Pacific Islands in Samoa, in the dedication of which he participated.

You are asked to hold a commemorative service in his name in your Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and memorial gatherings throughout Samoa. Kindly convey to the members of his family our wholehearted sympathy and the assurance of our prayers in the Holy Shrines for the progress of his radiant soul in the worlds beyond.

89.2National Spiritual Assemblies of countries in which a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is located are asked to hold there a commemorative service in honour of His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

90

Release of a Compilation on Huqúqu'lláh

28 June 2007
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
90.1We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to send you the enclosed copy of a new compilation entitled "Huqúqu'lláh—The Right of God" prepared recently at its request by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre. This is a revision of the compilation sent with a cover letter dated 4 July 1985; it reflects the significant developments that have occurred since that time.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

91
Passing of Javidukht Khadem
2 July 2007
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States
91.1We deeply sympathize in the great loss to your community of dearly loved Javidukht Khadem. This stalwart, ever-buoyant handmaiden of Bahá'u'lláh, so gifted with a winning personality and a generosity of spirit, drew on an irrepressible energy that sustained her manifold efforts in service to the Cause of God—as mother of five children, as Auxiliary Board member for thirty-six years, as author of a biography of her esteemed husband—but especially that charged her indomitable passion for teaching, which extended through some four decades of regular firesides in her home. Kindly convey our heartfelt condolences to the members of her dear family, and be assured of our ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines that her soul may attain to ineffable joy in the Abhá Kingdom.
The Universal House of Justice

92
Message to the National Bahá'í Youth Conference in Islamabad
27 July 2007
The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Pakistan
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
92.1Kindly extend our joyful greetings to all those gathered at the National Bahá'í Youth Conference taking place in Islamabad this weekend. As these precious youth consider over the coming days their experiences and aspirations, we hope that they will keep at the forefront of their deliberations the pressing requirements of the Five Year Plan, as its realization will depend, in no small measure, on their wholehearted and sacrificial participation. May the proceedings of this conference fan the flame of faith in each of their hearts, revitalizing their commitment to ensuring that the advancement in the process of entry by troops called for by the Plan is achieved in Pakistan. As they march valiantly into the field as individuals, as members of local communities, and as the vanguard of an entire generation in your country, they may rest assured of our loving prayers in support of their present and future services to the Cause of God.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice

93
Confidential Communication Expelling Bahá'í Students in Iran
24 August 2007
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

93.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the enclosed copy of a confidential communication, together with its provisional translation, issued by the director general of the Central Security Office in Iran some time in 2006 and instructing eighty-one Iranian universities to expel any student who is discovered to be a Bahá'í, whether at the time of enrolment or in the course of his or her studies.

93.2The instructions contained in the above-mentioned letter are promulgated under the provision of "decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]". This, of course, refers to the secret memorandum from Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, approved by the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the then President of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, calling specifically for Iran's Bahá'ís to be treated "in such a way that their progress and development are blocked"; its provisions include the expulsion of all Bahá'ís from universities.

93.3You may recall that when Iranian diplomats were confronted by other governments, the press, or national Bahá'í communities immediately following the press release issued in late March 2006 by Ms. Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, about the government's call for the Bahá'ís in Iran to be secretly monitored, they not only denied absolutely that Bahá'ís are subject to persecution in Iran but also stated explicitly as an example of the freedoms enjoyed by members of the Bahá'í Faith that they are not prevented from pursuing higher education. As an illustrative example, the Right Honourable Clare Short, Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, shared with the Bahá'í community of Birmingham a letter she had received from the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, dated 8 June 2006, in which it is stated that Iranian Bahá'ís "are entitled to equal rights" and, further, "In Iran no individual is excluded from higher education solely because of his/her ideology".

93.4The official line taken by Iranian government representatives was echoed loudly again just a few months ago, in March 2007, when a Reuters news agency dispatch cited a spokesman for Iran's mission to the United Nations as having denounced as "baseless" the concerns voiced publicly by the Bahá'í International Community over the expulsion of Bahá'í university students on the sole grounds of their religious belief, saying, "No one in Iran because of their religion has been expelled from studying".

93.5While the 2006 directives from the Central Security Office in and of itself exposes the Iranian government's blatant disregard for the truth when confronted about its persecution of the Bahá'ís, enclosed are copies of other documents, together with their provisional translations, which likewise lay bare the authorities' iniquitous treatment of Bahá'í students: a letter dated 17 March 2007 from the security office at Payame Noor University, Province of Sistan and Baluchistan, to the president of this University,

pointing out that Bahá'í students are not to be enrolled in that institution and that the names of any Bahá'í applicants are to be forwarded to the Central Security Office; two documents (with identifiers removed to protect the safety of the student concerned) related to the expulsion of a Bahá'í student from the University of Gilan stating explicitly that this expulsion is effected under "decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [25 February 1991], sanctioned by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council".

93.6A letter from the Office of Public Information to National Spiritual Assemblies dated 19 July 2007 conveyed the distressing news of the disqualification of Bahá'ís from entrance to Iranian technical and vocational institutes for the coming academic year and consequently called for an intensification in the ongoing efforts to draw attention to the plight of Bahá'í university students. Although there was no change in the application form for entrance to other Iranian institutions of higher education, and Bahá'í students were therefore able to sit for the entrance examination held at the end of June this year, as they had last year, preliminary information received from Iran indicates that of over one thousand Bahá'ís who took the June 2007 examination, only 237 were informed that their marks were satisfactory, and they could therefore choose their majors and select the universities of their choice. Over seven hundred Bahá'í students were told that their examinations would not be graded because their files were allegedly incomplete. However, this was not raised with them beforehand, and they did sit for the examinations, whereas it would be assumed that any student whose file was incomplete would not have been permitted to take the examination.

93.7While the final outcome of the current entrance examination process is not yet known, considering the foregoing developments and the fact that 130 of the Bahá'í students—about half of those admitted last year—have been expelled before completing their first year of studies, observers might well conclude that there never was any real intention to admit Bahá'ís to university, and the enrolment of those Bahá'í students who were admitted during this current academic year was nothing more than a political tactic intended to quell international protest as well as a tool used to waste the time and energy of the Bahá'í youth and to cause them emotional and financial distress. The letter of the Central Security Office effectively seals the fates of the Bahá'ís who were able to enrol for the 2006–2007 academic year and has cruelly eroded any remaining hopes among the Bahá'í youth that, after decades of being barred from higher education, the doors of the universities in their homeland might now be open to them….

Department of the Secretariat

94

Bahá'í Students Deprived of Higher Education in Iran

9 September 2007

To the Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

94.1In these difficult days laden with tribulation, we are with you in spirit, our hearts heavy at the injustice that continues to rain upon you. The persistent position of the Iranian authorities in banning Bahá'í students

from access to higher education is deeply saddening. The policy was clearly confirmed in a recently disclosed communication by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, confidentially conveyed to the officials of eighty-one universities in Iran, which called for the expulsion of any student discovered to be a Bahá'í. It has now been reaffirmed by the action taken recently by the Education Evaluation Organization, which declared as "incomplete"—and therefore invalid—the applications of some 800 Bahá'ís who took the national exam for university entrance for the coming academic year (2007–2008). These official acts are disappointing and shameful.

94.2Only a few months ago, reports carried by newspapers about the expulsion of Bahá'í students in Iran were denied by a spokesperson for Iran's mission to the United Nations, who said outright that no one in Iran is expelled from university because of religion. That same assurance was given by the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the United Kingdom, in a written response to the concern a British Member of Parliament had expressed about the government's treatment of Bahá'í students. A similar avowal by the Iranian embassy in Ethiopia appeared in a newspaper in that country following the publication of a story reporting Iran's covert plan to identify Bahá'ís and secretly monitor their activities throughout the country.

94.3For more than two decades Bahá'í students in Iran were unable to enter university because the only way open to them would have been to misrepresent their Faith. Then, consequent to a concerted worldwide effort—involving governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and individuals—that raised questions about this situation, your government's representatives responded by averring that the reference to religion on the forms was not to identify university applicants by belief but only to specify the religion on which they wished to be examined.

94.4That you would have received such explanations with a degree of scepticism is understandable. However, as a gesture of good will and to find a solution to an issue that adversely affects the good name of Iran, the Bahá'í community accepted this apparent clarification. At long last, you were able to feel hopeful that the way would now be clear for you to continue your education. Thus, some of you sat for the 2006–2007 entrance examination and were able to register at university. Your hopes were, however, short-lived, as over the course of this academic year more than half of those who had been enrolled were expelled, and we now have the Ministry's letter which confirms that for no other reason than your adherence to the Bahá'í Faith you will not be permitted to continue your education at institutions of higher learning in your country.

94.5Recent events call to mind heart-rending episodes in the history of the Faith, of cruel deceptions wrought against your forebears. It is only appropriate that you strive to transcend the opposition against you with that same constructive resilience that characterized their response to the duplicity of their detractors. Peering beyond the distress of the difficulties assailing them, those heroic souls attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development. This, too, is your work.

Their objective was to build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves; and thus, they set up schools, equally educating girls and boys; introduced progressive principles; promoted the sciences; contributed significantly to diverse fields such as agriculture, health, and industry—all of which accrued to the benefit of the nation. You, too, seek to render service to your homeland and to contribute to a renewal of civilization. They responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all. You, too, demonstrate such noble qualities and, holding fast to these same principles, you belie the slander purveyed against your Faith, evoking the admiration of the fair-minded.

94.6This action of the government in obstructing youth, Bahá'í or otherwise, from access to higher education stands in contrast to the noble history of Iran's past attainments. How is it to be explained to the people of the world, especially the youth, when such doings can be perpetrated in a nation that claims adherence to Islamic principles? What then of the value of education as upheld in past centuries by these principles, which stimulated the establishment of renowned centres of learning and produced in your nation brilliant minds that, in advancing knowledge, made enduring contributions to the arts and sciences? What must be the repercussions for the nation when thoughtful people and eminent institutions abroad, in utter dismay, find it inconceivable that a Ministry charged with promoting learning would issue such directives as would deny citizens of its own country access to education? What can possibly be said by the officials responsible as to the moral grounds for such decisions? Can it reasonably be assumed that they have any regard for international commitments Iran has made to justice and fair-mindedness or, indeed, bear any awareness of the fear of God?

94.7The sufferings you bear, the sacrifices you ceaselessly make, however grievous the circumstances, are only a part of the horrors agonizing millions upon millions in Iran and throughout the world in these times of global ferment. Such acknowledgement does not diminish in the least your adversity, but it is essential that you grasp its context. Bahá'u'lláh remarked often on the dire state of the world. "The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing," He wrote. "The world is in great turmoil and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion."

94.8In response to their agonies, some feel impelled to rise against their oppressors, some can only flee for refuge, some capitulate to their fate. But while most of the afflicted peoples of the world are often the victims of random forces of oppression, prejudice, or injustice, you know clearly why you suffer, and your response must be equally clear. Consider some of the exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men." "Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way." "If others … poison your lives, sweeten their souls …" "Should any one of you enter a city, he should

become a centre of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world….” “Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged.” “Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him.” “… undertake in all sincerity and purity of intent and for the sake of God alone, to counsel and exhort the masses and clarify their vision with that collyrium which is knowledge.”

94.9Did Bahá’u’lláh Himself not endure hardship to promulgate His Teachings? Did He not consent “to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage”?

94.10With an illumined conscience, with a world-embracing vision, with no partisan political agenda, and with due regard for law and order, strive for the regeneration of your country. By your deeds and services, attract the hearts of those around you, even win the esteem of your avowed enemies, so that you may vindicate the innocence of, and gain ever-increasing respect and acceptance for, your community in the land of its birth. Think not that these are mere words meant to soothe your disappointed hearts. Think rather of the situation which has developed as a result of the disciplined reaction to the torment borne by Iranian Bahá’ís since 1979. Has the manner of their response to oppression thus far not elicited the warm admiration of increasing numbers of their compatriots? To defend yourselves is, of course, only fair, and every principled means is being taken to defend you against oppression. Is there not an active defense mounted on your behalf by governments and non-governmental organizations, at national and international levels, and well-respected institutions of higher learning everywhere? Obviously, you are not alone. But your perseverance must be accompanied by patience; indeed, the patience required in the usually slow processes of social evolution is painful.

94.11Opposition to a newly revealed truth is a common matter of human history; it repeats itself in every age. But of equal historical consistency is the fact that nothing can prevail against an idea whose time has come. The time has arrived for freedom of belief, for harmony between science and religion, faith and reason, for the advancement of women, for freedom from prejudice of every kind, for mutual respect between diverse peoples and nations, indeed, for the unity of the entire human race. The deepest yearnings of the Iranian people resonate with implications of the world-revolutionizing principles enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh.

94.12Service to others is the way. Let it be your watchword, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá being your exemplar. Like Him, you can find practical ways of serving your fellow citizens. Strive to work hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, with your fellow citizens in your efforts to promote the common good.

94.13This surely is a time for the gallantry of illumined souls. Very dear friends, we pray that you can be counted among this noble company.

The Universal House of Justice

95

Passing of the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. ‘Alí-Muhammad Varqá

23 September 2007

To the Bahá’ís of the World

95.1In the early hours of last night, revered, greatly admired, well-loved Hand of the Cause of God Dr. ‘Alí-Muhammad Varqá departed this earthly plane after a period of outstanding, consecrated service to the Blessed Beauty that spanned many decades.

95.2With grieving hearts we bid farewell to the last of that noble company, the Chief Stewards of Bahá’u’lláh’s embryonic World Commonwealth, into which he is now gathered in realms of deathless delight and joy. The fervor of his love for the teaching work inspired countless believers across the globe, whether at the events he attended as the representative of the Guardian or of the Universal House of Justice, or in his extensive travels to promote the goals of the Master’s Divine Plan. In such activities he contributed mightily to the progress of the Ten Year Crusade and subsequent global teaching plans. Until his final days, he was leonine in his determination to protect the Faith. He wore with marked distinction the mantle of Trustee of Huqúqu’lláh that fell to him from the shoulders of his illustrious father, impressing a record of imperishable achievement on the annals of the Formative Age—achievement which has set a pattern that secures important features for the operation into the future of that divinely ordained institution. Throughout the many years of his valiant endeavor to maintain the integrity of the two offices of so high a rank to which he was simultaneously elevated, his manner was imbued with a luminous gentleness, a genuine kindliness and a natural dignity which combined to reflect the character of a saintly personality. For these exemplary traits he will ever be remembered. Our heartfelt sympathy reaches out to the members of his dear family in their sad loss, which is shared by the entire Bahá’í community. With deeply held trust in the bounties of the Gracious Lord, we pray at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his resplendent soul throughout the divine worlds.

95.3We advise the friends in all lands to commemorate his passing and request befitting memorial services in his honor at all Houses of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

96

Safeguarding the Properties of the Faith

27 September 2007

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

96.1Over the years, the Universal House of Justice has encouraged National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world to make suitable provisions for the care of the properties of the Faith in the countries and territories under their jurisdiction. Some National Assemblies have been able to establish comprehensive programmes for the maintenance of these properties, while the degree to which other National Assemblies have been able to systematize this area of their responsibility varies widely. The House of Justice has, therefore, asked us to write to National Assemblies to recommend that they put in place, if they have not already done so, proper systems and procedures to safeguard these assets of the Faith and to remind them of some points they should bear in mind when addressing these matters.

96.2As a first step, each National Assembly should have on hand, or compile if necessary, a current list of the properties within its national jurisdiction which includes basic facts about each one, such as a short description, utilization, legal status, current value, maintenance costs, and so on. Ideally, this list would be supplemented, wherever possible, by photographs of the sites and buildings. Once compiled, this list should be reviewed regularly and updated as circumstances dictate. It is, of course, of paramount importance that the National Assembly make certain it has clear legal ownership of each property to the extent possible, that the title deeds and other documents proving ownership are in safe custody, and that copies are sent to the Bahá'í World Centre for further safe keeping.

96.3It is likewise essential that the properties are regularly inspected and cared for, that repairs are carried out promptly, and that payments of land taxes or rates are made in a timely fashion. Furthermore, the National Assembly should safeguard its rightful possession of a property against such dangers as encroachment by neighbours, unauthorized occupancy by squatters, or issues of possible government expropriation of the land, any of which could result in long and expensive legal proceedings to rectify.

96.4It is the hope of the House of Justice that, by following these steps, every National Assembly will ensure that the properties for which it has responsibility will be a source of pride and prestige to the entire community.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

97

Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice

13 November 2007

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

97.1We announce with deep regret that the Universal House of Justice has decided, in accordance with provisions of Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution, to give permission to Mr. Hartmut Grossmann and Mr. Glenford E. Mitchell, who have rendered highly valued services in the Holy Land since 1988 and 1982, respectively, to relinquish their membership on the House of Justice.

97.2They will continue to serve on the institution until the date of the completion of the election of the Universal House of Justice at the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention to be held at Ridván 2008.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

98

Tribute to the Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God

26 November 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

98.1We are moved on the occasion of this Day of the Covenant to reflect on the august Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God in the aftermath of the decease only two months ago of the last remaining Hand of the Cause, Dr. ʻAlí-Muhammad Varqá. It was just a few weeks before the fiftieth

anniversary of the passing of Shoghi Effendi that our world community suffered this grievous loss. How sobering, indeed, it is to realize that Dr. Varqá's departure brought to an end the remarkable stewardship of an institution whose legacy is unparalleled in religious history! At so significant a juncture in the Formative Age of the Faith, it is only fitting that an effort be made to understand more deeply than before the significance of the achievements of so outstanding an organ of the Administrative Order—one that proved to be so integral to the evolution of our world community during its nascent years.

98.2We trace the origins of the Institution to Bahá'u'lláh Himself, Who designated four renowned promoters of His teachings as Hands of the Cause of God. In a period before the administrative system of the Faith was inaugurated, they became rallying points for the friends, as much because of the virtuous character of their personal lives as for their unceasing endeavours in proclaiming the Teachings and defending the Faith against its detractors. They remained resolute in such activities despite the severe persecution, including imprisonment in some instances, to which they were subjected by the authorities. These distinguished personages remained active during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, in 1899, instructed them to take steps to form the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tihrán, on which they all served. The focus of these first Hands on propagation and protection of the Faith, as well as their efforts to edify believers as to the importance of the new Laws, intimated even then the pattern of functioning the Institution would adopt at a later stage in the advancement of the Bahá'í community.

98.3The Master did not Himself appoint Hands of the Cause, but referred to four believers posthumously as such. However, His Will and Testament confirmed the Institution and extended it by authorizing the Guardian of the Faith to appoint consecrated souls to it. At first, over a period of three decades, Shoghi Effendi named ten such souls posthumously; all were distinguished for the constancy, vigour and impact of their efforts to propagate the Cause and promote its best interests. The Guardian's designation in December 1951 of twelve living believers as Hands of the Cause introduced the Bahá'í world to a wholly new dynamic in the operation of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh; through it the Hands exerted an unusual vitality during the Ten Year Crusade, particularly after the sudden passing of the Sign of God. His subsequent appointment of seven more in February 1952 and replacement thereafter of five of those deceased kept the number of living Hands at nineteen until less than a month before his departure, when in his last message to the Bahá'í world he identified an additional eight, bringing the total to twenty-seven. Shoghi Effendi's description of them as the "Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth" prefigured the world-shaking reality of the unexpected responsibilities that would be thrust upon them on the morrow of his passing.

98.4The Guardian now forever gone, the Hands' first task, despite the sorrow that overwhelmed them, was to restore the composure of a grief-stricken community. A vital aspect of that task was, of course, to settle the minds of the friends about the direction that the Faith would take. The Hands acted with dispatch. Only sixteen days after the burial of the Guardian, they issued from

the Holy Land a proclamation to the Bahá'ís of East and West. Declaring that, after a thorough search, no will or instruction of Shoghi Effendi had been found, they set forth in this message the procedures they would follow in meeting the daunting challenge they faced. It announced that a body of nine Hands, designated "Custodians", was constituted to function at the Bahá'í World Centre to protect the Faith, maintain communications with National Spiritual Assemblies in connection with the prosecution of the Ten Year Plan and on administrative matters, and attend to all issues related to the preservation of the World Centre of the Faith. The friends everywhere derived from this first communication assurance that the ship of the Cause would safely traverse the waters severely troubled by the Guardian's passing. Subsequent messages issued from conclaves of the Hands held in the Holy Land further infused confidence in the believers who arose to meet the goals set before them in the Plan.

98.5The Hands residing outside the Holy Land, in addition to giving close attention to the progress of the Plan in their own regions, undertook extensive journeys to visit and encourage the believers in every clime. Their travels covered the entire surface of the planet as they pursued every opportunity to advance the work of the Plan left by Shoghi Effendi. The obligations of the Hands spelled out in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were carried out with the selflessness, fearlessness and zeal characteristic of their activity. To "diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men"—all these they undertook with outstanding, sometimes astonishing, results. Such travels did not cease with the conclusion of the Ten Year Plan but continued with unabated intensity, the legendary journeys of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum generating immeasurable stimulus. Thus the activities of the Hands demonstrated to a superlative degree the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that the "movement itself from place to place, when undertaken for the sake of God, hath always exerted, and can now exert, its influence in the world."

98.6Among the principal results of their combined labours, these stand out: maintenance of the stature of the Faith as an independent and indivisible Order; protection of the Cause against schism, despite the disloyalty to the Covenant of one among their exalted company, Mason Remey, whom they were obliged to cast out; preservation of the properties and maintenance of the Holy Places and gardens at the World Centre; success in the vast expansion of the Faith. All these hard-won accomplishments prepared the path to the smooth transition that the Hands effected from the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, as head of the Faith, to that of the Universal House of Justice, for whose first election they meticulously prepared the Bahá'í world, especially the fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies that participated in it. The Hands of the Cause delivered to the House of Justice a community that was so greatly transformed during the Ten Year Plan as to place the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh on the map as a world religion in every legitimate sense. The grand celebration at the World Congress in London attended by Bahá'ís from countries of every continent demonstrated the validity of that claim.

98.7Beyond the World Crusade, the Hands of the Cause threw the full weight of

their support behind the newly formed Universal House of Justice, whose creation their valiant efforts ensured. They undertook many missions on its behalf and pursued tasks befitting their continuing obligation to propagate and protect the Faith. As in the absence of the Guardian there was no way further to appoint Hands of the Cause, the Hands in the Holy Land in particular performed what may well be viewed as a distinct and final mark of service: they assisted the House of Justice to extend into the future the functions of propagation and protection in the special character of their institution.

Hence, in 1968 Continental Boards of Counsellors were raised up and then in 1973 was created the International Teaching Centre foreshadowed in the writings of Shoghi Effendi. In their tireless support of the House of Justice in the design of these institutions and in the guidance they lent to their development, the Hands left to the Bahá'í world a further legacy that only future generations will be able adequately to appreciate. A shining value of their ultimate exertions is evident in the stature to which the International Teaching Centre has risen in such a short time and the permeating influence of the institution of the Counsellors which reaches every nook and cranny of our worldwide community.

98.8It is highly worthy of note that the body of the Hands, with one exception, remained unbeguiled by the allurements of power that commonly corrupt those who are suddenly thrust by force of circumstances into positions of elevated rank and authority. In this instance, all of creation cannot but bear witness to the integrity of their stewardship, the unblemished virtue of their faithfulness to principle.

98.9A point to ponder as well is the survival to the last of the one who was simultaneously appointed in 1955 to the two offices of Hand of the Cause and Trustee of Huqúqu'lláh. That he was able to shape the latter institution and finally to see to its administrative transition in the formation in 2005 of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, with branches spread throughout the globe, is yet another sign of the constancy and abundance of the providential confirmations which have attended the evolution of the Administrative Order. Clearly, then, the work of the divinely ordained Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was indispensable to the progress of the Faith from the Heroic Age to an early period of the Formative Age; its effects are certain to endure as an integral part of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The passing of Dr. Varqá marks both the end of a chapter of Bahá'í history and the beginning of a new stage in the unfolding of that Order.

98.10With such thoughts astir in our minds, we recognize with increasing wonder and appreciation the magnitude of the contributions of the Hands of the Cause of God to the growth and consolidation of the Faith in all parts of the world. In our grateful hearts we recite with deep emotion the benediction so eloquently exclaimed by the Lord of Hosts: "Light and glory, greeting and praise be upon the Hands of His Cause, through whom the light of fortitude hath shone forth and the truth hath been established that the authority to choose rests with God, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained, through whom the ocean of bounty hath surged and the fragrance of the gracious favours of God,

the Lord of mankind, hath been diffused."
The Universal House of Justice
99
The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice
18 February 2008
The Friends in Iran
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
99.1We have received a letter from a believer in Iran with questions about the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. We appreciate that firmness in the Covenant is among the distinctive characteristics of the believers in that land, who are informed of the principles and essential facts pertaining to the succession of authority in the Cause. Nevertheless, none among them should hesitate to seek clarification of matters about which they have questions, for the enemies of the Faith are tireless in their attempts to sow seeds of confusion and doubt. Moreover, it is beneficial, in view of the beloved Master's exhortations to us all to be ever-vigilant concerning matters of protection, for the friends to review the relevant essentials from time to time. We have therefore decided to provide you with the following comments….
99.2Questions concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice can be resolved through careful study of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and the elucidations of the House of Justice, which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, will "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide," He assures the friends, "has the same effect as the Text itself."
99.3Prior to the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, the provisions He had put in place in His Will and Testament to safeguard the Faith and ensure its steady advancement into the future were generally unknown. The believers anticipated a day when the Universal House of Justice would be established since it had been specifically mentioned in the Sacred Texts. There was, however, no definite understanding that there would be a Guardian. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi later indicated that he had no foreknowledge of the position to which he would be called. At most, he had reportedly thought the Will and Testament might charge him, as the eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with responsibility for arranging for the election of the House of Justice. Only after the reading of the Will did the institution of the Guardianship become widely known, and the Bahá'í community worldwide acknowledged Shoghi Effendi as the Head of the Faith to whom all must turn.
99.4An attentive reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will makes it clear that He did not indicate a predestined outcome but did provide for a number of circumstances which, depending on future conditions, might eventually confront the Faith. The second section of the Will, for instance, which refers only to the Universal House of Justice, with no mention of the Guardianship, was written at a time when His own life was in imminent danger and Shoghi Effendi was but a small boy. During that same period, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had made arrangements for the election of the Universal House of Justice to take place immediately, should the threat on His life materialize. Through the grace of

God, the crisis passed, and it was ultimately left to Shoghi Effendi many years later, as Guardian and Head of the Faith, to determine the timing of the formation of the House of Justice. Early on he considered the possibility of holding the election soon after the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in which case the House of Justice and the Guardian would have functioned simultaneously. He determined, of course, that the foundations of the Administrative Order needed first to be firmly laid at the local and national levels, and it eventually transpired that the House of Justice was established several years after his own passing. That the transition from the ministry of the Guardian to the election of the Universal House of Justice occurred with such relative ease can, itself, be attributed to the way certain provisions in the Will were formulated.

99.5‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament clearly allows for the possibility of a successor to Shoghi Effendi, and in this light, we find statements written by him or on his behalf over the course of his thirty-six-year ministry that envision future Guardians. However, there are no assurances in the Writings that the line of Guardians would continue throughout the Dispensation; rather, the possibility is envisaged that such a line would come to an end. In this respect, Bahá’u’lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

Endowments dedicated to charity revert to God, the Revealer of Signs. None hath the right to dispose of them without leave from Him Who is the Dawning-place of Revelation. After Him, this authority shall pass to the Aghsán, and after them to the House of Justice—should it be established in the world by then—that they may use these endowments for the benefit of the Places which have been exalted in this Cause, and for whatsoever hath been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the God of might and power. Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet—lo, they are the champions of victory betwixt heaven and earth—that they may use them in the manner that hath been laid down in the Book by God, the Mighty, the Bountiful.

The passing of Shoghi Effendi precipitated the situation described, in which the authority vested in the Aghsán—first in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and then in Shoghi Effendi—ended before the House of Justice was established.

99.6In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifies in the clearest terms the conditions according to which Shoghi Effendi was to have named his successor as Guardian:

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the words:—“The child is the secret essence of its sire,” that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the guardian of the Cause of God) choose

another branch to succeed him.

The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the guardian of the Cause of God. The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given in such wise as the assenting and dissenting voices may not be distinguished (i.e., secret ballot).

99.7The personal views of any individual regarding the above statement, no matter how learned, cannot compare with the Guardian's infallible understanding of the passage. Shoghi Effendi, who faithfully adhered to the wishes of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá throughout his ministry, would never have been careless in a matter so essential to the integrity of the Faith as the question of the appointment of his successor. It is unthinkable that he would appoint someone to succeed him who did not possess the qualifications laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. It is equally untenable to suggest that he would do so in a manner which deviated from the explicit requirements in that same document, which included the affirmation of his choice by nine designated Hands of the Cause of God, so that "differences" would "not arise after his passing." How perverse the suggestion of the violators of the Covenant that Shoghi Effendi would ignore the Master's instructions and make a veiled and indirect appointment of his successor! Rather should the fact that Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor be seen as a sign of his meticulous adherence to every word of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and an indication of his conclusion that there was no qualified individual whom he could appoint.

99.8Therefore, it should be clear to every steadfast follower of Bahá'u'lláh that the end of the line of Guardians was not the result of any decision or action taken by the Hands of the Cause of God following the sudden passing of Shoghi Effendi. The line was brought to a close when, compelled by existing circumstances and the strict provisions of the Will, Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor. To entertain the possibility that it may one day be re-established is futile. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that "ere the expiration of a thousand years, no one has the right to utter a single word, even to claim the station of Guardianship." And in the same passage He exhorted the friends, "Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems." The Universal House of Justice, soon after its formation, stated that it "finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi."

99.9While the line of Guardians has ended, the Covenant is preserved. The vast body of interpretations of Shoghi Effendi informs the decisions of the Universal House of Justice as the Faith continues its onward march. The unity of the Faith is safeguarded, and the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's great purpose for humanity assured. "The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation," Bahá'u'lláh

has stated. “Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men’s fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure.”

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99.10With reference to the specific questions raised in the letter we have received, one concerns the meaning of the designation “Aghsán”, as found in the Writings. While in some cases, as affirmed by the Guardian, the term applies specifically to Bahá’u’lláh’s sons, at other times it is used more broadly to include His male descendants. For example, in His Will and Testament ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to Shoghi Effendi as “the chosen branch” (Ghusn-i-Mumtáz). The reference to Shoghi Effendi as Ghusn here—the singular form of Aghsán—follows the usage of Bahá’u’lláh in relation to the titles He gave His sons, that is, the Most Great Branch, the Greater Branch, and the Purest Branch. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains that the word Aghsán “refers to Bahá’u’lláh’s descendants”; another describes Hussein Rabbani, the Guardian’s brother, as “the grandchild of the Master, an Afnán and Aghsán mentioned in the Will and Testament of the Master.” It is evident, then, that the designation Aghsán, or Ghusn, includes Shoghi Effendi and the other male descendants of Bahá’u’lláh.

99.11If, at any time, male descendants of Bahá’u’lláh appear who are faithful to the Covenant, it would nevertheless not be possible for any of them to occupy the office of Guardian, for, as already explained, in the absence of appointment by Shoghi Effendi, they cannot claim the station of Guardianship and there is no way for one to be named to it by an act of the House of Justice.

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99.12Another query concerns the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Specifically, the question has been asked whether the functioning of an “officially recognized” International Bahá’í Court in the Holy Land, mentioned by Shoghi Effendi, was an essential preliminary step in the evolution of the Universal House of Justice.

99.13As you are no doubt aware, Shoghi Effendi explained that “‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Himself, in one of His earliest Tablets, contemplated the possibility of the formation of the Universal House of Justice in His own lifetime.” The Master described the requirements necessary for its formation, which did not include the establishment of a religious court:

> The Supreme House of Justice should be elected according to the system followed in the election of the parliaments of Europe. And when the countries would be guided the Houses of Justice of the various countries would elect the Supreme House of Justice.
>
> At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.
>
> The establishment of that House is not dependent upon the conversion of all the nations of the world. For example, if conditions were favourable and no disturbances would be caused, the friends in Persia would elect their

representatives, and likewise the friends in America, in India, and other areas would also elect their representatives, and these would elect a House of Justice. That House of Justice would be the Supreme House of Justice. That is all.

99.14Over the thirty-six years of his ministry, as he guided the Bahá'í world, striving to lay the foundations of the Administrative Order, Shoghi Effendi outlined specific developmental steps to be taken, which were intended to lead to the eventual establishment of the Universal House of Justice. The accomplishment of some depended largely on the exertions of the believers themselves—an increase in the number of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, the appointment of the International Bahá'í Council and its evolution into an elected body. Others, however, were subject to the forces operating in society and, no matter what the efforts made by the Bahá'í community, could not be accomplished.

99.15In 1929, for instance, the Guardian stated, "given favorable circumstances, under which the Bahá'ís of Persia and of the adjoining countries under Soviet rule may be enabled to elect their national representatives … the only remaining obstacle in the way of the definite formation of the International House of Justice will have been removed." Later, following the expulsion of Bahá'ís from Russia by the authorities, a letter written on his behalf explained, "At the time he referred to Russia there were Bahá'ís there, now the Community has practically ceased to exist; therefore the formation of the International House of Justice cannot depend on a Russian National Spiritual Assembly."

99.16In the same way, goals were specified by Shoghi Effendi for the establishment of Bahá'í courts, including national courts in certain countries in Asia and, as a step in the development of the International Bahá'í Council, the precursor to the Universal House of Justice, a court in the Holy Land. Recognition by the Egyptian government of the National Spiritual Assembly as an independent Bahá'í court was sought as far back as 1929. Over time, changing conditions rendered the formation of such religious courts impossible. As the Hands of the Cause of God commented in 1959 in calling for the election of the International Bahá'í Council and the eventual establishment of the House of Justice,

> We wish to assure the believers that every effort will be made to establish a Bahá'í Court in the Holy Land prior to the date set for this election. We should however bear in mind that the Guardian himself clearly indicated this goal, due to the strong trend towards the secularization of Religious Courts in this part of the world, might not be achieved.

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99.17Yet another question that has been raised concerns the discharge by the Universal House of Justice of certain functions previously performed by the Guardian. With regard to Huqúqu'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that "Disposition of the Huqúq, wholly or partly, is permissible, but this should be done by permission of the authority in the Cause to whom all must turn." Likewise, the expulsion of Covenant-breakers is an obligation exercised by the Head of the Faith in the context of the duty to protect the

Cause from those who would seek to undermine its unity. Shoghi Effendi, it is well known, was obliged to expel Covenant-breakers from the Faith at different points throughout his ministry, both before and after the appointment of the Hands of the Cause of God. This responsibility now falls on the Universal House of Justice, as the centre of authority to whom all must turn. The current procedures followed in this respect are outlined in the statement "The Institution of the Counsellors".

99.18In this connection it should be noted that after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, although overwhelmed with grief, the Bahá'í world maintained its unity during the tenuous period between his ministry and the election of the Universal House of Justice. The sole challenge to its integrity appeared some two years after his death when Charles Mason Remey, who was at that time one of the Hands of the Cause, laid claim to the Guardianship. As you are aware, Remey asserted that his appointment in 1951 as president of the nascent International Bahá'í Council meant that he should automatically assume the position of head of the Universal House of Justice and was, therefore, the second Guardian.

99.19The absurdity of Remey's claim is obvious and requires little elaboration. In 1957, he was among the Hands of the Cause who gathered in the Holy Land to consider what course of action should be taken following the unexpected passing of the Guardian. He personally affirmed that Shoghi Effendi had appointed no successor, signing a document issued unanimously by the Hands to this effect. As signatory to yet another such document, he agreed that the entire body of the Hands of the Cause would determine when and how the evolution of the International Bahá'í Council would culminate in the election of the House of Justice. For two years, as one of the nine Hands designated to serve in the Holy Land, he participated in the consultations that guided the development of the Bahá'í community. Then, without notice or discussion with his fellow Hands, he claimed the station of Guardianship, lacking explicit appointment by Shoghi Effendi as specified in the Will and Testament and in direct violation of the command of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that no one could make such a claim. Exercising the authority conferred on them in accordance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, the Hands of the Cause expelled him from the Faith as a Covenant-breaker.

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99.20In matters related to the Covenant, the friends must be firm and steadfast; they should be wary, lest the arguments put forward by those who sow seeds of doubt become the cause for confusion or lead to disputation and disunity. Should questions arise that cannot be resolved, they should be placed immediately before the Universal House of Justice. The friends must be especially careful to avoid being enticed by the whisperings of the remnants of the Covenant-breakers and their supporters, who seek to shake the believers' faith. Whereas in the past the violators of the Covenant sought to undermine the authority of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, today they challenge the Universal House of Justice. Of particular concern are those who, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns, "assert their firmness and steadfastness in the Covenant but when they come across responsive ears they secretly sow the seeds of suspicion."

99.21Remey's small band of associates, bedevilled by half a century of infighting among competing factions, have had negligible effect on the progress of the Faith. The flurry caused by their actions does nothing more than shake a few lifeless twigs and leaves from the tree of the Cause. Those who are naïve, those who are not deepened in the Teachings or not firm in the Covenant, those who are controlled by their egos and lust for leadership can be misled and fall away. The friends are urged to protect themselves and their community by adhering strictly to the emphatic exhortations repeated throughout the Sacred Texts. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England….

And now, one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past. O friends! It behooveth you to call to mind with tenderness the trials of His Holiness, the Exalted One, and show your fidelity to the Ever-Blest Beauty. The utmost endeavour must be exerted lest all these woes, trials and afflictions, all this pure and sacred blood that hath been shed so profusely in the Path of God, may prove to be in vain….

O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive with all your heart to shield the Cause of God from the onslaught of the insincere, for souls such as these cause the straight to become crooked and all benevolent efforts to produce contrary results.

99.22The believers in the Cradle of the Faith, who have withstood for more than a century the onslaught of government and clergy, who triumphed over the perils posed by the rebellions of Azal and Muhammad-'Alí, who severed themselves from those who opposed Shoghi Effendi, will easily discount the spurious and ridiculous arguments of those few individuals who vie among themselves to exploit Remey's deviation as a pretext for attracting a handful of personal followers. Be assured of our supplications at the Holy Threshold on behalf of the beloved friends everywhere in that sacred land.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

100

Revision of the Codification of the Law of Huqúqu'lláh

18 February 2008

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

100.1On 28 June 2007 you were sent a copy of the new compilation entitled "Huqúqu'lláh—The Right of God" prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre. At the request of the Universal House of

Justice the Codification, prepared for an earlier version of the compilation, has recently been revised to incorporate new guidance contained in the 2007 compilation.

100.2We enclose a copy of the new revision of the Codification for circulation to the friends to further assist in deepening their understanding of the law of Huqúqu'lláh.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

A CODIFICATION OF THE LAW OF HUQÚQU'LLÁH

Prepared by the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre in 1987, and revised in 2007, at the request of the Universal House of Justice

Preamble

100.3Huqúqu'lláh (The Right of God) is a great law (13) and a sacred institution. Laid down in The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book, it is one of the key instruments for constructing the foundation and supporting the structure of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It has far-reaching ramifications that extend from promoting the welfare of the individual to buttressing the authority and extending the activity of the Head of the Faith. In providing a regular and systematic source of revenue for the Central Institution of the Cause, Bahá'u'lláh has assured the means for the independence and decisive functioning of the World Centre of His Faith.

100.4By identifying this law as "The Right of God", Bahá'u'lláh has re-emphasized the nature of the relationship between human beings and their Creator as a Covenant based on mutual assurances and obligations; and, by designating the Central Authority in the Cause, to which all must turn, as the recipient of this Right, He has created a direct and vital link between every individual believer and the Head of His Faith that is unique in the structure of His World Order. This law enables the friends to recognize the elevation of their economic activity to the level of divine acceptability; it is a means for the purification of their wealth and a magnet attracting divine blessings. The computation and the payment of Huqúqu'lláh, within the general guidelines set forth, are exclusively a matter of conscience between the individual and God (56, 82); demanding or soliciting the Huqúqu'lláh is prohibited (56, 82, 83, 93, 106)—only appeals, reminders and exhortations of a general nature, under the auspices of the institutions of the Faith, are permissible (94, 96, 97, 100). That the observance and enforcement of this law, so crucial to the material well-being of the emerging Bahá'í commonwealth (29), should thus have been left entirely to the faith and conscience of the individual gives substance to, and sheds light on, what the beloved Master calls the spiritual solution to economic problems. Indeed, the implications of the law of Huqúqu'lláh for the realization of a number of the principles of the Faith, such as the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and a more equitable distribution of resources, will increasingly become manifest as the friends assume in ever greater measure the responsibility for observing it.

100.5The fundamentals of the law of Huqúqu'lláh are promulgated in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Further elaborations of its features are to be found in other

Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, in Tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and in letters from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, mostly in response to questions raised by the friends. All these major references have been compiled by the Research Department of the House of Justice and separately published. A study of that compilation makes it clear that the application of the law has been progressive, and will continue to be so, as its ramifications and subsidiary rulings are elucidated.

100.6The following is a preliminary attempt at codifying the information in the Writings on the subject of Huqúqu'lláh. It should be emphasized, however, that the friends should not attempt to read into it an element of rigidity or total comprehensiveness. The questions put to Bahá'u'lláh, the Master and Shoghi Effendi were from friends residing in places and times with infinitely simpler economic systems and relationships than those which obtain today. What can be learned from them are clear guiding principles whose application to changing and more complex conditions must be considered. The subject will undoubtedly occupy the House of Justice in evolving legislation, as necessary, for a long time to come. As the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of our Faith unfolds before the eyes of an increasingly watchful humanity, the universal assumption of the obligation of Huqúqu'lláh by the friends serves as a clear illustration of a new level of spiritual maturity being attained by the community of the Greatest Name throughout the world.

A Bounty Granted by God

100.7God, while being wholly independent of all created things, has in His bounty given us this law (3, 13, 22), for the progress and promotion of the Cause depend on material means (4, 29). Obedience to this law enables the believer to be firm and steadfast in the Covenant (22), provides a reward in every world of the worlds of God (13) and is a unique test of true faith (24).

100.8The Huqúqu'lláh is to be offered joyfully and without hesitation (6, 8, 83). When the Huqúqu'lláh is offered in this spirit it will impart prosperity and protection to the friends, purify their worldly possessions (2, 9, 17, 31, 54, 88) and enable them and their offspring to benefit from the fruits of their endeavours (17).

Determining the Amount of Huqúqu'lláh

100.9Everything that a believer possesses, with the exception of certain specific items, is subject once and only once to the payment of Huqúqu'lláh.

Exempt from assessment to Huqúqu'lláh are:

1.The residence and its needful furnishings (36)

2.The needful business and agricultural equipment which produce income for one's subsistence (42, 46, 47)

Conditions under which payment falls due:

1.Huqúqu'lláh is payable as soon as a person's assessable possessions reach or exceed the value of 19 mithqáls of gold (43). [19 mithqáls equal approximately 2.2 troy ounces or approximately 69.2 grams (52).]

The amount to be paid is 19% of the value of the assessable property (3, 34).

The payment is calculated on whole units of 19 mithqáls of gold (41).

2.Huqúqu'lláh is payable on further units of 19 mithqáls of gold when

subsequently acquired possessions, after the deduction of the annual expenses, raise the value of the assessable property sufficiently. Among the expenses to be deducted are:

a)The general expenses of living (45, 48, 49)

b)Losses and expenses incurred on the sale of possessions (55, 78)

Sums which are paid to the state, such as taxes and duties (49)

3.When a person receives a gift or bequest it is to be added to his or her possessions and augments the total value in the same way as does an excess of annual income over expenditure (60, 74).

4.If a property increases in value, Huqúqu'lláh is not payable on that increase until it is realized, e.g., on the sale of the property (67).

5.If possessions decrease, such as through the expenses of a year exceeding the income received, Huqúqu'lláh falls due again only after the loss has been made good and the total value of one's assessable possessions is augmented (37, 38, 41, 43, 45–47, 49, 60, 72).

6.The payment of debts takes precedence over the payment of Huqúqu'lláh (35, 68, 71).

7.The payment of Huqúqu'lláh is dependent on the person's financial ability to meet his obligations (33).

8.On the death of a believer, the completion of his or her payment of Huqúqu'lláh is accomplished in the following manner:

a)The first charge on the estate is the expense of burial (35).

b)Secondly, the debts of the deceased must be paid (40).

c)The Huqúqu'lláh still payable on the property should then be paid.

In establishing the value of the property on which Huqúqu'lláh has not already been paid, the following are among the deductions to be made: expenses of burial (35), debts of the deceased (40), loss of value of the assets when realized (55) and expenses incurred in realizing the assets (55). The principal residence as well as items such as necessary furnishings and tools of trade remain exempt (79).

Further notes on determining Huqúqu'lláh:

1.Each believer should learn not only how to calculate Huqúqu'lláh during the course of his or her life but also how to provide for the payment of the balance remaining at the date of death (65, 68).

2.Although the law provides a certain leeway in the timing of the payment of Huqúqu'lláh, it should preferably be paid by a believer during the course of his or her life whenever it falls due (73); in this case the only payment to Huqúqu'lláh which should be provided for by the will is such additional liability as may be found to exist when the believer's financial affairs are determined at the date of death (65).

3.One believer cannot discharge the obligation of another to pay Huqúqu'lláh nor can a payment to Huqúqu'lláh be earmarked for any purpose or be made in honour of anyone (64, 80).

4.The law of Huqúqu'lláh imposes an obligation only on individual believers, not on Bahá'í institutions or corporate bodies (76).

5.It is left to the individual to decide which expenses are to be regarded as "necessary" and therefore deductible in computing the annual accretion to

savings and which furnishings of the household are to be regarded as "needful" and therefore exempt from the payment of Huqúqu'lláh (19, 45, 46, 48–50, 56–58, 61, 70).

6.Although references are made to annual payments of Huqúqu'lláh, the time and method of payment are left to the discretion of the individual believer (69, 72, 78). There is, therefore, no obligation to liquidate one's assets in haste in order to fulfil one's current obligations to Huqúqu'lláh (55).

7.Husband and wife are free to decide whether they want to honour their Huqúqu'lláh obligations jointly or individually (59, 71, 74).

8.The account of Huqúqu'lláh should be kept separate from other contributions inasmuch as the disposition of the funds of the Huqúqu'lláh is subject to decision by the Central Authority in the Cause to which all must turn, whereas the purposes of the contributions to other funds may be determined by the donors themselves.

9.Payment of Huqúqu'lláh has priority over making contributions to other funds of the Faith (49, 54, 57), as well as over the cost of pilgrimage (2). It is, however, left to the discretion of the believer whether or not to treat contributions to the fund as an expense when arriving at the value of his or her property in calculating the sum to be paid as Huqúqu'lláh (57) or to make contributions only out of money on which Huqúqu'lláh has been paid (62). He or she also has the discretion to treat some contributions in one way and some in the other (62).

Payment of Huqúqu'lláh

100.10Until the passing of the Hand of the Cause of God appointed to act as Chief Trustee, the Huqúqu'lláh was paid to the Trustee of Huqúqu'lláh, the Deputies or their appointed Representatives (85, 87, 102). The body of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, appointed by the House of Justice, acts in place of the Chief Trustee (100, 101, 103). This Institution appoints the members of the Regional and National Boards of Trustees and supervises the work of the Deputies and Representatives. It utilizes the services of the Office of Huqúqu'lláh at the Bahá'í World Centre in performing such functions as issuing receipts (101).

Applicability of the Law of Huqúqu'lláh

100.11For many decades the sacred law of Huqúqu'lláh had been applied only to the believers from the Middle East. The worldwide application was instituted by the House of Justice as from Ridván 1992, the beginning of the Holy Year marking the hundredth anniversary of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (28).

Management of Huqúqu'lláh

100.12Decisions on the necessary ordinances concerning Huqúqu'lláh (51, 54), as well as on its disposition, lie within the sole jurisdiction of the Central Authority in the Cause. The Huqúqu'lláh can be employed for charitable purposes (24, 25, 45) or for other purposes useful to the Cause of God (109, 110, 112).

Release of a Revised Compilation on Family Life
30 March 2008
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
101.1We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to send you the enclosed copy of a new compilation entitled "Family Life" prepared recently at its request by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre. This document is intended to replace the compilation with this title which was sent with a cover letter dated 18 February 1982; it is expanded from the earlier version to include additional extracts from the Holy Writings and the letters of the Guardian as well as elucidations of various aspects of Bahá'í family life provided by the Universal House of Justice over the past twenty-six years.
101.2It is the hope of the House of Justice that the perusal of the contents of this compilation by the members of Bahá'í families will be a source of enlightenment and strength to them as they focus their endeavours on the vital task of advancing the process of entry by troops at this critical time in the affairs of humankind.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
102
Conferred Infallibility and the Universal House of Justice
7 April 2008
The Friends in Iran
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
102.1Further to the letter to you of 18 February 2008 concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, we have been requested to provide the comments below on a related matter….
102.2In general, the House of Justice wishes to preserve the widest possible latitude for the friends to explore the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to share their individual understanding of the Teachings. Yet it must be remembered that, with regard to deductions drawn from the Texts, the Master clearly states:
… the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.
102.3The Universal House of Justice does not intend at this time to elaborate further on previous explanations given of its duties and powers. That the House of Justice itself does not find it necessary to do so should alert the friends as to the unwisdom of their attempting to define so precisely its sphere of action. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, while there are explicit passages in the authoritative texts that make reference to the infallibility of

the House of Justice in the enactment of legislation, the argument that it is free from error only in this respect is untenable. Surely, the many emphatic statements found in the Writings, such as the following excerpt from the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, should suffice to dismiss any claims of this kind:

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God….

102.4Apart from the question of infallibility, there is the matter of authority. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states: “It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian’s authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism.” In regard to the Universal House of Justice, the same understanding applies.

102.5Infallibility is a profound spiritual concept inherent in the Bahá’í Writings. In meditating upon the relevant passages, the believers will naturally reach their own understanding of the subject. Individual opinions, however, should not be imposed on others, nor so promoted as to crystallize into doctrines not found in the explicit Text. When exchanging views about the Universal House of Justice—the body to which all things must be referred—the friends should exercise care lest they go to extremes, by either diminishing its station or assigning to it exaggerated attributes. What better admonition to heed in a matter of this nature than that given by the beloved Master, when some believers fell into disagreement about His own station:

These discussions will yield no result or benefit: we must set all such debates and controversies entirely aside—nay, we must consign them to oblivion and arise to accomplish that which is enjoined and required in this Day. These debates are mere words bereft of inner meaning; they are mere illusions and not reality.

That which is true and real is this: that we become united and agreed in our purpose and arise to flood this darksome world with light, to banish enmity and foreignness from among the children of men, to perfume and revive the world with the sanctified breezes of the character and conduct of the Abhá Beauty, to cast the light of divine guidance upon East and West, to raise the tabernacle of the love of God and gather all people under its sheltering shadow, to confer peace and composure upon every soul beneath the shade of the blessed Tree, to show forth such love as to astonish the enemy, to turn ravenous and bloodthirsty wolves into the gazelles of the meadows of the love of God, to cause the oppressor to taste the sweet savour of meekness, to teach them that kill the submission and acquiescence of those that suffer themselves to be killed, to spread abroad the verses of the one true God, to extol the

virtues and perfections of the all-glorious Lord, to raise to the highest heaven the cry of “O Thou the Glory of Glories!”, and to cause the call of “The earth will shine with the light of her Lord!” to reach the ears of the denizens of His Kingdom.

102.6The House of Justice appeals to the friends not to become embroiled in the kind of fruitless theological discussions that caused conflict and contention in past dispensations, lest they lose sight of their responsibility to promulgate the oneness of humanity and of the role of the Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh in uniting minds, hearts, and souls.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

103

Ridván Message 2008

Ridván 2008

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

103.1Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. As they call on one another in their homes and pay visits to families, friends and acquaintances, they enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import, deepen their knowledge of the Faith, share Bahá’u’lláh’s message, and welcome increasing numbers to join them in a mighty spiritual enterprise. Aware of the aspirations of the children of the world and their need for spiritual education, they extend their efforts widely to involve ever-growing contingents of participants in classes that become centres of attraction for the young and strengthen the roots of the Faith in society. They assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. And with the advantage of a greater abundance of human resources, an increasing number of them are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions. Such is the panorama before us as we pause this Ridván to observe the progress of the worldwide Bahá’í community.

103.2On several occasions we have indicated that the aim of the series of global Plans that will carry the Bahá’í world to the celebration of the centenary of the Faith’s Formative Age in 2021 will be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the community. At this, the midway point of what will be a quarter of a century of consistent, focused exertion, the evidences of increased capacity are everywhere apparent. Of particular significance is the

widening impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between the three participants in the Plan. Institutions, from the national to the local level, see with ever greater clarity how to create conditions conducive to the expression of the spiritual energies of a growing number of believers in pursuit of a common goal. The community is serving more and more as that environment in which individual effort and collective action, mediated by the institute, can complement each other in order to achieve progress. The vibrancy it manifests and the unity of purpose that animates its endeavours are drawing into its swelling ranks those from every walk of life eager to dedicate their time and energies to the welfare of humanity. That the doors of the community are more widely open for any receptive soul to enter and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is clear. No greater testament is there to the efficacy of the interactions among the Plan's three participants than the dramatic acceleration in the tempo of teaching that was witnessed this past year. The advance made in the process of entry by troops was significant indeed.

103.3Within the sphere of these enhanced interactions, individual initiative is becoming increasingly effective. In previous messages we have referred to the impetus that the institute process imparts to the exercise of initiative by the individual believer. The friends in every continent are engaged in study of the Writings for the explicit purpose of learning to apply the teachings to the growth of the Faith. Remarkable numbers are now shouldering responsibility for the spiritual vitality of their communities; energetically, they are carrying out those acts of service befitting a healthy pattern of growth. As they have persevered in the field of service to the Cause, maintaining a humble posture of learning, their courage and wisdom, zeal and acuity, fervour and circumspection, determination and trust in God have combined all the more to reinforce one another. In their presentation of the message of Bahá'u'lláh and the exposition of its verities, they have taken to heart the words of Shoghi Effendi that they must neither "hesitate" nor "falter", neither "overstress" nor "whittle down" the truth which they champion. Neither are they "fanatical" nor "excessively liberal". Through their constancy in teaching, they have increased their ability to determine whether the receptivity of their listener requires them to be "wary" or "bold", to "act swiftly" or to "mark time", to be "direct" or "indirect" in the methods they employ.

103.4What we continue to find encouraging is how well disciplined is this individual initiative. Communities everywhere are gradually internalizing the lessons being learned from systematization, and the framework defined by the current series of Plans lends consistency and flexibility to the endeavours of the friends. Far from restricting them, this framework enables them to seize opportunities, to build relationships, and to translate into reality a vision of systematic growth. In a word, it gives shape to their collective powers.

103.5As we survey what has been accomplished around the world, our hearts are filled with particular admiration for the believers in Iran, who, under the most arduous conditions, have arisen boldly to serve their country and are bending their energies toward its revitalization, though the avenues open to

them are limited. And given the restrictions placed on the administration of the Faith, they have set out on an individual basis to acquaint their fellow citizens with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, directly engaging them in conversations about His redeeming message. Not only have they received unprecedented support from enlightened souls as they have begun to do so, but they have encountered a receptivity far beyond anything they would have imagined possible.

103.6Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh conscious of the forces of integration and disintegration operating in society today sees the relationship between the rise in receptivity to the Faith in all parts of the globe and the failings of the world's systems. That such receptivity will increase as the agonies of humanity deepen is certain. Let there be no mistake: The capacity building that has been set in motion to respond to mounting receptivity is still in its earliest stages. The magnitude of the demands of a world in disarray will test this capacity to its limits in the years ahead. Humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism. Bahá'ís are able to discern the causes of this affliction. "What 'oppression' is more grievous", Bahá'u'lláh asks, "than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" There is no time to lose. Continued progress must be achieved in the activity and development of the three participants in the Plan.

103.7'Abdu'l-Bahá has extolled "two calls" to "success and prosperity" that can be heard from the "heights of the happiness of mankind". One is the call of "civilization", of "progress of the material world". It comprises the "laws", "regulations", "arts and sciences" through which humanity develops. The other is the "soul-stirring call of God", on which depends the eternal happiness of humanity. "This second call", the Master has explained, "is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God." As you continue to labour in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.

103.8Sustaining growth in cluster after cluster will depend on the qualities that distinguish your service to the peoples of the world. So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural—that even the stranger sees in you loving friends. So high must be your standard of excellence and so pure and chaste your lives that the moral influence you exert penetrates the consciousness of the wider community. Only if you demonstrate the rectitude of conduct to which the writings of the Faith call every soul will you be able to

struggle against the myriad forms of corruption, overt and subtle, eating at the vitals of society. Only if you perceive honour and nobility in every human being—this independent of wealth or poverty—will you be able to champion the cause of justice. And to the extent that administrative processes of your institutions are governed by the principles of Bahá'í consultation will the great masses of humanity be able to take refuge in the Bahá'í community.
103.9As you press ahead, be confident that the Concourse on high is marshalling its forces and stands ready to come to your aid. Our continued prayers will surround you.
The Universal House of Justice
104
Message to the Delegates Attending the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention
Ridván 2008
To the Delegates attending the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention
104.1In just a few years, the intensive programme of growth has emerged as a powerful means for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith on a large scale. Leading the process of learning that impels progress are scores of clusters where the friends have, through painstaking, systematic effort, come to understand how best to implement the cycles of activity that constitute such a programme. So instructive is the experience of these clusters, we asked the International Teaching Centre to choose one example from each continent and prepare a document that would demonstrate at once the diversity of conditions in which the believers everywhere are labouring and the coherent vision that unites them as they advance the process of entry by troops. The document consists of five case studies and a closing analysis. It is inspiring indeed, and we commend it to your study.
104.2While the case studies offer an impressive account of the activity in each cluster, you will, we hope, not be content only to read the narrative but will try to identify the principles, qualities, and approaches that have made possible the progress achieved. What should become clear to you is how aptly the friends and institutions in the clusters have managed to exploit the framework for action referred to in our 27 December 2005 message to breathe the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation into places as diverse as the crowded city of London and the tiny island group of Kiribati.
104.3Immediately apparent from the description of all five clusters is the degree to which the friends have relied on the power of divine assistance; this has fortified them in the field of action and enabled them to persevere in the face of inevitable difficulties. Equally evident is the sense of purpose that animates their endeavours—a purpose complemented by the attitude of learning they have espoused. Even more striking, however, is the way these attributes are perpetuated in the body of believers as it grows in size, for in all cases they have come to characterize not only individual action but also the community's as a whole. So focused is the collective energy of the friends as they carry out the central tasks of the Five Year Plan, whether in taking individual initiative or participating in organized campaigns, that they are catching the first glimpses of what it means for their powers to be multiplied

in unified action.

104.4In reading the case studies, you will note how the approaches adopted and the system of administration employed serve as means for facilitating the dynamics of such unified action. In every cluster, fellowship and support are the watchwords in this respect. Whether they are paying a visit to a family's home to draw them into a conversation about the Faith or helping one another to perform acts of service as part of their study of the institute courses, it is the joy of accompanying other souls on their spiritual journey that motivates the believers.

104.5This same motivating force guides the institutions and agencies operating in the cluster in their efforts to administer the intensive programme of growth. Clearly the complexity of the coordination schemes in the five clusters varies to some extent. Yet, irrespective of the level of complexity, the administrative mechanisms in place represent a response to the desire of an increasing number of friends who are eager to express the ardour of their faith in action; these provide them with the support needed to participate in teaching teams, to host devotional meetings, to conduct children's classes, to form junior youth groups, and to establish study circles. That the institutions and agencies involved are able to maintain such a responsive form of administration testifies to the high degree of organizational skill and flexibility they have attained.

104.6In the closing analysis, the International Teaching Centre examines the strategies being employed to transfer the experience gained in advanced clusters, such as the five described here, to those in earlier stages of growth. The effect of such transference has been remarkable. What sometimes required several years for the friends in one cluster to accomplish can now be learned in another in a relatively short span of time. Often within a matter of months, as pointed out by the Teaching Centre, a dynamic pattern of activity, reflecting the equal emphasis placed on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation, can be established. Invariably, the believers take immediate ownership for the programme of growth, and unity of thought is soon reached. As they begin to put into practice what they have learned through the study of institute courses, especially related to direct teaching methods, they see their efforts confirmed and preconceived notions about the lack of receptivity fall away. Their commitment to the process of growth is raised to higher and higher levels as they are drawn into decision making at the reflection meeting. Plans laid down by the institutions and agencies serving the cluster become increasingly effective as their ability to interpret the experience acquired by the friends is gradually sharpened. They are able to think strategically, to set priorities, and to use resources judiciously. Moreover, they identify believers capable of shouldering added responsibilities in pursuit of plans and channel the energies of growing numbers in service to the Cause. The community thrives as it lovingly embraces new believers. In short, the process of capacity building in the three protagonists of the Plan accelerates at a tremendous rate. It is this development that heartens us most and which gives us confidence that the potential of the Five Year Plan will be realized.

The Universal House of Justice

105
Election of the Universal House of Justice
30 April 2008
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
105.1The newly elected members of the Universal House of Justice are Farzam Arbab, Kiser Barnes, Peter Khan, Hooper Dunbar, Firaydoun Javaheri, Paul Lample, Payman Mohajer, Shahriar Razavi, Gustavo Correa.
The Universal House of Justice
106
Development of the Bahá'í Holy Places at the World Centre
12 May 2008
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
106.1As the worldwide Bahá'í community proceeds with a unified and coordinated endeavour to advance the process of entry by troops, developments of far-reaching significance at the Bahá'í World Centre, foreshadowed in our message of Ridván 2006 to the Bahá'ís of the world, are now occurring.
106.2The way has been opened to further beautification of the environs of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the Qiblih of the people of Bahá, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the "luminous Shrine" and "the place around which circumambulate the Concourse on high". After negotiations over several years, agreement has been reached with the Israeli government for the acquisition of a rectangular plot of land 90,000 square metres in area, located between Bahjí and the main road, which is currently being used by the government.
106.3The property in the possession of the Faith has been further augmented by the conclusion, after negotiations which extended over some twenty years, of a land exchange with the Israel Land Administration, by which a portion of the land bequeathed to the Faith in the Ein Sara neighbourhood of Nahariya, north of 'Akká, is being exchanged for an additional 100,000 square metres to the east of the Mansion of Bahjí, an area of about 32,000 square metres adjoining the island at the Ridván Garden, and the caravanserai adjacent to the Mansion of Mazra'ih. Discussions are continuing with the authorities for a further exchange, using more of the Ein Sara land to acquire additional property in close proximity to the Bahá'í Holy Places in the 'Akká area required to protect the sanctity and tranquillity of these places in the face of the rapid urbanization of the region.
106.4Measures are now being taken to formulate a comprehensive plan for the development of these Holy Places in the years immediately ahead, in a manner which will preserve the distinctive characteristics evident when Bahá'u'lláh blessed them with His presence, while providing facilities for the growing number of pilgrims and visitors. Work has also been completed on the restoration of the Junayn Gardens, a small farmhouse and orchard north of Bahjí visited occasionally by Bahá'u'lláh, which was subsequently donated to the Faith.
106.5An extensive project is now under way for the restoration of the Ridván Garden to its condition when visited by Bahá'u'lláh at the termination of

His nine-year confinement within the walls of the prison-city of ‘Akká. Described by Him as “Our Verdant Isle” and as the “New Jerusalem”, Bahá’u’lláh rejoiced in the tranquillity of the setting, “its streams flowing, and its trees luxuriant, and the sunlight playing in their midst.” Included in the work being carried out here is the construction of a circulating water system, which will recreate the island frequented by Bahá’u’lláh, and the restoration of an antique flour mill, which was in use during His time.

106.6No less significant is the work being carried out on Mount Carmel. The International Archives Building, constructed over fifty years ago at a time of limited resources in the Holy Land, is being extensively renovated and its facilities developed. This edifice, described by the Guardian as “the permanent and befitting repository for the priceless and numerous relics associated with the Twin Founders of the Faith, with the Perfect Exemplar of its teachings and with its heroes, saints and martyrs”, is being strengthened structurally; provisions are being made to render it accessible to the disabled; the method of display of its relics is being improved; a comprehensive security system is being provided; the exterior stonework is being restored; and its interior is being enhanced through installation of a granite floor.

106.7Detailed plans have been prepared for the renovation of the Shrine of the Báb, the “majestic mausoleum” extolled by Shoghi Effendi as “the Queen of Carmel enthroned on God’s Mountain, crowned in glowing gold, robed in shimmering white, girdled in emerald green, enchanting every eye from air, sea, plain and hill.” This work will include installation of earthquake-resistant reinforcement not visible to pilgrims or visitors; preparation of the three chambers not previously available for meditation or worship; repair of the dome; and replacement of its tiles, which have become worn and discoloured, to return them to their pristine lustre.

106.8The work being carried out at the World Centre of the Faith represents far more than repair, renovation, and beautification of buildings and gardens of historic significance. It can best be assessed by reference to Bahá’u’lláh’s designation of Mount Carmel as “the seat of God’s throne” and by recognition of His followers that the Qiblih is the holiest spot on the surface of the planet, while the places in which He found respite are forever sanctified by His presence. From that perspective those who participate in this endeavour, either through their dedicated labours or through their sacrificial contributions of funds, are privileged to an extent far beyond their capacity to comprehend.

The Universal House of Justice

107

Tenth International Bahá’í Convention and theConference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

13 May 2008

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

107.1At midday on the second of May, the Tenth International Bahá’í

Convention drew to its close. Later that afternoon, some one thousand delegates from over 150 countries, in the company of the Continental Counsellors and the friends serving at the World Centre, assembled at Bahjí to celebrate the Twelfth Day of Ridván and to offer prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed on them. No one present during those six blissful days could fail to apprehend the import of the gathering. That at so turbulent a time on the world stage such a representation of humanity was able to come together in the Holy Land to fulfil so sacred a purpose was, indeed, an accomplishment of singular significance.

107.2Following their arrival here, delegates had the opportunity to refresh their souls in the precincts of the Holy Shrines, preparing themselves to discharge the weighty responsibility of electing the members of the Universal House of Justice. Over the course of the next several days, they took part in five consultative sessions that centred on the progress of the current global Plan. It was a source of inspiration and joy to note the wealth of experience that they brought to the discussions and the unity of thought that distinguished the comments put forward. Their contributions to the consultation were informed, as well, by their study of the document prepared by the International Teaching Centre Attaining the Dynamics of Growth: Glimpses from five continents. As suggested by its title, the document describes from an historical perspective efforts to establish intensive programmes of growth in different parts of the globe. What it demonstrates, above all, is how rapidly the process of learning that impels progress is accelerating worldwide. We hope that it will form the basis for much of the discussions at the National Conventions soon to get under way.

107.3As delegates began to depart from the World Centre, the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors opened. The observations made by these high-ranking officers of the Cause throughout the meeting further confirmed the efficacy of the strategies being put in place for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. As we enter the third year of the Five Year Plan, we are delighted to announce that the number of intensive programmes of growth in operation has surpassed the 600 mark. However impressive this accomplishment, it pales before what remains to be achieved. We urge you, one and all, to maintain your focus, to strengthen your resolve and to arise with even greater determination to carry forward the teaching work.

The Universal House of Justice

108

Appointment of the Members of the International Teaching Centre

14 May 2008

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

108.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre for the five-year term beginning 23 May 2008: Uransaikhan Baatar, Stephen Birkland, Stephen Hall, Joan Lincoln, Juan Francisco Mora, Rachel Ndegwa, Zenaida Ramirez, Ayman Rouhani, and Penelope Walker. We are profoundly grateful to Rolf von Czékus and Violette Haake for the outstanding contribution they have made, during so critical a period in the fortunes of the Faith, to the development of this vital institution.

The Universal House of Justice
109
Arrest of the Members of the Friends in Iran
14 May 2008
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
109.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to convey to you the gravely distressing news just now received that the members of the Friends in Iran—the group that coordinates the activities of the Bahá'í community in the absence of a National Spiritual Assembly in the Cradle of the Faith—have been summarily and unjustly arrested by the Iranian authorities in raids conducted in the early hours of this morning, 14 May 2008. Details are as follows.
109.2Officers of the Intelligence Ministry in Tehran entered the homes of six of the seven members of the Friends in Iran, whereupon they conducted extensive searches, following which all six were arrested and brought to the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran. These individuals—Mrs. Faríbá Kamálábádí [Fariba Kamalabadi], Mr. Jamálu'd-Dín Khánjání [Jamaloddin Khanjani], Mr. 'Afíf Na'ímí [Afif Naeimi], Mr. Sa'íd Ridá'í [Saeid Rezaie], Mr. Bihrúz Tavakkulí [Behrouz Tavakkoli], and Mr. Vahíd Tízfahm [Vahid Tizfahm]—now join the seventh member of the group, Mrs. Mahvash Thábit [Mahvash Sabet], resident of Tehran and Secretary of the Friends in Iran, who has been held in custody since 5 March 2008 when she was summoned to Mashhad by the Ministry of Intelligence, ostensibly on the grounds that she was required to answer questions related to the burial of an individual in the Bahá'í cemetery in that city. Contrary to recent indications that Mrs. Thábit would be released sometime soon, the events that have transpired today are yet another indication of the government's determination to extinguish the Bahá'í community in the land of its birth.
109.3As you are aware, such dire action on the part of the government has not been witnessed since the heart-rending events in 1980 and 1981, when all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran were abducted on 21 August 1980 and disappeared without a trace, following which the reconstituted National Assembly was again ravaged by the execution of eight of its members on 27 December 1981.
109.4The members of the peace-loving, non-violent Bahá'í community of Iran—the country's largest religious minority—have been made more vulnerable through this wholly unwarranted action….
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
110
Arrest of the Yárán in Iran
19 May 2008
To the steadfast and sorely wronged Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the sacred land of Iran
Dearly loved Friends,
110.1The recent arrest of the esteemed members of the Friends in Iran [the

seven believers who coordinate the affairs of the Faith in your country] is yet another sign that the authorities remain unaware of the operation of spiritual forces that can bring about the greatness of that blessed land. This heedlessness has led the government to subject a group of its most faithful, obedient, capable and innocent citizens to unwarranted scorn and unjustified repression. You, however, know full well that the invisible Hand of God is at work, that all things are held within the grasp of His power, and all that transpires serves to further His design to infuse new life into the human frame, contributing to the establishment of His divine civilization and the welfare of society. So it is that you feel no fear before the flames of bitter trial ablaze in the world; you stand firm and staunch in the Cause of God. You do not allow apprehension and anxiety to take hold of you, nor can any calamity you may face perturb your hearts. Immovable as the mountain, resplendent as brilliant stars, you carry out your spiritual obligations, in the midst of the present turmoil, with steadfastness, devotion and utmost wisdom. In the circle of unity you shed light as radiant lamps, and together with your enlightened fellow citizens you strive diligently to revive the land of Iran and make it a most honoured country, that it may become the pride of nations, lauded by all the peoples of the world.

110.2Be assured of celestial confirmations, remain mindful of the Divine exhortations, and as necessary turn to the local Friends for guidance. In the Holy Shrines we supplicate for your protection and success, and at the Sacred Threshold we earnestly implore that He may “bestow justice upon the rulers, and fairness upon the divines” and transform this iniquity and oppression into peace and tranquillity.

The Universal House of Justice

111

Defence of the Yárán

21 May 2008

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

111.1As you may be aware, on 14 May 2008, six of the seven members of the Friends in Iran—the group that coordinates the activities of the Bahá’í community in the absence of a National Spiritual Assembly in the Cradle of the Faith—were summarily and unjustly arrested by the Iranian authorities. The seventh member had been arrested some weeks prior to this and also remains incarcerated. In this respect, the Universal House of Justice has directed us to extend to you its request for your action in defence of the Friends in Iran as follows.

111.2Immediately upon receiving news of the arrests, a selected number of National Spiritual Assemblies were asked to seek the intervention of their governments on behalf of the Friends in Iran and to bring this unconscionable action of the Iranian authorities to the attention of the mass media in their countries. Enclosed is a copy of that communication, dated 14 May 2008, for your information. The House of Justice has been most gratified to witness the strong statements that have been made by certain governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as the widespread coverage the mass

media is giving to the story as a result of the efforts that have been taken to date by these National Assemblies.

111.3The situation is perilous, and the House of Justice now calls upon you to undertake diplomatic and public information initiatives in defence of the Friends in Iran, to the extent that the circumstances in each of your countries allow. In this respect, your attention is drawn to the final paragraph of the above-mentioned letter to selected National Assemblies, which identifies the various spheres in which action is to be taken. Extensive background information regarding the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran may be obtained from the official Web site of the Bahá'í International Community at <http://www.bahai.org/dir/worldwide/persecution>. In addition, current news reports on this same subject are posted regularly by the Bahá'í World News Service at <http://news.bahai.org>.

111.4It is appreciated that there will be a wide variation from country to country concerning what is both possible and wise to do. It is therefore left to each National Assembly's discretion to determine the nature and extent of its response to this call, mindful that the gravity of the matter demands that efforts be made to secure serious attention at the highest possible levels of government and the mass media.

111.5You may feel confident that the Concourse on high stands ready to reinforce every step you take on behalf of these beleaguered and sorely wronged believers. The House of Justice will supplicate in the Holy Shrines that your devoted efforts may be guided and bountifully confirmed.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

112

Responding to Oppression with Good Deeds

3 June 2008

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

112.1Nearly three weeks have passed since the arrest of the esteemed members of the Friends in Iran. No reliable information regarding their circumstances or their whereabouts has yet come to light. That they have been denied access both to their families and to legal counsel in order to defend their rights is deeply disturbing to Bahá'ís worldwide—indeed, to just and fair-minded people everywhere.

112.2What brings solace to our hearts is the courage and steadfastness that you, the devoted followers of Bahá'u'lláh, have manifested in the face of such crisis. With the utmost unity and in full adherence to the Divine teachings, placing complete reliance on heavenly confirmations, you continue to discharge your spiritual obligations and strive to protect and safeguard the interests of the Faith at all times. The support that the media have lent to the oppressed believers in Iran, the advocacy of their cause by social activists, and the sympathy voiced by Iranian intellectuals serve to revive our hope and evoke our profound gratitude.

112.3Observe how an increasing number of Iranians, honouring their ancient traditions, recognize the imperatives of human rights. They believe that

ignorant prejudices should cease to be the cause of discrimination and division among their fellow citizens and acknowledge that the true prosperity of their nation is to be attained through commitment to the principle of unity in diversity. You should rest assured that the Iranian people will exert their utmost to fulfil such a vision. How regrettable that a small band of individuals, whose hearts have been darkened by the clouds of prejudice and who have yielded to the forces of hatred and animosity, are incapable of comprehending the truth that Bahá'ís have no aim but to serve humanity and assist in the promotion of spiritual civilization. Thus do they accuse you of baseless conspiracies, persecute you for your beliefs and practices, and seek to harm you at every turn. And yet you remain ever mindful of the counsel of Bahá'u'lláh: "That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race."

112.4Strive, then, to exemplify the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "It behooveth the loved ones of the Lord to be the signs and tokens of His universal mercy and the embodiments of His own excelling grace. Like the sun, let them cast their rays upon garden and rubbish heap alike, and even as clouds in spring, let them shed down their rain upon flower and thorn." Undeterred by the current crisis and drawing inspiration from the Divine teachings, attach no importance to the acts of oppression and cruelty meted out to you. Indeed, respond in the opposite manner. Focus your thoughts on being a source of good to everyone who crosses your path. Make every effort to serve your fellow citizens—heirs to a rich and humane culture—who themselves suffer from many an injustice. Eschew divisiveness and conflict, consort with all people with kindliness and sincerity, and engage your compatriots in discussions on matters that are of serious concern to them. May you convey to their hearts the hope, faith and confidence, already carried in yours, that the future of Iran is bright and the destiny of humankind glorious.

112.5We will offer supplications in the Holy Shrines for the protection of the dearly loved believers in the Cradle of the Faith.

The Universal House of Justice

113

Equality of Men and Women in Families and the Community

20 June 2008

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

113.1Our 3 June 2008 letter expressed our appreciation for the courage and steadfastness that you have manifested during these difficult days and encouraged you to work diligently for the good of your fellow citizens and engage in conversations with them on matters of common concern. There are, of course, many pressing issues that occupy the minds of those striving to promote the prosperity and well-being of Iran. Chief among them is, no doubt, the critical need to remove barriers hindering the progress of women in society.

113.2For you, the equality of men and women is not a Western construct but a universal spiritual truth—a statement about human nature—that was promulgated by Bahá'u'lláh nearly one hundred and fifty years ago in His native Iran. That women should enjoy equal rights with men is a requirement of

justice. It is a principle consonant with the highest standard of purity and sanctity, whose application strengthens family life and is essential to the regeneration and progress of any nation. Indeed, peace in the world and the advancement of civilization depend on its realization. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained:

The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.

113.3You are particularly well placed to contribute to the promotion of this principle. Táhirih, that peerless heroine of Iranian history, courageously advocated the emancipation of women in 1848, at a time when efforts to improve the status of women were only beginning to gather momentum in a few parts of the world. From that time on, you have raised generation after generation of your children—both boys and girls—to value this fundamental tenet of the Faith and to express it in every facet of their lives. In 1911, nearly a century ago, you founded the Tarbíyat School for Girls in Tihrán, which provided girls of all backgrounds with an opportunity for education, encouraging, in this way, progressive thinking and making an indelible mark on society. For half a century now, Bahá’í women in Iran have worked shoulder to shoulder with men in administering the affairs of the community at the local, regional and national levels. And long ago you succeeded in eliminating in your community illiteracy among women under the age of forty.

113.4Yet you are keenly aware that you cannot be content with your achievements to date. Rather must you persevere in your efforts to transcend cultural norms that impede the progress of women. True equality is not easily attained; the transformation required is difficult for men and women alike. We encourage you, then, to continue to enhance your understanding of the operation of this principle and to strive to uphold it more consistently in your family and community life. You can, in addition, draw upon your experience to discuss this issue with friends, neighbours and co-workers, especially the challenges it presents and ways of surmounting them, and participate in projects designed to advance the status of women, whether by government agencies or organizations of civil society.

113.5Many of your compatriots are eager to see the realization of the universal principle of the equality of men and women. They will no doubt welcome you to join them in learning how to promote, step by step, conditions that enable the women of Iran to overcome impediments blocking their progress and participate fully, as equals of men, in all areas of human endeavour. As you engage in so vital a field of service, you may be assured that our prayers are ever with you.

The Universal House of Justice

114

Release of Attaining the Dynamics of Growth

26 June 2008

To All National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

114.1As you know, the International Teaching Centre has prepared a document entitled Attaining the Dynamics of Growth: Glimpses from five continents, which profiles the experiences in five clusters where intensive programmes of growth have been established. In providing a broad overview of the progress being made in advancing the process of entry by troops worldwide, the booklet represents the next in what has become a series of documents issued from the Bahá’í World Centre in recent years that have lent added impetus to the work being carried out in communities across the globe.

114.2At the request of the Universal House of Justice, this booklet as well as a DVD that contains a slideshow presentation of the visual display at the Tenth International Bahá’í Convention, augmented by a number of sound clips and many additional photographs, were distributed to each delegate in attendance at the International Convention. For your records, we enclose two copies of each of these items; additional copies are included for sharing among members of National Spiritual Assemblies who were not present on that occasion. The House of Justice is confident that these materials will provide inspiration and information to aid you as you
strive to achieve your goals for the establishment of intensive programmes of growth during this Five Year Plan.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

115

Appointment of Five Continental Counsellors

21 July 2008

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

115.1We joyfully announce the appointment of the following Continental Counsellors to fill the vacancies created by the recent appointments to the International Teaching Centre: in the Americas Mr. Daniel Duhart and Miss Alison Milston, and in Asia Miss Khursheda Porsayeva and Mrs. Zebonisa Salieva.

115.2We are also happy to announce the appointment of Mr. Aggrey Zeyazi Munubi to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa, filling a vacancy that was created on that Board.

The Universal House of Justice

116

Passing of Harriett Wolcott

29 July 2008

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá’ís of the United States

116.1We were saddened to learn of the passing of devoted maidservant of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh Harriett Louise Wolcott. Her tireless and highly meritorious services to the Cause, which spanned some sixty years, include a quarter of a century of valued activities at the Bahá’í World Centre. Her modest, cheerful nature will be sorely missed and her contributions are warmly remembered. Kindly assure her family and friends of our loving sympathy and prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her luminous soul in the

realms on high.
The Universal House of Justice
117
Convocation of Forty-One Regional Conferences
20 October 2008
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
117.1Today, the anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, marks the midway point of the five-year enterprise that will engage the Bahá'í world until Ridván 2011. We bow our heads in humble gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the favours and confirmations He has vouchsafed unto those labouring so diligently and sacrificially in the forefront of the teaching work. Since the conclusion of the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention a few months ago, there has been a rise in awareness of the efficacy of the framework governing the operation of the Five Year Plan as insights gained by the delegates have been widely diffused throughout the Bahá'í community. Scores of clusters around the globe are being primed for systematic expansion, and we expect to see a wave of intensive programmes of growth launched in the months leading up to Ridván next year.
117.2The challenge facing the friends in these and all clusters continues to be twofold in character. While learning to identify receptive segments of society and share with responsive souls the message of the Faith—an aspiration generally not difficult to fulfil—they are striving to understand in practice how the diverse elements of a healthy pattern of growth, particularly the development of human resources, are to be integrated into a cohesive whole. How heartening it is to see that the moment the friends in a cluster begin to meet this dual challenge, immediate progress is achieved; the goal of launching an intensive programme of growth becomes imminently attainable.
117.3That the continued strengthening of the community should be matched by a further decline in the old world order comes as no surprise. Indeed, the friends should be on their guard, lest the development of capacity in the community not keep pace with the rise in receptivity of a disillusioned humanity. Behold how even in the short span of time since we raised this warning in our Ridván message, financial structures once thought to be impregnable have tottered and world leaders have shown their inability to devise more than temporary solutions, a failing to which they increasingly confess. Whatever expedient measures are adopted, confidence has been shaken and a sense of security lost. Surely such developments have caused the believers in every land to reflect on the lamentable condition of the present order and have reinforced in them the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together.
117.4It is with these thoughts in mind that we turn our hearts in frequent prayer to Bahá'u'lláh and beseech Him to strengthen His followers through His unfailing grace. In such moments, we implore Him to illumine their souls with the light of knowledge and faith. Let them not underestimate the power inherent in the system they are putting in place for the propagation of His Faith, nor mistake the true purpose of the global enterprise on which they have

embarked. Let them not deviate from the path of learning on which they are set, nor be distracted by the ephemeral pursuits of a bewildered society. Let them not fail to appreciate the value of the culture now taken root in the community that promotes the systematic study of the Creative Word in small groups in order to build capacity for service. Let them never forget the imperative to tend to the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. Let them come to realize the full significance of their efforts to help young people form a strong moral identity in their early adolescent years and empower them to contribute to the well-being of their communities. And let them rejoice at having learned through consistent, systematic action how to establish a rhythm of growth that pays due attention to the essential elements of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning. May they one and all be endowed with constancy and fidelity and be granted the courage to make whatever sacrifices are needed to ensure the resounding success of the Plan. By the rectitude of their conduct, the sincerity of their love for their fellow human beings, and the ardour of their desire to serve the peoples of the world, may they vindicate the truth proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh that humanity is one. May they be diligent in their efforts to establish ties of friendship that show no regard for prevalent social barriers and ceaselessly endeavour to bind hearts together in the love of God. That they may recognize the profound implications of their mission is our fervent hope. That they may not falter in accomplishing their ambitious goals, no matter how severe the crises engulfing the world around them, is our most heartfelt prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

117.5To provide the opportunity for the friends to gather together, as much to celebrate the feats already achieved during the Plan as to deliberate on its current exigencies, we announce the convocation of a series of regional conferences, forty-one in number, to be held in the following cities between November and March: Abidjan, Accra, Almaty, Antofagasta, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Battambang, Bologna, Bukavu, Chicago, Dallas, Frankfurt, Guadalajara, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Kiev, Kolkata, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Lae, London, Los Angeles, Lubumbashi, Lusaka, Madrid, Managua, Manila, Nakuru, New Delhi, Portland, Quito, São Paulo, Stamford, Sydney, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Yaoundé. To each of these conferences, two members of the International Teaching Centre will be sent as our representatives. National Spiritual Assemblies in hosting countries will have further details available regarding participation. We urge the believers, both those fully engaged in executing the provisions of the Plan and those whose circumstances have prevented them from fulfilling their desire to do so until now, to avail themselves of this opportunity and attend the conference to be held in their area.

The Universal House of Justice

118

Release of Bahá'ís Arrested in Yemen

22 October 2008

To the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Yemen

Dearly loved Friends,

118.1With gladdened hearts we rejoice with you at the release of your devoted brethren who, after several months of incarceration, have now all been permitted to return to the embrace of their loved ones. We are moved, moreover, to express to your precious community our admiration for your steadfastness and courage. That you continued to discharge your spiritual obligations with unbending adherence to the Divine Teachings despite the ordeals confronting you is a tribute to the depth of your consecration. Recent events and your commendable response to them impel us to take this opportunity to convey our cherished hopes for your community and to reflect on the challenges before you.

118.2The close association of your country with the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh dates back over half a century when many of your families settled in Yemen and made it your home. Others amongst you, exemplifying the purity of heart and spiritual capacities of the people of Yemen, sought the divine Light "from whatever lamp it may shine" and, exhibiting a remarkable freedom of spirit, were attracted to teachings that fulfil humankind's highest ideals. With uprightness of character and conduct, you succeeded through the years to earn the respect and trust of your neighbours and acquaintances and to vindicate the reality of your faith. Scrupulously heeding the admonition of Bahá'u'lláh to be well-wishers of all, you remained aloof from the political and sectarian upheavals that erupted from time to time, and showed fidelity to the people of Yemen and its authorities.

118.3Through the haze of the commotion surrounding recent events two points emerge with particular clarity. The first is that courageous souls from different walks of life were ready to offer you their genuine support and, in so doing, demonstrated the fair-mindedness and integrity of the Yemeni people. The second is that these events revealed the scope of the misunderstandings that exist about the aims of the Faith and, therefore, highlighted the magnitude of the work before you. The opportunity is now yours to seize. You must communicate to your countrymen the loftiness of your purpose: to unite the hearts through "holy words and pure and goodly deeds". Share with them your unalterable belief in the oneness of humankind and your conviction that consciousness of this truth can banish hatred and fanaticism from the heart. Convey to your fellow citizens your abiding faith in their capacity to contribute to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. And together with them bend your energies to selfless service for the progress of your society in the land you hold so dear.

118.4That you may be confirmed in your current path, reinforced in your resolve and protected through the sustaining grace of the Ancient Beauty is our fervent entreaty at His Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

119

Countering the Slanders and Calumnies against the Faith in Iran

31 October 2008

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

119.1In recent months the Bahá'ís of the world have witnessed, with

pleasure and gratitude, the courageous and unprecedented steps taken by open-minded Iranians in defence of the civil rights of their fellow citizens persecuted for their beliefs. At the same time, however, a small segment of the population, manipulated by the forces of hatred and prejudice, has become the cause of further difficulty for the Bahá'í community. Yet, in a climate fostered by the dissemination of misinformation and widespread calumny, unmatched in its intensity, in which Bahá'ís are barred from using the media to defend themselves, those under the influence of such forces cannot be held entirely to blame.

119.2In the face of such adversity, you remain confident in the ability of the Iranian people to discern truth and strive wisely to correct misleading information. May you not slacken in this task. Be not dismayed by the severity of the attacks made against you. Do not yield to despondency and despair. Perseverance and patience are required to counteract the effects of slander and calumny. The ultimate outcome is clear: the light of truth will dispel the darkness of deceit.

119.3One of the accusations being put forward is that the Bahá'ís of Iran maintain political ties with foreign powers and act against the interests of their own country and government. You should take every opportunity to explain to your fellow citizens the fundamental principle of the Faith that strictly prohibits involvement in partisan political activity of any kind, whether local, national or international. Bahá'ís view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society, and obedience to the laws of the land is a distinguishing feature of their beliefs. Iran is dear to the Bahá'ís, who are the well-wishers of all. In whatever country they reside, including the birthplace of Bahá'u'lláh, they strive to promote the welfare of society. They are enjoined to work alongside their compatriots in fostering fellowship and unity and in establishing peace and justice. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of others, through whatever legal means are available to them, conducting themselves at all times with honesty and integrity. They eschew conflict and dissension. They avoid contest for worldly power. Neither do they aspire to overthrow governments, nor do they participate in the schemings of others to do so. The record of the past one hundred and sixty years bears witness to this assertion.

119.4There are those who, either lacking proper information or promoting their own political agendas, regard the establishment of the Bahá'í World Centre in Israel as a political statement—as evidence of ties to the Zionist movement. Yet anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of historical facts knows that the location of the World Centre can be attributed to the machinations of the Iranian government itself. It was that government which exiled Bahá'u'lláh from His native Persia and instigated His final banishment to the Holy Land—then under the sovereignty of the Ottoman empire—some one hundred and forty years ago, eighty years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. The relationship of the World Centre with that State is governed by the same principles being followed by any Bahá'í community—it is characterized by obedience to the laws of the land and a strict abstention from partisan politics. In your efforts to address this

issue, you might find it helpful to refer to the response given by Shoghi Effendi, as the Head of the Faith, to an inquiry made by Judge Emil Sandström, acting on behalf of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine formed in 1947, which was then seeking the views of various religious and non-religious groups on the future of that land. In a letter dated 14 July 1947, a year prior to the birth of the State of Israel, Shoghi Effendi made clear the Bahá'í position of non-involvement in partisan politics, indicating that the Faith did not identify with any side "in the present tragic dispute going on over the future of the Holy Land". "As many of the adherents of our Faith are of Jewish and Muslim extraction", he further stated, "we have no prejudice towards either of these groups and are most anxious to reconcile them for their mutual benefit and for the good of the country."

119.5Indeed, how regrettable it is that Bahá'ís should be accused of any malevolence towards Islám. Certainly you would be prepared to share with those who make such accusations the Bahá'í Writings which refer to Islám as "the blessed and luminous religion of God" and the Prophet Muhammad as "the refulgent lamp of supreme Prophethood", "the Lord of creation" and "the Day-star of the world", "through the will of God, shone forth from the horizon of Hijáz". You would also no doubt be ready to cite passages that speak of the station of Imám 'Alí in terms such as "the moon of the heaven of knowledge and understanding" and "the sovereign of the court of knowledge and wisdom". Recite with them the Tablet of Visitation revealed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself for Imám Husayn, whom He calls "the pride of the martyrs" and "the day-star of renunciation shining above the horizon of creation". Read to them passages from the talks delivered some one hundred years ago by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in churches and synagogues, and among scholars in Europe and North America, on the station and importance of Islám. Share with them the account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's funeral, which was attended by countless people from the region, including thousands of Muslims, who came to pay homage to Him, and acquaint them with the eulogies that the Muftí of Haifa and other Muslim leaders delivered in His honour on that occasion.

119.6Curtailing the spread of slander and calumny is not your only challenge. Various social and economic pressures—not least the denial to Bahá'í youth of access to higher education and the hostility faced by Bahá'í schoolchildren in some places—continue to mount. By contrast, a growing portion of the populace praises your courage, audacity, patience and steadfastness before the rising tide of tribulations. The resolve shown by the vast majority of believers, preferring to live with hardship rather than to seek refuge in other countries, seen by many as a sign of their love for their homeland, has earned great respect.

119.7There appear to be some who are poised, at present, to exploit the least trace of ill feeling they perceive among the believers, imagining they can make it the cause of strife and dissension in your community and weaken your morale. You realize full well, of course, the paramount importance of preserving and strengthening the unity of the community. Shielded by the power of the Covenant, you and your spiritual forebears have withstood for more than a century and a half the relentless attacks of the enemies, some of whom arose to

discredit the Cause publicly, while others, in the guise of good intentions, set out to sow the seeds of discord within its ranks. You are well aware that "disunity destroyeth the divine edifice and sloweth the spread of the Cause", and in your deeds and conduct, you have manifested the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "This day is the day of unity and this time is the time of harmony. Unity and harmony will lay low the people of malice".

119.8While the peoples of the world are still in the earliest stages of learning to coexist, you are being schooled by the wisdom of the beloved Master in the workings of unity and concord among nations. You have faith in their constructive powers. You must consider now, more than ever before, what will be conducive to strengthening the bonds of love and fellowship among the believers in these difficult times, beseeching continually God's confirmations.

119.9By adhering to the Divine teachings and following the guidance of the Centre of the Faith, you have succeeded in achieving unity of thought on issues concerning service to the Cause and the advancement of spiritual civilization. May you recognize the value of this accomplishment and not underestimate its significance. You are also mindful of one essential, practical point, namely: that believers differ in their capacity, aptitude and approach, in their understanding, wisdom and spiritual discipline, in their degree of commitment and willingness to sacrifice, as well as in their personal preferences and priorities. As members of a diverse but united community, then, you must remain, one and all, as tightly bound as threads in the cord of the Covenant to which all must cling. Be at all times a source of encouragement and support to one another, and together seek after new avenues of service. In association with friends, neighbours and acquaintances, may you dispel the darkness of iniquity and tyranny with the light of love and fidelity. Pay no heed to rumours. Rather may you draw sustenance from the power of unity and rely upon the penetrating influence of "holy words and pure and goodly deeds" and "a virtuous life and a goodly behaviour"—this, that you may become the cause of love, unity and harmony within your community and among your fellow citizens. Be confident that every step taken in the path of God with sincerity will attract heavenly confirmations, for He "imparteth to the drop the power of the sea, and turneth the atom into a very sun."

119.10Be assured of our constant prayers in the Holy Shrines on your behalf.

The Universal House of Justice

120

Appointment of Two Continental Counsellors

2 November 2008

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

120.1For compelling personal reasons, Mr. Emilio Egea and Dr. Isatou Hyde-Forster have asked to be relieved of their responsibilities as members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in Europe and Africa, respectively. We have, with much regret, assented to their requests. Mr. Egea and Dr. Hyde-Forster have earned our warm gratitude for the contributions they have made to the work of the Faith as Counsellors, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround them as they continue their valuable labours in

other fields of service to the Cause.
120.2To fill the vacancies thus created, we announce the appointment of Mr. Chuungu Malitonga of Zambia to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa and Mrs. Zoraida Garro García of Spain to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe, for the remainder of the present term.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice
121
Launch of the "Bahá'í Community News" Web Site
14 November 2008
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
121.1The first three of 41 regional conferences called for by the Universal House of Justice in its 20 October 2008 message to the Bahá'ís of the world have taken place amid great enthusiasm, with focused, action-oriented consultation. Reports from the conferences in Lusaka, Johannesburg, and Nakuru carry news of the tremendous joy that has animated these gatherings. Several accounts have been received of the Bahá'ís' being so energized by the spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to the Cause that they have arisen directly to seize opportunities in cluster after cluster.
121.2The Web site "Bahá'í Community News" at http://news.bahai.org/community-news/regional-conferences/ has been created to make available the reports of these regional conferences, based on information received from participants. The Web site also features an interactive map of the conference locations and their scheduled dates. A link connects the visitor to the report for each conference, including photographs and other media as available.
121.3Please share this information with the believers in your communities. The reports will no doubt provide encouragement to the friends as they continue to pursue the aim of the Five Year Plan.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Office of Public Information
122
Political Activity, Social Change and Public Policy
23 December 2008
To an individual Bahá'í
Dear Bahá'í Friend,
122.1Your email letter dated 26 June 2008, in which you inquire about the extent to which a Bahá'í, particularly one who is a social scientist or academic, may speak publicly on sociopolitical issues, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following reply.
122.2You are, of course, well aware of the principle of noninvolvement in politics enunciated by Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'ís are to "refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions." They "assign no blame, take

no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests" of the Faith and eschew "the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician". They are to "rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world". This principle, which demands strict avoidance of any type of partisan political activity, must be scrupulously upheld. However, as society and its political processes evolve and as the Faith grows, the interaction between the two becomes increasingly complex. The House of Justice will provide the necessary guidance over time to apply this principle to existing circumstances.

122.3The term "politics" can have a broad meaning, and therefore it is important to distinguish between partisan political activity and the discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. While the former is proscribed, the latter is enjoined; indeed, a central purpose of the Bahá'í community is social transformation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise The Secret of Divine Civilization amply demonstrates the Faith's commitment to promoting social change without entering into the arena of partisan politics. So too, innumerable passages in the Bahá'í Writings encourage the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," Bahá'u'lláh states, "and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges the friends to "become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world—for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace." Further, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explains that "much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part, with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings". In another letter written on his behalf in 1948, when racial inequality was enshrined in the laws of many states in the United States, he indicates that there is "no objection at all to the students taking part in something so obviously akin to the spirit of our teachings as a campus demonstration against race prejudice." Bahá'ís must, therefore, be tireless in addressing, through word and deed, a range of social issues.

122.4When the Bahá'í community was small, its contribution to social well-being was naturally limited. In 1983 the House of Justice announced that the growth of the Faith had given rise to the need for a greater involvement in the life of society. Bahá'ís began to engage more systematically in the work of social and economic development through activities of varying degrees of complexity. Efforts to contribute to social transformation also include participation in the public discourse on issues of concern to humanity, such as peace, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, and the promotion of justice. These two types of activity

have steadily increased over the past twenty-five years and will grow in scope and influence in the future.

122.5The organized endeavors of the Bahá'í community in these areas are reinforced by the diverse initiatives of individual believers working in various fields—as volunteers, professionals, and experts—to contribute to social change. The distinctive nature of their approach is to avoid conflict and the contest for power while striving to unite people in the search for underlying moral and spiritual principles and for practical measures that can lead to the just resolution of the problems afflicting society. Bahá'ís perceive humanity as a single body. All are inseparably bound to one another. A social order structured to meet the needs of one group at the expense of another results in injustice and oppression. Instead, the best interest of each component part is achieved by considering its needs in the context of the well-being of the whole.

122.6Involvement in social discourse and action will at times require that Bahá'ís become associated with the development of public policy. In this regard, the term "policy," like the term "politics," has a broad meaning. While refraining from discussion of policies pertaining to political relations between nations or partisan political affairs within a country, Bahá'ís will no doubt contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that address certain social concerns. Examples of such concerns are safeguarding the rights of women, extending effective education to all children, curbing the spread of infectious disease, protecting the environment, and eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty.

122.7It is evident, then, that as a Bahá'í who is a political scientist you have a great deal of latitude to comment on social issues. Yet it is also possible to participate in the generation and application of knowledge in your field by dealing with topics that are more directly political in nature. You are no doubt aware of the general advice, written on behalf of the Guardian, that one way to criticize the social and political order of the day without siding with or opposing an existing regime is to offer a deeper analysis on the level of political theory rather than practical politics. Another approach would be to contribute to scientific inquiry and shed light on differing viewpoints to seek common understanding and effective solutions without succumbing to partisan advocacy and obfuscation. Bahá'u'lláh states that "every matter related to state affairs which ye raise for discussion falls under the shadow of one of the words sent down from the heaven of His glorious and exalted utterance." You have the opportunity to mine the gems of His Revelation and to prepare and present them in a manner that is attractive to those seeking new insights. You will have to learn over time how to find a balance between the principles and concepts you hold as true that come from the Teachings of the Faith and from your discipline.

122.8Challenges will inevitably arise. For example, you may find that an issue pertaining to social action has been co-opted by the political debate among competing factions, and wisdom will be required to determine whether to adjust your approach or let the matter rest for a time. In some cases it may be necessary to forgo opportunities that would thrust you into political debate or

criticism of partisan policies of governments. In other instances there may be special sensitivities, such as topics related to countries where the Bahá'í community faces hardship or oppression, when comments could create the impression that the friends are engaged in political activity against the interests of a particular government. These same considerations arise when evaluating invitations from the media to comment or engage in discussion on the political affairs of the day. Your National Spiritual Assembly is available to assist you in clarifying particular questions should the need arise.

122.9Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your efforts to reflect the principles of the Faith in your professional activities may attract the blessings and confirmations of the Ancient Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

123

Three Broad Areas of Action

4 January 2009

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

123.1Your email letter dated 23 July 2008 has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which is heartened to see that you are engaged in such focused consultations on how best to develop the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. You have raised a number of pertinent questions in this respect, especially related to the Centre's programmes of study. While such specifics deserve ample attention, the House of Justice feels it would be timely for you to step back at this important juncture in the development of your community and survey from a broad perspective its challenges and possibilities. In this connection, we have been asked to write to you as follows.

123.2With the institute process so well advanced and the core activities flourishing in cluster after cluster, a systematic pattern of action has taken root in your community, and you can have every confidence that provisions are now in place to ensure Bahá'u'lláh's Message reaches increasing numbers of people of all ages and backgrounds in your country. It will be essential, of course, for momentum to be maintained—indeed, accelerated. But there is no doubt that the prospects for the growth of the Australian Bahá'í community are bright.

123.3Like so many communities worldwide, then, yours will find itself being drawn further and further into the life of society in the years ahead as a natural consequence of its continued expansion and consolidation. The greater the clarity of thought you maintain about the nature of this challenge, already showing signs of the pressing demands it brings, the more effective will be the response of your community in meeting it. At this stage in your development, the House of Justice encourages you to begin to examine the work of your community in terms of three broad areas of action, which, though distinct from one another, each with its own methods and instruments, must achieve a high degree of coherence between them, if they are to reinforce one another and lend substantial impetus to the movement of the Australian people towards the spiritually and materially prosperous civilization envisioned in the Writings

of the Faith. What will ensure this coherence is the process of systematic learning that characterizes them all.

123.4The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself can be regarded as one area of action, the approach, methods and instruments of which are now well understood. Social action can be considered another. This term is being employed increasingly in consultations among Bahá'ís, as a result of heightened consciousness and enhanced capacity at the cluster level. It is to be expected that a desire to undertake social action will accompany the collective change which begins to occur in a village or neighbourhood as acts of communal worship and home visits are woven together with activities for the spiritual education of its population to create a rich pattern of community life. Social action can, of course, range from the most informal efforts of limited duration to social and economic development programmes of a high level of complexity and sophistication promoted by Bahá'í-inspired non-governmental organizations—all concerned with the application of the teachings to some need identified in such fields as health, education, agriculture and the environment. In this case, too, there is a vast amount of experience worldwide, fostered and correlated by the Office of Social and Economic Development, that has given rise to effective approaches, which can be exploited at the level of the cluster as soon as the processes of expansion and consolidation have advanced to the degree necessary.

123.5Efforts to participate in the discourses of society constitute a third area of action in which the friends are engaged. Such participation can occur at all levels of society, from the local to the international, through various types of interactions—from informal discussions on Internet forums and attendance at seminars, to the dissemination of statements and contact with government officials. What is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few—so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society. Of course, care should be exercised that the friends involved in this area of activity avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience and drawing attention to fledging efforts of the Bahá'í community which are best left to come to maturity without interference, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. The development of instruments, methods and approaches for this area of activity is a chief concern of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, based here at the Bahá'í World Centre.

123.6The House of Justice wishes us to emphasize that the above scheme should be regarded as merely one way of conceptualizing the work of the Bahá'í community, one that avoids fragmentation and facilitates sound planning. It does not encompass the entirety of Bahá'í endeavour, the defence work being a case in point. Nor should it assume the status of a definition, as reflected in statements such as "There are three areas of Bahá'í activity."

Further, in no way should the friends feel there is a division of labour, in

which one group participates in the work of expansion and consolidation, and another group in each of the other two areas. All Bahá'ís should engage in efforts to expand and consolidate the Faith. They also participate, to some extent, in social action and the discourses of society. In the case of the latter two, however, where the work takes on different degrees of formality, the nature of the tasks to be carried out can become quite complex and sometimes delicate, requiring specialized training and preparation.

123.7Indeed, it is in this context that the Universal House of Justice asks you to consider plans for the development of the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. As currently conceived, the programmes of the Centre are intended to attract students who seek a deeper understanding of various facets of the Faith. However, you are encouraged to detach yourselves from the Centre's past achievements, which have been undeniably praiseworthy, and determine dispassionately what role it would play in the above scheme. At the outset, it should be acknowledged that systematic study of the Faith will be a natural outgrowth of the culture of Bahá'í community life, in which the habit of reading the writings is fostered by the institute process and complemented by local deepening classes, conferences, winter and summer schools, and special gatherings devoted to specific subjects. So, too, will training needed to carry out programmes of social and economic development take place at the grassroots of the community. Much learning is still required, however, in developing human resources that can effectively participate in the discourses of society, and it is here that the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning can make a singular contribution.

123.8In that case, the nature of the Centre's programmes would change. Still concerned with specialized aspects of the Faith, it would not conduct courses in Bahá'í studies in the same sense as those offered in universities by departments of religious studies, which, as you know, the House of Justice discourages since it could easily lead to a class of individuals in the Bahá'í community who assume a degree of authority on the basis of some formal qualification. Nor would the courses of the Centre simply repeat, in the final analysis, what will already be covered in local deepening classes. They would seek, rather, to relate the teachings of the Faith to a range of social issues, drawing on existing bodies of knowledge in such disciplines as history, economics, philosophy, political science and sociology. Decisions regarding the development of the Centre's facilities and its recognition as a Private Higher Education Provider would need to be taken, then, in this light.

123.9The House of Justice looks forward to learning of the outcome of your consultations on this matter and assures you of its prayers on your behalf.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

124

Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Bahá'í Faith in Ethiopia

7 January 2009

To the Friends Gathered on the Occasion of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Faith in Ethiopia

124.1We extend our love and warmest greetings to the believers in Ethiopia who

are observing the auspicious occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in that esteemed country.

124.2The Diamond Jubilee celebration is a time to recall the noble accomplishments of the past and thoughtfully reflect upon the opportunities that lie ahead. Ethiopia was among the first Bahá'í communities of the African continent, and its history has been distinguished by the exemplary devotion, firmness in the Covenant, and spirit of self-reliance of the believers. Who are those of the present generation that will build upon this legacy and create an illustrious future through their heroic deeds? Arise, dear friends, with sacrifice and determination to achieve unprecedented victories in the teaching field, accelerate the development of human resources, multiply the core activities essential to a vibrant community life, and extend your involvement and influence in the life of the wider society. In this endeavour you can draw upon the rich body of experience accumulated through your learning in recent years to reach out to the spiritually receptive peoples of your nation. Be assured of our ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines that your worthy efforts in the service of the Faith may continue to be reinforced through the unfailing grace and manifold blessings of the Blessed Beauty.

The Universal House of Justice

125

Passing of Madge Featherstone

2 February 2009

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Australia

125.1We are distressed to learn of the passing of Madge Featherstone, who served the Faith sacrificially in Australasia for over six decades. In addition to her unfailing support to her late husband in the discharge of his vital responsibilities, Madge Featherstone made a distinguished contribution to the work of the Cause through her membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia for some time and of the highly effective Asian Teaching Committee during the Ten Year Crusade. Her devotion to the advancement of the Faith was evident in the journeys she undertook in the Pacific Islands as a travelling teacher despite frailty of health in the ninth decade of her life. Kindly convey our condolences to her family and friends and assure them of our prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her illumined soul in the worlds beyond.

The Universal House of Justice

126

Ending the Services of the Yárán and Khádimín in Iran

5 March 2009

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

126.1In recent weeks, world attention has been focused more intently than ever before on the wave of persecution engulfing the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran. The spurious character of the charges levelled against the seven members of the Yárán, the injustice of the treatment meted out to other innocent Bahá'í prisoners, and the prolongation of the repression of the

community of the Most Great Name are increasingly the subject of public discussion and debate. The resolve and steadfastness you have exhibited and the extraordinary powers of concentration you have shown in carrying forward your day-to-day affairs, in discharging your spiritual duties and in serving your country, together with the dignity you have manifested and the constructive resilience of spirit you have evinced in the face of countless hardships—these have won you widespread admiration.

126.2The Prosecutor General of Iran has recently declared illegal the existence of the Yárán and the Khádimín. This is an astonishing assertion, given that, for some twenty years, government agencies have had regular contact with them and have been aware of their activities. From the confines of prison, the members of the Yárán have made clear their view that, if indeed the government no longer considers acceptable present arrangements for administering the affairs of the Bahá'í community, it would pose no major obstacle to bring these arrangements to a close. In so doing, the community would, they have emphasized, demonstrate once again its goodwill to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as it has done heretofore.

126.3We find the decision of the Yárán to be both wise and appropriate under the circumstances. In view of the current imprisonment of these trusted ones of God, who have served with such ability and discernment their spiritual brothers and sisters in their homeland, responsibility for implementing this decision now rests on the Khádimín across the country. These dearly cherished souls have, in turn, demonstrated exemplary self-sacrifice in the path of service to the Cause of God. Knowing full well their skill and resourcefulness, we are confident that they will bring their work to a close in a suitable manner, taking into account all necessary considerations. That the Yárán and the Khádimín have ceased their collective functioning will not, we are certain, unduly concern the beleaguered Bahá'í community of Iran. You, the much-loved and sorely tried friends in the Cradle of the Faith of God, valiant knights in the arena of servitude and fidelity, will draw on the power inherent in unity and mutual support and, aided by divine confirmations, will find appropriate ways of managing your spiritual and social affairs and engaging in service to your nation and its citizens. The illustrious record of your community over one hundred and sixty-five years can but reinforce this conviction.

126.4In collaboration with the agencies of the United Nations, as well as human rights activists and progressive thinkers everywhere, National Spiritual Assemblies spanning the globe are striving with renewed vigour to defend the rights you have been so long denied. The Bahá'í International Community addressed an open letter on 4 March 2009 to the Prosecutor General, setting out certain fundamental points in response to his announcement. During these blessed days of the Fast, your fellow believers throughout the world hold you especially in their prayers and, conscious of the spiritual forces released through your courage and sacrifice, are sparing no effort to ensure the advancement of the Cause of God and the promotion of the well-being and prosperity of humankind. In the Holy Shrines we offer supplications on your behalf and, with utmost fervour and devotion, beseech the Abhá Beauty that He

may bestow justice and fairness upon clerics and rulers alike and that the day of your emancipation from the fetters of baseless prejudice and long-standing oppression may be hastened.

The Universal House of Justice

127

Open letter to the Prosecutor General in Iran

6 March 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

127.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to apprise you of the following recent developments in the Cradle of the Faith.

127.2On 15 February 2009, Ayatollah Qorban-Ali Dorri-Najafabadi, the Prosecutor General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, declared illegal the ad hoc arrangements that tend to the spiritual and social affairs of the Bahá'í community of Iran. In response, the Yárán from their prison cell have stated that if the current arrangements for administering the affairs of the Bahá'í community are no longer acceptable to the government, to bring them to a close would not present a major obstacle. They have indicated that this is to further demonstrate the goodwill that the Bahá'ís have consistently shown to the government of the Islamic Republic for the past thirty years. The House of Justice agreed with the wisdom of the proposed approach. Consequently, the Yárán and the Khádimín are now bringing to a close their collective functioning.

127.3On 4 March 2009, the Bahá'í International Community addressed an open letter to the Prosecutor General, relaying to him its perspectives on this deplorable action against the Bahá'ís in Iran. The communication has also been posted on its Web site at www.bic.org and is enclosed herewith in both its Persian and English versions.

127.4Notwithstanding the gravity of the accusations levelled against them, the steps being taken by the Yárán and the Khádimín to bring to a close their functioning should not cause undue concern. There are many ways for the friends to arrange their affairs informally, and there is no doubt that the valiant Bahá'ís of Iran will continue to manage the spiritual life of their community and, to the extent possible, contribute to the advancement of their nation. What must be borne in mind, however, is that these actions by the authorities are but the most recent manifestations of a systematic campaign of persecution that aims at the eradication of the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in the land of its birth. In recent years, the harassment and ill-treatment of our fellow believers in Iran have reached new levels of intensity as certain elements historically hostile towards the Cause have assumed growing influence in the affairs of the country.

127.5We call on you to invite the believers in your community to join you, during these spiritually charged days of the Fast, in offering prayers for the protection of their brothers and sisters in Iran. You are free to share the foregoing information and the enclosed communication with the Bahá'ís throughout your country, reassuring them that Bahá'í institutions and selected individuals are undertaking wide-ranging and concerted efforts

to defend the friends in Iran. The enclosures may also be shared with others, as you deem appropriate. Should the House of Justice wish you to take additional action, such a request will be conveyed to you separately.

127.6The heroic steadfastness of the Bahá'ís in the Cradle of the Faith has released mighty spiritual forces into the world. It has, too, evoked the highest admiration of the believers across the globe, whose yearning to alleviate the tribulations of their Bahá'í sisters and brothers in Iran is deeply felt and lovingly acknowledged by the House of Justice. What all must realize is that this longing may best be expressed through single-minded dedication to the prosecution of the Five Year Plan. May every follower of the Blessed Beauty seize the opportunities that present themselves for the advancement of the Cause, confident that the victories won will bring abiding joy to the members of the long-suffering, renowned community in His native land.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Open letter to the Prosecutor General in Iran

4 March 2009

Ayatollah Qorban-Ali Dorri-NajafabadiProsecutor General

Islamic Republic of Iran

Your Honor,

127.7Your recent announcement regarding the administrative affairs of the Bahá'ís of Iran has brought to the arena of public debate issues which not only affect the safety and livelihood of the members of that community but also have profound implications for the future of every citizen of that esteemed nation. The steps that have been taken to formulate the response of the Iranian Bahá'í community to your announcement have surely been communicated to you. The Yaran and the Khademin, the small groups that have been attending to the spiritual and social needs of the several hundred thousand Bahá'ís of Iran, the former at the national level and the latter at the local, have expressed their willingness to bring to a close their collective functioning. This decision has been made for no other reason than to demonstrate yet again the goodwill that the Bahá'ís have consistently shown to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the past thirty years.

127.8The Universal House of Justice has assured us that the disruption in the functioning of these groups need not be seen as a cause for concern. There is no doubt in the minds of millions of Bahá'ís residing in virtually every country around the world—nor in the minds of many others who are watching these events with impartiality and who are aware of the historical development of the Faith—that the Bahá'ís in Iran will find ways of managing the spiritual life of their community, as they have done for generations over the past one hundred and sixty-five years of persecution. However, given the gravity of the accusations leveled against the Yaran and the Khademin, we feel obliged, as the representatives at the United Nations of one hundred and seventy-nine National Spiritual Assemblies encircling the globe, to bring certain fundamental points to your attention in an open letter and request that you examine them with the sense of fairness they deserve.

127.9In reference to Article 20 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran pertaining to the rights of its citizens, as well as Article 23 related to freedom of belief, you have stated: “Adherence to a principle or belief is free [to anyone], but to openly express and proclaim it in order to cause deviation in the thoughts of others, to manipulate, pretend, disseminate [ideas], and otherwise attempt to deceive and confuse people will not be permissible.” Such a statement tests credulity to an extreme. It is widely recognized that similar statements have been used by repressive regimes throughout the centuries to justify the arbitrary suppression of conscience and belief. The suggestion that it is possible to separate the convictions held by an individual from their expression in words and action begins an entirely false line of reasoning. To see its absurdity one need only ask oneself what it means to have faith if it is not consciously manifested in one’s relationships with others. Qualifying the argument by implying that only those expressions of belief which cause deviation in the thoughts of others are objectionable may appear reasonable at a first glance. In reality, of course, it is a means of granting license to those in authority to suppress whomsoever they wish, for it leaves open the possibility of labeling any action or comment not to their liking as a cause of deviation in the thoughts of others. In any event, the record of the Bahá’ís of Iran is clear in this respect. They have never sought to cause such deviation, nor have they ever attempted to deceive and confuse people. Since you have raised the issue of freedom of belief in the context of the articles pertaining to the rights of Iranian citizens, knowing full well the Bahá’í record, we can only assume that you have made curtailment in the functioning of the Yaran and the Khademin a condition for according the Bahá’ís at least some of the rights which they have been denied for some thirty years now.

127.10The facts of the matter are, of course, well known to you:

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979, the Bahá’ís of Iran, who had long been the victims of periodic outbreaks of violence, the later rounds of which had been instigated by the notorious SAVAK, were subjected to a fresh wave of persecution.

In August 1980 all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Iran—a national council whose election and functioning are prescribed in the Bahá’í teachings and which forms part of the Bahá’í administrative structure in all countries—were abducted and disappeared without a trace. Undoubtedly they were executed.

Members subsequently elected to this council, as well as scores of individuals with influence in the Bahá’í community, including several members of Local Spiritual Assemblies—councils operating at the local level—were executed by the government in the years immediately after.

In response to the announcement made by the Prosecutor General of Iran in 1983 calling for the dismantling of the Bahá’í administrative structure, the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran dissolved itself and the rest of the administrative structure in the country as a demonstration of goodwill towards the government.

Subsequently, ad hoc arrangements were made to tend to the spiritual and social

needs of the 300,000 Bahá'ís in Iran through the formation of the Yaran at the national level and the Khademin at the local level.

For some twenty years, government agencies had regular contact with the Yaran and the Khademin—some times friendly and other times in the form of unreasonably long and aggressive interrogations—consulted with their members and were entirely aware of their activities. The possibility of some degree of dialogue between the Bahá'ís and government agencies seemed to be emerging. During that same period, however, a 1991 memorandum signed by Hujjatu'l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, then Secretary of the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, came to light. It called for the "progress and development" of the Bahá'ís in Iran to be "blocked" through a number of specific measures it advocated and for a plan "to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."

While the harassment and ill-treatment of Bahá'ís continued uninterrupted during this period, they have been taken to new levels of intensity in recent years as certain elements that have historically been bent on the destruction of the Bahá'í community have assumed growing influence in the affairs of the country.

The official campaign to malign the name of the Faith through the mass media—through newspaper articles and Web sites, through radio and television programs and films—escalated around 2005; it has proceeded unabated to this day. There can be little doubt that systematic steps are being taken to implement the provisions set out in the 1991 memorandum.

In March 2006 a confidential letter from the Iranian military headquarters, dated 29 October 2005, asking various intelligence agencies and police organizations, in addition to the Revolutionary Guard, to identify and monitor Bahá'ís around the country, came to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, raising great concern throughout the world for the safety of the Bahá'ís.

For more than two decades young Bahá'ís were barred from entering university through an application process that would require them to deny their faith. Though a modification in the process, achieved through worldwide public pressure, enabled a few hundred to register at the start of the 2006–2007 academic year, their hopes of pursuing higher education were soon dashed. That same year the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology issued a letter to eighty-one universities, instructing them to expel any student known to be a Bahá'í.

The abovementioned letter was followed by another in April 2007 from the Public Intelligence and Security Force restricting the involvement of Bahá'ís, already barred from employment in the public sector, in some twenty types of businesses. The document reinforced ongoing efforts to strangle the economic life of the Bahá'í community.

In these past few years, the number of Bahá'ís arrested without cause has climbed; the confiscation of Bahá'í personal property has grown; attacks on Bahá'í homes have escalated; acts of arson against Bahá'í properties have proliferated; the desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries have spread; the sealing of shops owned by Bahá'ís has increased; refusals

of bank loans and business licenses to Bahá'ís have multiplied; harassment of landlords with Bahá'í tenants has intensified; threats against fellow citizens who associate with Bahá'ís have mounted; and the vilification of Bahá'í children in their classrooms by teachers has been on the rise. That such acts are being systematically orchestrated city by city is unquestionable.

Then last year the seven members of the Yaran were imprisoned, one of them in March and the remaining six in May. For some time they were held in solitary confinement and denied access to their families. Although eventually family members were allowed brief visits under strict observation, the prisoners have yet to be given access to legal counsel. The conditions of their incarceration have varied in degree of severity over the course of the past several months, with the five male members confined at one time to a cell no more than ten square meters in size, with no bed.

Finally, after some nine months of imprisonment, during which time not a shred of evidence could be found linking the members of the Yaran to any wrongdoing, they were accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic," and it has been announced that their case will soon be submitted to court with a request for indictment.

This announcement was followed almost immediately by news reports which indicated that you had written to the Minister of Intelligence stating that the existence of the Yaran and the Khademin in Iran is illegal, while at the same time raising the question of the constitutional right of Iranian citizens to freedom of belief. You then made an official announcement to this effect.

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127.11Your Honor, the events of recent years and the nature of the accusations made raise questions in the mind of every unbiased observer as to the intent behind the systematic perpetration of injustice against the Bahá'ís of Iran. Even if there might have been some misunderstandings about the motives of the Bahá'í community during the early turbulent days of the revolution, how can such suspicions persist today? Can it be that any member of the esteemed government of Iran truly believes the false accusations which have been perpetuated about the

Bahá'ís in that country? Are not the following facts well known to the authorities in the various branches of the government?

In whatever country they reside, Bahá'ís strive to promote the welfare of society. They are enjoined to work alongside their compatriots in fostering fellowship and unity and in establishing peace and justice. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of others, through whatever legal means are available to them, conducting themselves at all times with honesty and integrity. They eschew conflict and dissension. They avoid contest for worldly power.

It is a fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith that its followers strictly refrain from involvement in any partisan political activity, whether local, national or international. Bahá'ís view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society, and obedience to the laws of the land is a distinguishing feature of their beliefs.

To take any action in willful violation of allegiance to one's own country is

explicitly proscribed in the Scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith. Adherence to this principle has been amply demonstrated by Bahá'ís everywhere.

The Bahá'í administrative structure, which is established in more than one hundred and eighty countries worldwide, is a means for channeling the energies of Bahá'ís in service to the common good and for organizing the religious and social affairs of the Bahá'í community itself. For Bahá'ís, the concept does not imply in any way the existence of a political agenda or any kind of interference in the affairs of the government.

The international headquarters of the Bahá'í Faith is located within the borders of modern-day Israel as a result of the successive banishments imposed on Bahá'u'lláh in the mid-nineteenth century by the Persian and Ottoman governments. Exiled from His native Persia, Bahá'u'lláh was sent to Baghdad, Constantinople and Adrianople and finally to the fortress-city of Acre in 1868, eighty years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, where He eventually died in 1892. That Bahá'ís in all parts of the world are today in contact with the international headquarters of their Faith regarding their individual and collective affairs is entirely natural and is a well-established fact.

Bahá'ís have the highest respect for all religions. Our Writings refer to Islam as "the blessed and luminous religion of God" and the Prophet Muhammad as "the refulgent lamp of supreme Prophethood," "the Lord of creation" and "the Day-star of the world," Who, "through the will of God, shone forth from the horizon of Hijaz." The station of Imam Ali is described in terms such as "the moon of the heaven of knowledge and understanding" and "the sovereign of the court of knowledge and wisdom." In the Tablet of Visitation revealed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself for Imam Husayn, He refers to him as "the pride of the martyrs" and "the day-star of renunciation shining above the horizon of creation."

Bahá'ís are exhorted to evince a high sense of moral rectitude in their activities, chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with people of every race, class and creed.

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127.12In light of these well-established facts, Your Honor, it is difficult to understand how words such as "manipulative" and "deceitful," "dangerous" and "threatening," can be applied to Bahá'í activity in Iran. Do you consider dangerous the efforts of a group of young people who, out of a sense of obligation to their fellow citizens, work with youngsters from families of little means to improve their mathematics and language skills and to develop their abilities to play a constructive part in the progress of their nation? Is it a threat to society for Bahá'ís to discuss with their neighbors noble and high-minded ideals, reinforcing the conviction that the betterment of the world is to be achieved through pure and goodly deeds and through commendable and seemly conduct? In what way is it manipulative for a couple to speak in the privacy of their home with a few friends confused by the portrayal of Bahá'ís in the mass media and to share with them the true nature of their beliefs, which revolve around such fundamental verities as the oneness of God and the oneness of humankind? What duplicity is there if a child

at school, after listening to offensive language about the Founder of her Faith Whom she so loves, politely raises her hand and requests permission to explain to her classmates some of the teachings she follows? What deceit is there if a young person, committed to the acquisition of knowledge and learning, seeks the right from the authorities to enter university without having to lie about his faith? What harm is done if several families gather together periodically for communal worship and for the discussion of matters of concern to them all? Given that the human soul has no sex, is it so alarming for someone to express the view that men and women are equal in the sight of God and should be able to work shoulder to shoulder in all fields of human endeavor? And is it so unreasonable for a small group of people, in the absence of the administrative structures prescribed in their teachings, to facilitate the marriage of young couples, the education of children and the burial of the dead in conformity with the tenets of their Faith?

127.13These are but a few examples of the various endeavors for which the Bahá'ís of Iran are being so grievously persecuted. It is the right to engage in such activity that has been denied them for thirty years.

127.14Your Honor, many times over these twenty years the Yaran and the Khademin have been told by government officials that they are in fact protecting the Bahá'í community from those who regard its members as a negative element in society. It is true that there may be a small fraction in any populace who, succumbing to the forces of hatred and enmity, can be incited to perform acts of cruelty and oppression. But, in the main, our vision of the Iranian people does not correspond with the one projected by such officials. Narrow-mindedness and pettiness are not the qualities that we attribute to them. Rather do we see the staunch commitment to justice evinced by the citizens of one town who petitioned the government when several shops owned by Bahá'ís were closed without reason. We see the fidelity shown by the young musicians who refused to perform when their Bahá'í counterparts were prohibited from playing in a recital. We see the courage and tenacity of university students who stood ready to prepare a petition and to forgo participation in examinations that their Bahá'í classmates were barred from taking. We see the compassion and generosity of spirit exhibited by the neighbors of one family, whose home was attacked with a bulldozer, in their expressions of sympathy and support, offered at all hours of the night, and in their appeals for justice and recompense. And we hear in the voices raised by so many Iranians in defense of their Bahá'í compatriots echoes from their country's glorious past. What we cannot help noting, with much gratitude towards them in our hearts, is that a majority of those coming out in support of the beleaguered Bahá'í community are themselves suffering similar oppression as students and academics, as journalists and social activists, as artists and poets, as progressive thinkers and proponents of women's rights, and even as ordinary citizens.

127.15Your Honor, the decisions to be taken by the judiciary in Iran in the coming days will have implications that extend well beyond the Bahá'í community in that land—what is at stake is the very cause of the freedom of conscience for all the peoples of your nation. It is our hope that, for the

sanctity of Islam and the honor of Iran, the judiciary will be fair in its judgment.

Respectfully,

Bahá'í International Community

128

Continued Functioning of the Community in Iran

18 March 2009

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

128.1In this sacred period of the Fast, our hearts are filled with sorrow at the increased oppression that afflicts your sorely tried community. Yet the resilience of your spirit is an inspiration to witness, and we are encouraged by the rise in spiritual susceptibility everywhere apparent in the world, not least in your homeland, and by the accumulating achievements of the Cause of God in all parts of the globe. The growing support among the general populace in defence of your rights is equally heartening. In accepting to bring to a close the collective functioning of the Yárán and the Khádimín, you have demonstrated to the authorities once again that yours are not the ways of conflict and contention. It is only the freedom to serve your country and humankind, at the prompting of the principles and teachings of your Faith, that you seek. Your willingness to accept this most recent restriction imposed on your community does not imply, of course, that you will refrain in any way from discharging your spiritual and social responsibilities.

128.2Reflect for a moment on the religions of the past, how in every age the Cause of God has withstood the storms of enmity and opposition that have raged against it, no matter how severe. Consider, as well, how every attempt in this Dispensation to suppress the development of the Faith has spurred its further progress and released untold potentialities in its avowed supporters. Divine Will has ever been thus, for the appearance of spring is conditioned upon the bitter winds of winter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated: "The weeping of the cloud giveth rise to the smile of the rose, and the crash of thunder maketh way for the warbling of the nightingale. The intensity of the cold bringeth on the beauty of the bloom and the chilling rain adorneth the garden with blossoms of every hue."

128.3It is fitting, indeed, that in these tumultuous times the believers would band together ever more closely in support of one another. As you set out on the new path now open to you, it will be important to bear two points in mind. On the one hand, you should respect the decision of the Yárán and the Khádimín to cease their collective functioning. On the other, drawing on the creative power of the Covenant, animated by your infinite love for Bahá'u'lláh, and following the illustrious example set by the heroes of the Faith over the past one hundred and sixty-five years, you should strive to conduct your spiritual and social affairs and pursue endeavours in service to your fellow citizens. Our confidence in this regard, expressed in our message dated 5 March 2009, has been redoubled upon reading the recent letters written by the Bahá'í youth of Iran and by the former Khádimín of Kirmán.

128.4Beloved friends: On the path that you must now tread, patience and

forbearance will be the steed that carries you forward; reliance on God and steadfastness in His Covenant will be the spiritual sustenance that nourishes you; unity and mutual support will be the standard that you hold aloft; confirmations from the Kingdom will be the shield that protects you; a land wherein peace and concord prevail will be the destiny that you strive to attain; and nearness unto God and eternal happiness and honour will be the reward that you seek. Steel your resolve then, and don the mantle of valour and wisdom. Press forward with renewed fervour and zeal that you may achieve life's true purpose and may shelter in the divine nest that abides on the celestial tree.

128.5It is gratifying to learn that consultation among Bahá'í families on how best to manage their individual and social affairs is becoming more widespread. Consultation, so central to all aspects of Bahá'í life, is a fundamental principle of the Faith. Its application is not confined to the work of Bahá'í institutions. Families and individuals are also enjoined to employ it in all matters. You should be confident that the promotion of the principle of consultation among Bahá'í families will go far in raising your community's level of maturity and enhancing its effectiveness, enabling you to render an ever-widening range of services. Be a source of encouragement and support to one another, and strive to ensure that as many decisions as possible are made among families. Persevere in the spiritual and moral education of your children and in your study of the Sacred Writings. Such must be the strength of your solidarity that the malevolent will be powerless to create the least dissension among you. Remain current with news of the activities of your spiritual brothers and sisters across the globe, and let not the cessation of the functioning of the Yárán and the Khádimín give rise to a sense of isolation. Further, you should not hesitate to contact us, if necessary, drawing on the assistance of Bahá'í institutions in other parts of the world or friends and family outside of Iran.

128.6We remember you, valiant knights in the arena of fidelity, in the Holy Shrines and pray that the angels of Heaven may rush to your aid.

The Universal House of Justice

129

Appointment of Continental Counsellor

19 March 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

129.1We are pleased to announce the appointment of Mr. Navid Serrano to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas for the remainder of the present term, to fill the vacancy which resulted from the passing of Rebequa Murphy.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

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Naw-Rúz Message 2009

21 March 2009

To the Bahá'ís of the World

130.1This Naw-Rúz marks the centenary of one of the outstanding events in the Apostolic Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation, the interment by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the sacred remains of the Báb in their permanent resting place on God's holy mountain. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The most joyful tidings is this, that the holy, the luminous body of the Báb … after having for sixty years been transferred from place to place, by reason of the ascendancy of the enemy, and from fear of the malevolent, and having known neither rest nor tranquillity has, through the mercy of the Abhá Beauty, been ceremoniously deposited, on the day of Naw-Rúz, within the sacred casket, in the exalted Shrine on Mt. Carmel."

130.2In commemoration of that triumph of the Cause, the members of the Universal House of Justice, accompanied by the members of the International Teaching Centre, have today offered prayers of thanksgiving in the Shrine of the Báb on behalf of the worldwide Bahá'í community, expressing gratitude for the unfailing divine protection vouchsafed to the Cause of God. In their solemn contemplation, their hearts were stirred as they recalled the indelible image of the Master left to posterity when, on this day a hundred years ago, having with His own hands laid that peerless Trust in its final place of repose, He rested His head upon the edge of the blessed casket of the Báb, and "sobbing aloud, wept with such a weeping that all those who were present wept with Him". They remembered, too, the manifold obstacles with which He had been confronted in constructing this sacred edifice and His unbounded relief at having accomplished one of the principal objectives of His Ministry.

130.3A century ago, the Faith was emerging from a period of severe crisis during which the incarceration of 'Abdu'l-Bahá by His inveterate antagonists in the Ottoman Empire had been renewed, a grievous assault on the unity of the Cause had been launched by the Covenant-breakers, and an upsurge in the persecution of the heroic Persian believers had produced a fresh wave of sacrifice. In the immediate future there lay dazzling victories. The strenuous and fate-laden journeys of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the western world would release incalculable spiritual powers destined to give rise to unprecedented progress of the Faith in the American and European continents He visited. The Tablets of the Divine Plan would set in motion processes designed to bring about, in due course, the spiritual transformation of the planet. The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá would establish the basis for a future world order.

130.4Today the Cause of God is again confronted by cruel and relentless opponents seeking in vain to eradicate it in the land of its birth. However, this is occurring in a world far different from that of a hundred years ago, when the Faith was largely unknown and its defenders were few. From all parts of the world the followers of Bahá'u'lláh appeal for justice, while providing, in the example of their lives, compelling evidence of the absurdity of the accusations levelled against their Iranian brethren. In this appeal they are joined by fair-minded people of all backgrounds, including thousands of Iranians who express their concern at the denial of the human rights of their Bahá'í compatriots.

130.5The sacrifices of the Báb and the dawn-breakers of the Cause are yielding

abundant fruit. Energized and confident, the followers of the Greatest Name throughout the world have mobilized their resources in a vast and concerted endeavour to offer the healing balm of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings to the multitudes of humanity. The magnificent progress achieved over the past century demonstrates the invincible power with which the Cause is endowed. It is but a portent of the ultimate realization of the oneness of humankind.

The Universal House of Justice

131

Ridván Message 2009

Ridván 2009

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

131.1A mere three years ago we set before the Bahá'í world the challenge of exploiting the framework for action that had emerged with such clarity at the conclusion of the last global Plan. The response, as we had hoped, was immediate. With great vigour the friends everywhere began to pursue the goal of establishing intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide, and the number of such programmes soon started to climb. But no one could have imagined then how profoundly the Lord of Hosts, in His inscrutable wisdom, intended to transform His community in so short a span of time. What a purposeful and confident community it was that celebrated its accomplishments at the midway point of the current Plan in forty-one regional conferences across the globe! What an extraordinary contrast did its coherence and energy provide to the bewilderment and confusion of a world caught in a spiral of crisis! This, indeed, was the community of the blissful to which the Guardian had referred. This was a community aware of the vast potentialities with which it has been endowed and conscious of the role it is destined to play in rebuilding a broken world. This was a community in the ascendant, subject to severe repression in one part of the globe, yet rising up undeterred and undismayed as a united whole and strengthening its capacity to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression. And in the nearly eighty-thousand participants who attended the conferences we saw the emergence on the historical scene of an individual believer supremely confident in the efficacy of the Plan's methods and instruments and remarkably deft at wielding them. Each and every soul of this mighty sea stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith. Each and every one was evidence of Bahá'u'lláh's promise to assist all those who arise with detachment and sincerity to serve Him. Each and every one offered a glimpse of that race of beings, consecrated and courageous, pure and sanctified, destined to evolve over generations under the direct influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In them we saw the first signs of the fulfilment of our hope expressed at the outset of the Plan that the edifying influence of the Faith would be extended to hundreds of thousands through the institute process. There is every indication that, by the end of the Ridván period, the number of intensive programmes of growth around the world will have crossed the 1,000 mark. What more can we do at the opening of this most joyous Festival than to bow our heads in humility before God and offer Him

thanksgiving for His unbounded generosity to the community of the Greatest Name.

The Universal House of Justice

132

The Nineteen Day Feast

17 May 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

132.1In its Ridván message of 2008, the Universal House of Justice referred to the widening impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between the three participants in the Five Year Plan. The celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast has not remained unaffected by this growing dynamism. Everywhere the devotional portion of the Feast is enriched by the sense of reverence cultivated through personal prayer and regular devotional gatherings. The administrative portion is animated by reports on the progress of the Cause, as well as insights contributed by eager believers drawn from diverse populations, both newly enrolled and long-standing, engaged in Bahá'í activity. The social portion transcends polite formalities, becoming the joyous reunion of ardent lovers, of tested companions united in a common purpose, whose conversations are elevated by spiritual themes.

132.2Over the course of the Plan, in response to questions that have been raised about the Nineteen Day Feast, the House of Justice has described how certain fundamental principles are to be applied within the context of a steadily expanding community that is embracing souls from all walks of life, from every background. Since its comments in this respect may well be of interest to all National Spiritual Assemblies, we have been asked to write to you as follows.

Decentralization of the Feast in urban centres

132.3The decentralization of the Nineteen Day Feast in urban centres, where a significant percentage of humanity currently resides, is an inevitable consequence of the growth of the Faith, marking a significant stage in the organic development of a local community. While care should be taken to avoid instituting this practice precipitously when the number of believers in the entire city is relatively small, a Local Spiritual Assembly should not feel obliged to prolong the pattern of hosting a community-wide Feast if it is no longer propitious. Such a change may be required when limited time or facilities hamper the satisfactory observance of the three parts of the Feast in a single location, most notably the portion devoted to consultation on community affairs. Experience to date has demonstrated the salutary effect of decentralizing the Feast on the quality of participation, on bonds of fellowship, and on the overall process of growth. Although some believers may yearn for the enthusiasm generated by large community gatherings, this need can be met on other occasions arranged by the Assembly.

132.4In this connection, we are requested to draw your attention to the 27 December 2005 message of the House of Justice which indicated that, as the process of growth continued to gather momentum worldwide, urban centres would need to be divided into progressively smaller areas, perhaps ultimately into

neighbourhoods, as a means of facilitating planning and implementation. Not only would such areas become focal points of activity, the message suggested, but in each the Nineteen Day Feast would be conducted. Already in some cities around the world the Feast is held at the intimate level of the neighbourhood.

132.5Dividing a local community into areas for the purpose of celebrating the Feast is not without certain challenges. In many cities around the world, for instance, people have been segregated into areas according to various factors such as race, ethnicity, and economic conditions. A Local Assembly must be mindful that barriers entrenched in the wider population are not inadvertently perpetuated in the local Bahá'í community as a whole. By the same token, it must recognize that, for believers newly enrolled in the community, the desire to assume responsibility for the affairs of the Faith is cultivated more readily in gatherings close to home, in a familiar environment.

132.6In deciding to decentralize the Feast, a Local Assembly will need to determine how the devotional portion will be organized and how reports, news, and announcements will be shared. A common set of materials for the administrative part of the Feast would generally be disseminated each Bahá'í month to every area designated to host a gathering, including any particular topics or questions that should be raised. The Assembly will also want to ensure that consultations in each area are fruitful and productive, that the views of the friends are brought to its attention, and that it responds to recommendations in a loving and constructive manner. To this end, it may decide to designate one or more friends to act on its behalf in chairing the gathering, recording the results of consultations, and receiving contributions to the Fund.

Choice of language

132.7As a general principle, the Nineteen Day Feast and other official Bahá'í gatherings should be conducted in the conventional language spoken by the people of the locality. However, as social and economic conditions throughout the world continue to change, it is not unreasonable to assume that more and more people will be forced to migrate to urban centres, forming pockets of minorities, each with a distinct language, as can already be seen, for example, in the concentrations of Spanish-speaking populations in North America or of certain tribal populations in Africa. In such instances, when the Feast is decentralized, the question may well arise as to whether the programme can be conducted in the language spoken by the minority population most prevalent in a neighbourhood. At this stage, the House of Justice does not wish to lay down any hard and fast rules, and it is left to the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly concerned to decide, under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly, how to address the matter, approaching it with both flexibility and an attitude of learning.

132.8Naturally, whether the Feast is held centrally or in several locations, a Local Assembly will want all the friends to feel that they are part of one unified community, irrespective of linguistic differences, and will take steps to ensure that an inviting atmosphere is created. To this end, selections from the Writings in the diverse languages spoken by the friends might well be included in the devotional programme of the Feast. Further, suitable ways

should be found to inform believers not fluent in the language in which the Feast is conducted of the content of major messages and announcements. During consultations, they should be afforded an opportunity to express their views, in their own language if necessary. It should be feasible to offer any translation needed in a manner that does not interfere with the smooth running of the meeting.

Attendance of those who are not Bahá'ís

132.9The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Cause, which serves, in part, as a means for the Bahá'í community to address its affairs in a full and frank manner, without fear of creating misunderstandings among those unfamiliar with its purpose. It is for this reason that participation is limited to members of the Bahá'í community.

132.10In general, the believers are discouraged from inviting those who are not Bahá'ís to the commemoration of the Feast. However, friends of the Faith do sometimes appear unexpectedly, and they are not to be turned away. Courtesy and the spirit of fellowship require that they be warmly received. In this light, unanticipated visitors, who were by and large infrequent in the past, have been welcome to join the devotional and social portions of the Feast, but either they were asked to absent themselves during the administrative portion or that segment of the programme would be eliminated entirely.

132.11Now, with the Plan's framework for action well established in so many places, growing numbers enjoy ready access to Bahá'í community life through the core activities, and there is greatly increased likelihood that those who are close to the Faith will learn about the Nineteen Day Feast and appear at its celebration. The House of Justice has decided that, in such instances, rather than eliminating the administrative portion completely or asking the visitors to withdraw, those conducting the programme can modify this part of the Feast to accommodate the guests. The sharing of local and national news and information about social events, as well as consultation on topics of general interest, such as the teaching work, service projects, the Fund, and so on, can take place as usual, while discussion of sensitive or problematic issues related to these or other topics can be set aside for another time when the friends can express themselves freely without being inhibited by the presence of visitors.

132.12A similar approach to the administrative portion may be adopted when the Feast is celebrated in the home of a family with some members who are not Bahá'ís. As part of planning these occasions, careful thought must be given, on the one hand, to the requisites of hospitality and love, and, on the other, to those of confidentiality and unfettered discussion on important and sensitive subjects. The Local Assembly, in consultation with the believers who have such relatives, should endeavour to find a satisfactory way to resolve each situation that arises.

Accumulating experience

132.13The continued expansion of the Bahá'í community in the years to come will surely give rise to a range of challenges that will affect how the devotional, administrative, and social aspects of the Nineteen Day Feast are conducted in diverse localities. Responsibility for addressing these

challenges will fall, in the first instance, on Local Spiritual Assemblies. Theirs is the duty to remain alert to conditions in their communities, to consult with the friends, to respond thoughtfully to a multiplicity of needs and circumstances, and to remain flexible without compromising fundamental principles. In this connection, they would naturally seek advice from the Auxiliary Board members. National Spiritual Assemblies will, in collaboration with the Counsellors, follow developments closely, familiarize themselves with approaches taken in different localities, facilitate learning to determine which approaches prove most effective over time, and offer guidance and encouragement.

132.14We are to assure you of the supplications of the Universal House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that the Blessed Beauty may confirm your ongoing efforts to guide the friends in discharging their vital responsibilities to promote the Cause of God throughout the world.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

133

The Role of Consultation and the Nineteen Day Feast in Iran

19 May 2009

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

133.1From National Conventions conducted across the globe over the past few weeks, there resounded expressions of the love and sympathy that Bahá'ís everywhere, proud to be counted as your spiritual brothers and sisters, hold for you in their hearts. Aware of the spiritual energies released by your steadfastness and sacrifice and reinforced thereby, they are engaged in defending your rights, propagating the Bahá'í teachings, and contributing to the well-being of the world of humanity.

133.2Included among the many communications referred to in our letter dated 14 May 2009 are reports of the unprecedented rise you have witnessed in opportunities to dispel from the minds of your fellow citizens misunderstandings regarding the history and teachings of the Faith. That you have demonstrated increasing resilience, holding fast to your beliefs and carrying out your spiritual obligations despite intensified persecution, has had far-reaching effects, the implications of which cannot as yet be adequately appreciated. Only time will reveal the full significance of the momentous events which have converged upon you in recent years. Especially noteworthy in this respect are the growing eagerness of the Iranian people to understand the true character of the Faith and the rising awareness among the youth of your country that a new source of hope for the future is to be found in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Your hearts thus assured, we urge you to move forward, wisely and within the framework of the guidance laid out in our previous communications, to discharge your individual spiritual responsibilities.

133.3A number of you have raised questions in your letters that revolve around the theme of strengthening the community. This, indeed, is a matter of fundamental importance, and every believer would do well to bear its

requirements in mind. Already you have seen in the unity of thought and action achieved among the believers, in their enthusiasm and fellowship, the effect that performing your individual spiritual responsibilities has on the life of the community. There are a host of other factors that enhance the vitality of community life as well. Chief among them are the spiritual education provided to children and youth, opportunities created to deepen understanding of the teachings, gatherings held to celebrate the Nineteen Day Feast and to mark other occasions, efforts made to foster and maintain unity in all matters, assistance offered to young people and families in need, and the time spent visiting with friends and neighbours in their homes, engaging in meaningful conversation and weaving bonds of affection and solidarity.

133.4To the degree that the principles and spirit of the Faith are reflected in the character of the community, its vitality will show forth and its individual and collective endeavours increase in efficacy. Present circumstances, which require you to carry on in the absence of the Yárán and the Khádimín and the inspiration and aid they provide, will demand of each of you new levels of tolerance and discipline, as well as a commitment to encourage and support one another. At the same time you should recognize that, as your individual activities take on a more outward-looking orientation, the management of the internal affairs of the community will grow easier.

133.5The discharge of the foregoing individual and collective responsibilities forms part of Bahá'í identity; it is one of the commitments to which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is held. Such expressions of your belief are well within recognized standards of individual human rights. Continue, then, to carry them out with confidence and vigour, guided by the dictates of wisdom, faithful to civil law, and sensitive to social conditions.

133.6Our letter to you dated 18 March 2009 called attention to the role consultation plays in raising the community's level of maturity and in enhancing its effectiveness. Thus, we were pleased to note from your recent letters its more widespread practice among the believers. The law of consultation, as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, is a fundamental teaching of the Faith. He tells us that through consultation the "maturity of the gift of understanding" is made manifest. "It is and will always be", He states, "a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being." "Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude", He further asserts. "It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth." Consultation paves the path of individual and collective endeavour. The growth, progress, and enduring unity of the community are ensured by its practice. It is indispensable for the ordering of human affairs. 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to consultation as "the cause of great victories", assuring us that "it attracteth the aid and bestowal of God."

133.7As you know, Bahá'í consultation is to be undertaken with the utmost love, sincerity, and unity. Its participants must come together in a prayerful attitude, seeking assistance from the Realm of Glory, expressing their thoughts freely, surrendering all attachment to their individual opinions, and giving fair-minded and careful consideration to the views of others, in an effort to

reach consensus. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advises us that should it be found, in the course of coming to a decision, that discussion has become prolonged or given rise to disputation, consultation should be deferred and taken up at a more propitious time. Be confident that, as you engage in Bahá’í consultation among families or in small groups, your sincere efforts to abide by these principles will, through the power of the Covenant and with Divine assistance, enable you to resolve a great majority of the issues that confront you. Of course, it must be remembered that the purpose of consultation need not always be to arrive at a particular or final decision. Often the aim may simply be to engage in an exchange of views so as to help clarify a certain matter and bring about unity of vision. Further, you should recognize that, given current circumstances, there may be issues that cannot be resolved at present and which should be left for future consideration.

133.8Some of you have enquired about the Nineteen Day Feast, the observance of which is ordained by Bahá’u’lláh in His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Since the early days of the Faith, the Feast has been a distinctive feature of your spiritual and social life, essential to the development of the individual and the community, and it should continue to be observed with wisdom and with consideration for local circumstances. Within the context of the clear guidance regarding its nature and purpose, you have a wide degree of latitude in which to organize and conduct such meetings.

133.9We remember you often in the Holy Shrines and offer prayers of gratitude for your steadfastness. In you we see these words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made manifest:

O spiritual friends and loved ones of the All-Merciful!

In every Age believers are many but the tested are few. Render ye praise unto God ye that are tested believers, that ye have been subjected to every kind of trial and ordeal in the path of the supreme Lord. In the fire of ordeals, your faces have flushed aglow like unto pure gold, and amidst the flames of cruelty and oppression which the wicked had kindled, ye suffered yourselves to be consumed while remaining all the time patient. Thus ye have initiated every believer into the ways of steadfastness and fortitude.

The Universal House of Justice

134

Passing of Margaret Ruhe

27 May 2009

To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States

134.1We were deeply grieved to learn of the passing of dearly loved and greatly admired handmaiden of the Blessed Beauty Margaret Ruhe. Born into a distinguished family, she was raised in the Urbana, Illinois Bahá’í community, an early stronghold of the Faith in the American heartland, under the benevolent influence of believers whose lives were dominated by their love for the Master. She grew to exemplify many of the attributes of that noble company: unshakable faith, joyous and indefatigable devotion to the Cause, and a gracious, vibrant and caring nature that endeared her to friend and stranger alike. Whether through the deep interest she took in the lives of youth, the hospitality so often offered in her home, or the tender concern she extended to

those who were ill or in need, she was an endless source of loving encouragement. Especially notable have been her contributions to the strengthening of Bahá'í marriage and family life. Her service to the Cause, which continued until her final days, was crowned by two and a half decades of vigorous, unstinting labor at the Bahá'í World Centre. Kindly convey to her sons and family members our heartfelt condolences and assure them of our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her radiant soul throughout the divine realms.

The Universal House of Justice

135

Countering Cruelty with Inner Strength and Confidence in Iran's Future

23 June 2009

To the Bahá'ís of Iran

Dearly loved Friends,

135.1With hearts grieved by events unfolding in Iran, we address this letter to you, the steadfast followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that land. To the concern for your safety that has long weighed on us is now added mounting fear for the safety of millions of Iranian men and women, so many of them at the pinnacle of their youth, their vast potentialities yearning to be realized. How rapidly have veils been rent asunder! Cruelty meted out in calculated measures to you and others over the years has been unleashed in the streets of Iran for all humanity to see. No matter what the turn of events, we are confident you will adhere firmly to the fundamental principle of our Faith that strictly prohibits any involvement in partisan political activity by individual Bahá'ís or by Bahá'í institutions. Yet you cannot remain aloof and insensitive to the suffering of your people. Decades of hardship have prepared each of you to stand as a beacon of strength in the circle of your family and friends, your neighbours and acquaintances, radiating hope and compassion to all those in need. Keep alive in your hearts the feeling of confidence that the future of Iran holds bright promise, the certitude that the light of knowledge will inevitably dispel the clouds of ignorance, the conviction that concern for justice will protect the nation from falling prey to calumny, and the belief that love will ultimately conquer hatred and enmity. You have demonstrated in the example of your lives that the proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action. May the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá resound: "Iran shall become a focal centre of divine splendours. Her darksome soil will become luminous and her land will shine resplendent." You and your compatriots are in our continued prayers.

The Universal House of Justice

136

Granting Bahá'ís in Egypt the Right to Possess Identity Cards

16 August 2009

To the Bahá'ís of Egypt

Dearly loved Friends,

136.1The significance of the landmark ruling accorded to your community by the Supreme Administrative Court in Egypt has emerged into sharper focus since it was announced in March. At last, your steadfast refusal to submit to a glaring injustice yielded its long-anticipated fruit: the right of citizenship, an entitlement so basic that its denial to you attracted the sustained attention and concern of observers both within your own country and abroad. Although the prolonged delay in implementing the ruling cast a shadow over our initial feelings of gladness that your call for fair treatment had been heard, we nevertheless welcome without reservation the court's public assertion that you should not have to deny your faith in order to obtain official documents stating your identity. Many supported you in your struggle, and many from outside your community stand to benefit from the positive outcome. This milestone deserves to be marked, and for the dignity, integrity and commitment to principle you evinced in reaching this point, you have won the respect of the fair-minded.

136.2Sadly, there exist those who remain bitterly opposed to even so modest an advance. Hardly had the news emerged that you had succeeded in securing your right to obtain an identity card than the believers in al-Shuraniya were subjected to fierce attacks upon their properties. Even the home of a Muslim neighbour was destroyed by the frenzied mob. It distressed us all the more to learn that children are among those most acutely affected by this outburst of religious fanaticism—a phenomenon described by Bahá'u'lláh as "a world-devouring fire", a "desolating affliction" from which "the Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind". Our thoughts and prayers are with those caught up in the maelstrom that was unleashed in Sohag, and we regard with admiration the exemplary fortitude and patience they have shown, young and old, in coping with their hardships.

136.3These acts of violence, and the continuing hostility emanating from some quarters, are unhappy confirmations that misconceptions persist in Egypt concerning your aims and motives. To dispel these misunderstandings must now be your constant aim; however, the manner in which you pursue this objective should be in marked contrast to the approach which won you your rights as citizens. With that favourable verdict a new chapter has opened, one that must be characterized not by the plaintive call of the unjustly maligned but by an attitude of service to others that militates against your being drawn into conflict and fruitless disputation. You shall persuade others of your true intentions through your wholehearted implementation of a framework for action finely tempered through the experience of your fellow believers on every continent. We confidently expect the youth to excel in this vital task—indeed, to eclipse their previous accomplishments. With a determination surpassing that which you exhibited in defence of your basic rights, you must resolve to engage more and more well-wishers of mankind in those activities that have proven their capacity to contribute to the betterment of the world. Does not every concerned parent yearn for the means of developing their children's spiritual faculties, laying within them the foundations of a noble and upright character? Would not every young person flourish in a programme that helps to form a strong moral identity in the critical years of early

adolescence and empowers participants to contribute to the well-being of society? Would the lives of your friends and neighbours not be enriched by the profound conversations that naturally arise from systematic study of the Creative Word and the exploration of its implications? Are not the complementary ideals of spiritual and material progress also dear to the hearts of Egyptians, heirs to a civilization as celebrated as any in recorded history? Harbour no doubt that, in a land that was home to some of the Faith's earliest Arab adherents and admirers, there exist countless fair-minded, truth-seeking souls whose spirits will rejoice in apprehending the true purpose underlying the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: a goal no less lofty than the rehabilitation of the world.

136.4Seize the moment. With faith in the confirmations vouchsafed to you, grasp every opportunity to prove the extent of your goodwill towards your country and its people. Share with those you encounter your unalterable belief in the oneness of humankind and your conviction that consciousness of this truth serves to erase all traces of hatred and fanaticism from the heart. Impress upon all who offer you a hearing ear your abiding faith in their capacity to play a part in an ever-advancing civilization. By the excellence of your character and adherence to the dictates of wisdom, by your rejection of contention and strife, by the moderate language of your discourse, you can demonstrate to your society a much needed model of what it means to reflect a faith in Almighty God through one's life and to be citizens worthy of this blessed Day.

136.5Beloved friends: Our hands are lifted up in fervent entreaty to the Ancient Beauty that He may inspire you and fortify your efforts to nurture, in His Name, the seeds of love and fellowship in people's hearts.

The Universal House of Justice

137

Passing of Eloy Anello

4 October 2009

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Bolivia

137.1With heavy hearts we received the news of the passing of Eloy Anello, indefatigable and valiant servant of Bahá'u'lláh. Nearly forty years ago, as the Nine Year Plan was drawing to a close, we urged the friends everywhere to emulate the Bahá'í youth, "whose recent surge forward into the van of proclamation and teaching" was "one of the most encouraging and significant trends in the Faith" and who stormed "the gates of heaven for support in their enterprises by long-sustained, precedent and continuing prayer." Among those who had stepped into the vanguard was dear Eloy, who, as a young man, left the United States and settled in Bolivia in the early 1970s, making it his home and dedicating himself to the upliftment of its people. No one who crossed his path could fail to be touched by his unbounded energy, by his sincere love of humanity, which he brought to every enterprise he undertook in service to the Faith. Especially noteworthy were the valuable contributions he made to the progress of the Cause as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas for two decades. How many young people were awakened to the crying

needs of humanity as a result of his efforts in this capacity. How many were galvanized to arise and serve the Cause. So dedicated was he to nurturing young minds that he co-founded Universidad Núr in Santa Cruz—an institution striving to apply Bahá'í principles to higher education and to programs for the advancement of the indigenous populations.

137.2May his life of consecration to the Cause serve as an inspiration to those laboring to meet the requirements of the current stage of the Divine Plan. To his family and many friends, we extend our loving condolences. Our most fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold join yours for the progress of his noble soul throughout the realms of God. We call on all National Spiritual Assemblies in the Americas to hold memorial gatherings in his honor.

The Universal House of Justice

138

Appointment of Continental Counsellor

16 October 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

138.1For compelling personal reasons, Mr. Sinuhé Lozano has asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa. Mr. Lozano has earned our warm gratitude for the contributions he has made to the work of the Faith as a Counsellor, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround him as he continues his valuable labours in other fields of service to the Cause.

138.2To fill the vacancy thus created, we announce the appointment of Mrs. Helen Otia of Cameroon to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa for the remainder of the present term.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

139

Receptivity to the Faith within Immigrant Populations

17 November 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

139.1In its letter dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice referred to the "unrelenting social and political forces" which "continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents". Over the last four years these forces have shown no signs of ebbing. At the same time, many Bahá'í communities are becoming increasingly confident at sharing Bahá'u'lláh's Message with peoples of all backgrounds. They have frequently reported finding considerable receptivity to the Faith within immigrant populations, including among refugees and asylum seekers coming from places, such as Iran, where to be identified as a Bahá'í would entail overt personal risk. The House of Justice has recently reviewed the guidance on teaching the Faith to this latter group, which stated that they must establish permanent residence before they could be eligible for enrolment. We have been asked to convey the decision of the House of Justice that it is now timely for

this restriction to be lifted: lack of permanent residence in a country no longer disqualifies anyone from enrolment in the Faith.

139.2Naturally, when considering the possible enrolment of a refugee or asylum seeker from a place where it is unsafe to be a Bahá'í, caution is necessary. It is important that would-be declarants appreciate the implications of their taking such a step, giving thought to how family members will react and the difficulties that may arise if one day they return to their homeland. Moreover, you should be conscious that, in many countries, being a Bahá'í strengthens a claim to refugee status and to the right of residence in the place where an individual has sought asylum. Given this consideration, it is necessary that, in each case, you pause to consider whether a person's desire to register as a Bahá'í has arisen from his or her genuine recognition of the Manifestation of God for today.

139.3Faith is a state of conscience that expresses itself in word and deed. Therefore in order to assess, to the extent that it is possible, the sincerity of an individual's motive, you must consider the degree to which he or she outwardly manifests the inner reality of belief. Factors that would weigh in favour of a positive assessment include, but are not limited to, rectitude of conduct; a plausible account of a seeker's attraction to the Cause; sustained interest in the Faith over time; involvement in the activities of the global Plan; and, perhaps above all, a record of actively encouraging the participation of one's children, whether teenaged or younger, in classes for Bahá'í education. While such judgements cannot be arrived at lightly, you must avoid placing hindrances in the path of those whose enthusiasm for the spiritual truths to which they have been awakened may be dulled by excessively stringent requirements. Clearly, current circumstances require that, when gauging a seeker's purity of motive, you assess the cases of asylum seekers from certain countries with a rigour you would not apply to those of seekers from elsewhere; nevertheless, you should guard against there being too great a disparity between the ways in which the motive of each is considered. Of course, your approach in this area should be implemented in a spirit of learning, thereby allowing, over time, for a rise in your capacity to evaluate, with sensitivity and wisdom, each unique situation.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

140

Distinctive Bahá'í Family Life in Iran

24 November 2009

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

140.1News has reached us that, having recently received the Persian translation of the compilation on family life originally released in English in March 2008, you have begun to study its pages and consult on its content. It brings us joy to know that you are giving due attention to a matter of such fundamental importance, and we are moved to share with you a few thoughts in this respect.

140.2The followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world, of every gender, race and ethnicity, are working alongside their friends and colleagues to

build a society rooted in justice and characterized by unity—a society in which individuals see their outward differences as a reflection of the beauty and perfection of the multi-hued rose garden of humanity and in which, drawing inspiration from the Divine teachings and applying their God-given talents, they labour confidently to further the progress of an ever-advancing civilization. Bahá'ís consider it a priceless bounty to participate in this momentous enterprise and recognize that its success depends, in no small measure, on the acquisition of high moral standards. The family unit, the nucleus of human society, constitutes a space within which praiseworthy morals and essential capacities must be developed, for the habits and patterns of conduct nurtured in the home are carried into the workplace, into the social and political life of the country, and finally into the arena of international relations.

140.3Among the signs of moral decay in the present social order is the weakening of the spiritual ties that bind the family. Failure within the household to acknowledge the equality of the sexes and to respect the rights of children gives rise to a culture that belittles women and children, condones the imposition of a single will upon others, and opens the way for aggression and violence—first in the family, then at school and work, and eventually in the streets and in society at large. Under such circumstances, the family environment, potentially the ideal milieu for learning the principles of consultation and collective decision making, serves to perpetuate tyranny and oppression in society.

140.4In the context of family solidarity, an essential point needs to be borne in mind: while many cultures emphasize the importance of the family, and there is much evidence which attests the positive role it plays in promoting social progress, it is equally true that excessive attention to family interests can lead, however unwittingly, to a narrow social outlook, one that is ultimately detrimental to the broader community. How many the stable and united families that, in their intolerance towards one or another segment of society, instil in their younger generations an "us and them" mentality, heedless of the fact that the transmission of such poisonous attitudes stifles in their children love for humanity and hampers their sense of justice. Small wonder if, upon attaining adulthood, individuals reared in such an environment tend either to be indifferent to the suffering of others or to regard violence and oppression as justified—indeed, even to contribute to tyranny. What is more, in a repressive society, when faced with the difficult task of defending human rights and protecting victims of oppression, such individuals may well choose the path of silence or tacit collusion with the oppressor, rather than advocating the cause of justice, impeding thereby their own spiritual development as well as the progress of their nation.

140.5Teaching justice and fair-mindedness in the home is fundamental to any attempt to address this social deficiency. Children must be so raised as to regard every soul, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or any other affiliation, as a fellow human being and to hold dear the words that capture the spirit of the age: "The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of

one branch.” Consider how through education children gradually learn to look beyond their own interests to those of their family. With yet further training, they recognize the importance of respecting the interests of others and see as a sacred obligation service to their neighbours. At a higher level still, proper education can help children to broaden their horizons and set their sights on the advancement and glory of their nation. And when their breadth of vision expands even wider, they will undoubtedly come to see the progress of the entire human race and the furtherance of the true interests of all the peoples of the world as a guiding purpose of their lives. The family unit provides an environment within which such lofty and world-embracing principles can be taught and nurtured. It is the matrix in which generation after generation can be reared in the conviction that the well-being of the individual is inextricably bound to the progress and well-being of others.

140.6Dearly loved friends! During these times of adversity, when you must shoulder myriad hardships in the face of oppression and injustice, and as the Iranian nation struggles to find solutions to highly complex issues, we urge you to continue to reflect upon the question of family life and upon the progress made by the Bahá’í community in this respect. You are encouraged to share your understanding of this subject with your neighbours, friends and co-workers so that each may benefit from insights gained by the other. Explore in consultation with them what it means in practical terms for every member of the family to play a constructive part in creating a proper home environment and what measures can be taken to ensure that increasingly significant progress in this regard is made with each generation. In this way may you, one and all, render a signally important service to your nation.

140.7In the Holy Shrines we call you ever to mind and offer ardent prayers on your behalf.

The Universal House of Justice

141

Release of Arising to Serve: Glimpses from 41 Regional Conferences

2 December 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

141.1On 20 October 2008, the Universal House of Justice announced the convocation of forty-one regional conferences throughout the world to provide an opportunity for the friends to celebrate together the feats achieved during the Five Year Plan and to deliberate on its exigencies. Such was the momentum generated by these conferences that by the end of the following Ridván period, the number of intensive programmes of growth established had risen to more than one thousand.

141.2The film Arising to Serve: Glimpses from 41 Regional Conferences provides a unique historical and inspirational record of those precious moments when nearly eighty thousand participants gathered to share experiences, plan for the work ahead, and mark their achievements in raising the call of Bahá’u’lláh across the globe. Capturing the spirit of celebration and preparation for action, the film features accounts of participants from all walks of life who have courageously arisen to respond to the needs of the Plan.

141.3Copies of the DVD containing the film will be posted to you. The House of Justice wishes the film to be widely distributed among the friends, for their own viewing and that of others where they deem it appropriate…. The DVD includes options for watching the film with subtitles in English, French, Persian, or Spanish; enclosed with this letter you will find two documents that will be of help if you wish to produce a version of the film with subtitles in another language. In addition, the film can be downloaded or viewed online by visiting the Web site www.bahai.org/arising. You may wish to consider distributing copies of the DVD to Regional Bahá'í Councils, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and smaller communities so that it can be used as a tool for reflecting on the progress made thus far and planning to meet the challenges that are in store.

141.4It is hoped that the film will serve as a source of learning, encouragement, and inspiration to those who, in response to the summons of their Lord, are arising to serve their fellow citizens in every corner of the world.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

142

Progress on Projects on Mount Carmel

15 December 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

142.1We are pleased to inform you of the significant advances that have been made recently in the restoration and further development of the majestic edifices on Mount Carmel raised up by Shoghi Effendi more than five decades ago.

142.2With the successful completion of a three-year-long programme for its restoration and improvement, the International Archives Building has been reopened for visits by pilgrims to the holy relics and historic objects displayed there. The exterior stonework has been repaired through thirty thousand hours of meticulous work over a two-year period by the members of a dedicated restoration team. The foundations of the building have been waterproofed, and the entire structure made earthquake resistant through incorporation within it of a reinforced concrete and steel frame, not visible to visitors, extending from the foundations to the roof level. Interior improvements include installation of an attractive granite floor at the main level; use of high-quality display cabinets similar to the original cabinets, designed to ensure preservation of the objects on display far into the future; development of basement facilities for receiving pilgrims; provision of means for persons with a physical disability to have access to the building; and installation of complete environmental, safety, and security systems.

142.3No less significant has been the progress made with the restoration of the edifice of the Shrine of the Báb. A comprehensive programme for the structural reinforcement of the original building and the superstructure for earthquake resistance is nearing completion. The stone-restoration team is proceeding well with repair to the exterior stonework and the ornamental metal balustrades.

Work is advanced on the preparation for use by pilgrims and other visitors of the three rooms on the southern side of the Shrine, and arrangements are being made for restoration of the dome and replacement of its golden tiles to recover the original lustre. Installation of a new electrical and environmental control system is in progress.

142.4As this vital project on Mount Carmel proceeds, work is also continuing in the ‘Akká area, in both the Ridván Garden and the newly acquired land surrounding the resting-place of Bahá’u’lláh, the Qiblih of the Bahá’í world.

The Universal House of Justice

143

Youth Conference in the United Kingdom

1 January 2010

To the Friends Gathered at the Youth Conference in the United Kingdom

143.1We have watched with admiration the eagerness with which the youth in the United Kingdom have stepped into the vanguard of the work of the Cause, reaching out to ever greater numbers of souls and engaging them in the community-building activities that lie at the heart of the Five Year Plan. Your earnestness, your energy, your intrepid determination not to shirk the demands of this Day mark you out for this all-important undertaking. Ably trained, spiritually enkindled, and eager for experience, you have arisen to seize the initiative in your immediate surroundings and beyond. The need for you to apply yourselves to service in two capacities in particular—as teachers of children’s classes and as animators of junior youth groups—has never been more apparent. Countless parents yearn for the means of developing their children’s spiritual faculties that would lay within them the foundations of a principled and upright character. And surely every young person will flourish in a programme that helps to form a strong moral identity in the critical years of early adolescence and empowers participants to contribute to the well-being of society. Beyond these specific fields of activity, you must not refrain from acquainting your peers with the potent, the compelling, the world-embracing mission with which you are charged. Which of them would not feel their spirits enriched for contemplating how, through the application of those far-reaching principles enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh, the regeneration of the world can be accomplished and its perplexing crises resolved? Which of them would not be raised to a new consciousness of humanity’s capacity to “carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” by combining their energies with yours and bending them towards this noble aim?

143.2That the spirit of this gathering may galvanize your energies and strengthen your resolve; that you may pledge to intensify your efforts in the path of service to humankind; above all, that you may be the recipients of an outpouring of the favours vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty to those who arise for His Cause—these are our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

144

Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice

5 January 2010
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Beloved Friends,
144.1In view of the heavy burden of work resting upon the members of the Universal House of Justice, Mr. Hooper Dunbar and Dr. Peter Khan have, after prayerful consideration as to the best interests of the Cause of God and in light of their advanced ages, requested permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.
144.2It is with deep regret that the House of Justice has accepted the resignation of these much-loved members to take effect on the date that the by-election to replace them is completed. Dr. Khan was first elected to the Body in 1987 and Mr. Dunbar in 1988. We wish them well in the next stage of their service to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.
144.3We call upon the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies to cast their ballots for the election of two members to the Universal House of Justice to fill the vacancies thus created. We exhort all electors to ponder the sacred responsibility now resting upon their shoulders and to uphold scrupulously and prayerfully the sanctified spirit of Bahá'í elections.
144.4Each National Assembly member should record his or her vote for two male adult believers, each name on a separate piece of plain paper, and enclose them in an unmarked envelope, which should then be sealed. That first envelope should be placed in a second one, which should also be sealed and on which the elector should write his or her own name and the name of his or her National Assembly. The member should then immediately send or take this ballot to the National Assembly's Office.
144.5As soon as all nine ballots have been received at the National Office, they should be airmailed in one package, with a list of the ballots enclosed, to the Universal House of Justice. This should occur before Monday, 1 March. The National Office should immediately notify the Bahá'í World Centre by email, fax, or telephone of this fact.
144.6If fewer than all nine ballots have been received at a National Office by 1 March, the ballots which have been received must be sent that day. Late ballots should be forwarded by the National Office as soon as they are received, and the World Centre informed in each case of the number of ballots which have been dispatched.
144.7The result of this by-election will be announced at Naw-Rúz.
144.8We offer supplications in the Holy Shrines that Bahá'u'lláh may guide and protect you all in the exercise of this divinely conferred responsibility.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice
145
Youth Conference in Australia
7 January 2010
To the Friends Gathered at the Bahá'í Youth Conference in Australia
145.1We send our abiding love and warmest greetings to the youth from all parts

of the continent who have gathered in Wollongong to consider how best the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh can be served in Australia at this time.

145.2You convene at a moment of unprecedented opportunity and need. In every part of your country are to be found a multitude of souls, young and old, who yearn for the spiritual values inherent in the Bahá'í teachings, which are the indispensable source of enduring happiness and fulfilment. Blessed beyond measure with the bounty of recognizing the Manifestation of God for this Age, you have been assigned the responsibility to show forth these values in your lives, so that you can be a source of attraction and illumination to those seeking direction within the turmoil of the society in which they find themselves.

145.3Central to your role in the present day is to give new vigour to the concept of service—being devoted to high ideals far removed from purely selfish interests, oriented to advancement of society, and committed to the welfare of humanity. Among the many opportunities now before you there are two which stand pre-eminent: acting as teachers of children's classes and as animators of junior youth groups, so that the emerging generation is provided with the guidance necessary to establish a secure foundation for their lives.

145.4You are assured of our ardent prayers on your behalf in the Holy Shrines, that your consecrated endeavours may be blessed and confirmed and that the power of the Holy Spirit may reinforce all of your efforts.

The Universal House of Justice

146

Restrictions on Marrying Relatives

15 January 2010

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

146.1Your email letter of 11 October 2009, concerning Bahá'í law as regards marrying one's relatives, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following in response.

146.2The House of Justice has clearly stated that it is not permissible for a Bahá'í to marry his or her mother or father and their siblings and forebears, brothers or sisters and their descendents, or sons or daughters and their descendents. It is also not permissible to marry some corresponding categories of relations formed by bonds of marriage—such as the step-mother, step-father, step-daughter, or step-son, or the daughter-in-law, son-in-law, mother-in-law, or father-in-law—or similar categories of relations formed by legal and social bonds that create a shared family life, for example through adoption. Beyond these prohibitions, Bahá'ís should ensure they do not contract a marriage that would violate the customs or laws of the country in which they reside. While the House of Justice has refrained, at this stage, from defining other categories of relations with whom marriage is prohibited, it is important for believers everywhere to be mindful of this clear statement by the Master:

In marriage the more distant the blood-relationship the better, for such distance in family ties between husband and wife provideth the basis for the well-being of humanity and is conducive to fellowship among mankind.

146.3It is hoped that the foregoing provides the clarification you seek. You are assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines on your behalf.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

147

Considerations Related to Parental Consent for Marriage

19 January 2010

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

147.1With respect to your email letter of 16 November 2009, the Universal House of Justice has had the opportunity to consider issues concerning the application of the requirement of consent of parents to marriage, and it has asked us to respond as follows.

147.2In stipulating His law of marriage, Bahá'u'lláh included a requirement for the consent of the parents. He states:

It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes. Thus hath Our commandment been ordained.

The intent of the requirement is further elucidated in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian.

Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of the children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator.

147.3However, in a letter dated 15 November 1940 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Persia written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, the following statement was made.

… in some cases it is permissible under the law of God either for the parents or for the children to disown the other, to deprive the other of certain rights, to sever family ties and to renounce their responsibilities. However, the law thereof is to be decided by the Universal House of Justice.

147.4The House of Justice has concluded that it is timely to further clarify the range of circumstances in which a child may seek to be free of the requirement to obtain parental consent for marriage. Three areas have been identified in this respect.

147.5First, a child may be permitted to marry without seeking the consent of a man who denies paternity and never assumed the responsibilities of parenthood. Marriage is also permitted without seeking the consent of a parent who abandoned the child from infancy. Furthermore, a child conceived as a consequence of rape is not obliged to seek consent of the male offender.

147.6Second, the consent of a parent is not required if he or she engaged, or was complicit, in the sexual or physical abuse of a child. The application of this decision will require careful investigation and wisdom on the part of the responsible Bahá'í institutions. While many forms of treatment of a child may be considered unfair or harsh, the institutions cannot diminish the standard for defining or assessing abuse, lest the parents be deprived too easily of their right to consent. Parents are liable to err and might be immoderate in the exercise of physical or verbal chastisement. In a permissive age, strict discipline or authoritarian behavior can be perceived as a form of abuse, even by some psychologists. Furthermore, if an individual finds it impossible to change the decision of a parent unwilling to give consent, he or she might be tempted to circumvent the requirement by exaggerating past behavior of the parent to make it seem like abuse. Nevertheless, it is unjust to require a true victim of abuse to renew ties with, or submit to the will of, an abuser. In order to deprive the parent of the right to consent, the Assembly must be satisfied that abuse has actually occurred. To this end, it may find it necessary to seek corroboration from reliable witnesses or the views of qualified professionals.

147.7Finally, the right of the parent to consent can be forfeited if he or she seeks to use the requirement for consent in a manner which subverts the spirit and intent of the law or obstructs an individual's right as a believer in Bahá'u'lláh to marry in accordance with the provisions of Bahá'í law. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother." Yet, in some instances, a parent has refused consent in order to deprive the child of the right to choose and to force the child to marry someone of the parent's choosing. In other instances, a parent has denied consent in order to try to prevent the child from marrying anyone.

147.8A parent also violates the spirit of the marriage law if he or she uses the requirement for consent to exert unjustifiable control over factors that are unrelated to the prospective marriage. An example of this transgression is a parent who threatens to withhold consent as a means of manipulating the child's behavior to create estrangement between the child and the other parent. Another example is a parent who misuses the law to extract financial benefits or other concessions from the child or the child's other parent.

147.9It is important for an Assembly to distinguish such violations of the spirit of the law from the reasons a parent might have for denying consent to marry in a particular instance. Parents have a wide degree of latitude to determine how they choose to exercise their responsibility. As long as the spirit of the law is not violated they may refuse consent, and their conclusion is binding, even if it appears to the children or to others that they are being unreasonable or are acting out of prejudice. Ultimately, parents are responsible before God for their decision.

147.10When cases arise involving any of the circumstances discussed above, a Local Spiritual Assembly should ascertain all relevant facts and refer the matter for consideration to your National Spiritual Assembly. You should

exercise care not to unduly invalidate the rights of the parents; yet, while children have the obligation to abide by the Bahá'í marriage law, they also have the right to be protected from the excesses imposed by parents that violate the spirit and intent of that law. Should particular situations arise for which no clear solution is apparent, you should refer the matter to the House of Justice.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

148

Principles regarding Participation in the Life of Society in Iran

22 January 2010

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

148.1The Universal House of Justice has received your letter dated 11 January 2010 inquiring about the principles that, under present conditions, should guide the Iranian believers in their participation in the life of society. The House of Justice appreciates your desire to promote the best interests of the Faith, as well as the clarity and penetrating insight of your questions, and has requested us to respond on its behalf.

148.2As you are well aware, in present-day Iran, fundamental questions of social justice and public welfare have become entangled with sectarian political concerns. This has made it difficult for Bahá'ís, who love their country and cherish great aspirations for its progress, to determine the best course of action to take. It is hoped that the following comments will be of assistance to the friends in choosing how to proceed.

148.3Members of the Bahá'í community, wherever they reside, avoid engaging in partisan politics or meddling in political relations among governments, refraining at all times from becoming involved in the contest for worldly power. They have chosen this path in accordance with the teachings of their Faith, that they might focus their attention on working towards the greater goal of establishing a united and prosperous society. This choice is not intended as a criticism of any particular political party or of the approach taken by other groups. Needless to say, in following this path Bahá'ís categorically reject any form of sedition or recourse to violence.

148.4While eschewing partisan political activity, Bahá'ís are to vigorously engage in constructive public discourse and in a wide range of social endeavours aimed at the betterment of the world and the progress of their respective nations. They undertake such activities with humility, discernment and respect for prevailing laws and social conditions, in a spirit of learning and in collaboration with like-minded groups and individuals, fully confident in the power inherent in the principle of unity in diversity and in the efficacy of mutual aid and cooperation.

148.5As to the question of taking part in demonstrations, individual Bahá'ís in every country are, in principle, free to participate in efforts and activities, for instance in peaceful rallies, that aim to further laudable objectives such as the advancement of women, the promotion of social justice, the protection of the environment, the elimination of all forms of

discrimination, and the safeguarding of human rights. However, should such activities begin to deviate from their original purpose and assume a partisan character or degenerate into violence, they must of course be avoided.

148.6It is natural that young Bahá'ís in Iran would aspire to work together with their fellow citizens to promote justice and the common weal. The administrative institutions of the Faith are intended to serve as a means for channelling the energies of the believers and organizing the religious and social affairs of the Bahá'í community. Individual Bahá'ís, therefore, often consult with the institutions in determining how they can best serve as individuals. Circumstances in Iran, however, have placed the friends there in a unique situation. Until a year ago, the Bahá'ís benefited from the counsel and services of informal groups that, with the full knowledge of the government, were tending to the spiritual and social needs of the community. In the wake of statements made by the country's Prosecutor General in February 2009 and the subsequent suspension of the activities of these groups, the House of Justice reassured the believers that, drawing on the power of unity and mutual support, and relying upon Divine confirmations, they would be able to devise appropriate measures both for managing their spiritual and social affairs and for serving their country and their compatriots. The House of Justice encouraged the friends to take counsel together and to have every confidence that, through adherence to the principles of Bahá'í consultation, their decisions and actions would be guided by wisdom and circumspection. Bahá'í youth, then, would do well to consult with their parents, family members and others whose judgement they trust about the nature of their participation in social action.

148.7In such consultations, the friends will no doubt readily acknowledge that participation in demonstrations is by no means the only way, or even the most effective way, to contribute to the advancement of society. Whether in the discharge of their personal spiritual obligations or in their commitment to the call for "pure and goodly deeds" and for "commendable and seemly conduct", whether through their participation in the fruitful discourses of society—perhaps through writing articles as you suggest—or through their involvement in activities of social and economic development, Bahá'ís should recognize the numerous ways in which they can work alongside their fellow citizens to promote the welfare of their country.

148.8Mistakes might well be made in pursuit of such an aim, but the friends must not criticize one another; nor should they allow differences of opinion or apparent contradictions between various lines of action to disrupt their unity or diminish their love and affection for one another. Rather must they persist in their efforts and strive to learn from the results of their endeavours. The friends should remain ever mindful that some officials are seeking by every possible means to undermine the very existence of the Bahá'í community. Resorting to the use of lies and calumnies, they portray the community as a political entity or as the enemy of Islam, or even, on occasion, as an agent of foreign powers. They go so far as to label as "Bahá'í" certain Iranians working for the betterment of the country, hoping in this way to discredit them in the eyes of the public. More recently, they have seized upon the arrest of a

few young friends in connection with the events of Áshúrá to falsely accuse the Bahá'ís, particularly through the press, of helping to organize the demonstrations, of carrying arms, and of threatening the interests of the country while, supposedly, acting under the instruction of the institutions of the Faith. The primary purpose underlying such accusations is to spread prejudice among the masses and to discourage Bahá'ís from taking an active role in society. Even the noblest efforts of the Bahá'ís are not exempt from the malicious designs of these officials. The arrest and imprisonment in 2006 of those youth in Shíráz who were rendering a welcome and much-needed service to children from less privileged families is but one example.

148.9Over the past three decades the community of the Greatest Name has suffered grievously in the Cradle of the Faith. During the same period, the noble people of Iran, having gained a deeper understanding of many social issues, underwent a profound evolution in their thinking. Fair-minded Iranians today can no longer ignore the absurdity of the accusations made against the Bahá'ís, whom they regard as loyal compatriots, entitled to the same rights accorded to every other citizen. Indeed, few, if any at all, see the label "Bahá'í", so often attached to those who hold progressive views, as a stigma. The actions of young Bahá'ís, animated by their love for their homeland and its people, and brimming with vitality and enthusiasm, have contributed significantly to this change in attitude. The House of Justice conveys to them its warmest expressions of admiration and praise, as well as its confidence that, through prayer and meditation, and with support and encouragement from their elders, they will be assisted in choosing the most judicious means for fulfilling their commitment to social progress and in observing the dictates of wisdom in all their undertakings.

148.10We are to assure you of the prayers of the Universal House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf, as well as on behalf of the dear youth of Iran. May you succeed in attaining God's good pleasure and in performing such deeds as will contribute to the material and spiritual progress of the people of that blessed land.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

149

Disaster Relief Fund

25 January 2010

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Haiti

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

149.1The Universal House of Justice was greatly pleased to receive your email letters dated 16 and 23 January 2010 expressing appreciation for its prayers and for the relief supplies Counsellors Ehsanollah Hemmat and Rodrigo Tomás arranged to have delivered to you on behalf of the Bahá'í World Centre. The loving and effective measures your National Spiritual Assembly is taking to relieve the sufferings of the people of Haiti augurs well for meeting the difficult and complex challenges ahead. While all the matters you have raised in your letters will soon be addressed, we have been asked to convey the following in response to the guidance you requested regarding further relief

aid.
149.2In order to establish new ways in which the Bahá'í community might assist countries that have experienced major natural disasters, the House of Justice has requested the Bahá'í International Community, United Nations Office, to develop a framework in which assistance, both immediate and longer-term, could be provided to such nations. In light of the enormous challenges now confronting Haiti as a result of the devastating earthquake, the first initiative in this direction will focus on your country. The Office has been asked to immediately contact your Assembly and Messrs. Hemmat and Tomás to create and set in motion a plan of action that would involve the Bahá'ís of Haiti as well as help from outside. Critical to this effort will be the identification and mobilization of believers with the requisite skills and experiences who could offer volunteer services.
149.3Further, a Disaster Relief Fund has been established at the Bahá'í World Centre to which institutions and individuals may contribute and from which financial contributions to your nation will be channelled as part of an overall strategy. If you receive further enquiries regarding donations to the relief effort, you should indicate that they should be forwarded to the World Centre, earmarked as "Relief for Haiti".
149.4Kindly assure the believers in Haiti that the House of Justice will be offering ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines that all efforts to reconstruct your dearly loved country will be crowned with Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing assistance.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
150
Newly Elected Members of the Universal House of Justice
20 March 2010
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
150.1We warmly welcome Stephen Birkland and Stephen Hall as the newly elected members of the Universal House of Justice.
The Universal House of Justice
151
Appointment of Members of the International Teaching Centre
30 March 2010
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
151.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of Chuungu Malitonga and Praveen Kumar Mallik as Counsellor members of the International Teaching Centre.
The Universal House of Justice
152
Economic Life of the Bahá'í Community of Iran
2 April 2010
To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith
Dearly loved Friends,
152.1In our letter to you of 24 November 2009, we addressed the subject of the family and its role in the advancement of civilization, drawing attention to

the need to rear children that see their own welfare as inseparable from the welfare of others. While stressing the importance of family solidarity, particularly as it pertains to social progress, we called for caution in this respect, lest devotion to family interests diminish one's commitment to justice and compassion for all or provide an excuse for perpetuating a harmful mentality of "us and them". Many, indeed, are the ways in which the family can contribute to the life of society—for example, as an economic unit it can play a significant part in alleviating a variety of problems born of the economic inequalities so prevalent in the world today.

152.2The relative prosperity enjoyed by the Bahá'ís of Iran in the past can be attributed to a culture that lays great emphasis on education and learning and which recognizes as an act of worship the assiduous and honest pursuit of a useful trade or profession, undertaken in the spirit of service. Present social and economic conditions in Iran, combined with the restrictions so unjustly imposed on you in recent years by some authorities, have made it difficult for you to gain access to higher education, to secure steady employment, and to serve the wider community. We take pleasure in knowing that, despite such obstacles, you are striving to pass on to your children the culture which has so distinguished your community. Without doubt, the social and economic development of your nation will require, especially among its younger generations, a fundamental shift in perspective, one that changes the way in which certain essential concepts are viewed—the true purpose of life, the nature of progress, the meaning of true happiness and well-being, and the place that material pursuits should assume in one's individual and family life. In this light, we are providing in the paragraphs that follow a few comments on the family and its influence on social and economic affairs, in the hope that they will assist you in engaging in constructive dialogue with your compatriots.

152.3Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches. The family unit offers an ideal setting within which can be shaped those moral attributes that contribute to an appropriate view of material wealth and its utilization.

152.4Referring to the exigencies of the material world, Bahá'u'lláh has affirmed that to every end has been assigned a means for its accomplishment. A natural conclusion to be drawn from reflection on this fundamental principle is that vigilance must be exercised in distinguishing "means" from "ends"; otherwise, what is intended as a mere instrument could easily become the very goal of an individual's life. The acquisition of wealth is a case in point; it is acceptable and praiseworthy to the extent that it serves as a means for achieving higher ends—for meeting one's basic necessities, for fostering the progress of one's family, for promoting the welfare of society, and for contributing to the establishment of a world civilization. But to make the accumulation of wealth the central purpose of one's life is unworthy of any human being.

152.5An idea closely related to the above, and well in accord with the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings, is that the end does not serve to justify the means. However constructive and noble the goal, however significant to one's life or to the welfare of one's family, it must not be attained through improper means. Regrettably, a number of today's leaders—political, social, and religious—as well as some of the directors of financial markets, executives of multinational corporations, chiefs of commerce and industry, and ordinary people who succumb to social pressure and ignore the call of their conscience, act against this principle; they justify any means in order to achieve their goals.

152.6The legitimacy of wealth depends, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated, on how it is acquired and on how it is expended. In this connection, He has stated that "wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, crafts and industry", if the measures adopted by the individual in generating wealth serve to "enrich the generality of the people", and if the wealth thus obtained is expended for "philanthropic purposes" and "the promotion of knowledge", for the establishment of schools and industry and the advancement of education, and in general for the welfare of society.

152.7Reflect on the significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, at once complex and subtle. Quite apart from the already formidable obstacles to employment and service that certain fanatical elements have placed in your path, a host of negative forces, generated by the materialism and corruption so widespread in the world, present yet a further challenge in upholding the Bahá'í standard of conduct with respect to financial affairs. Nevertheless, following in the footsteps of your spiritual forebears, you remain undaunted, striving sincerely to reinforce within your families, particularly in your children, attitudes towards material wealth founded on Divine guidance. The members of the younger generation would do well to ponder the above statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He conditions the acquisition of wealth on diligent work and the grace of God. Let them weigh carefully in their hearts and minds the difference between gaining wealth through earnest effort in fields such as agriculture, commerce, the arts, and industry, on the one hand, and, on the other, obtaining it without exertion or through dishonourable means. Let them consider the consequences of each for the spiritual development of the individual, as well as the progress of society, and ask themselves what possibilities exist for generating income and acquiring wealth that will draw down confirmations from on high. It will surely become evident, as they do so, that what will attract God's blessings and ensure true happiness both in this world and in the next is the development of spiritual qualities, such as honesty, trustworthiness, generosity, justice, and consideration for others, and the recognition that material means are to be expended for the betterment of the world.

152.8Many would readily acknowledge that the acquisition of wealth should be governed by the requirements of justice, which, as a principle, can be expressed to varying degrees, on different levels. An employer and employee, for example, are bound by the laws and conventions that regulate their work,

and each is expected to carry out his or her responsibilities with honesty and integrity. At another level, however, if the deeper implications of justice are to be realized, the other two preconditions to the legitimate acquisition of wealth mentioned above must be taken into account, and prevailing norms reassessed in their light. Here, the relationship between minimum wage and the cost of living merits careful evaluation—this, especially in light of the contribution workers make to a company's success and their entitlement, as noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to a fair share of the profits. The wide margin, often unjustifiable, between the production costs of certain goods and the price at which they are sold likewise requires attention, as does the question of the generation of wealth through measures that "enrich the generality of the people". What such reflection and inquiry will no doubt make abundantly clear is that certain approaches to obtaining wealth—so many of which involve the exploitation of others, the monopolization and manipulation of markets, and the production of goods that promote violence and immorality—are unworthy and unacceptable.

152.9Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skilfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the basest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. How vain and foolish a worldview! And meanwhile, a rising tide of fundamentalism, bringing with it an exceedingly narrow understanding of religion and spirituality, continues to gather strength, threatening to engulf humanity in rigid dogmatism. In its most extreme form, it conditions the resolution of the problems of the world upon the occurrence of events derived from illogical and superstitious notions. It professes to uphold virtue yet, in practice, perpetuates oppression and greed. Among the deplorable results of the operation of such forces are a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies.

152.10The key to resolving these social ills rests in the hands of a youthful generation convinced of the nobility of human beings; eagerly seeking a deeper understanding of the true purpose of existence; able to distinguish between divine religion and mere superstition; clear in the view of science and religion as two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress; conscious of and drawn to the beauty and power of unity in diversity; secure in the knowledge that real glory is to be found in service to one's country and to the peoples of the world; and mindful that the acquisition of wealth is praiseworthy only insofar as it is attained through just means and expended for benevolent purposes, for the promotion of knowledge and toward the common good. Thus must our precious youth prepare themselves to shoulder the tremendous responsibilities that await them. And thus will they prove immune to the atmosphere of greed that surrounds them and press forward unwavering in the pursuit of their exalted goals.

152.11It is our hope that, as you consult on these matters with friends,

relatives, neighbours and co-workers, you will find yourselves increasingly able to contribute to the social and economic development of your country and to the welfare and prosperity of all. We will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines for the progress of the noble people of Iran and for the continued success of your endeavours.

The Universal House of Justice

153

Ridván Message 2010

Ridván 2010

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

153.1With hearts filled with admiration for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, we are pleased to announce that, as this most joyous Ridván season opens, there is in every continent of the globe a fresh complement of intensive programmes of growth under way, raising the total number worldwide over the 1,500 mark and securing the goal of the Five Year Plan, one year in advance of its conclusion. We bow our heads in gratitude to God for this astounding achievement, this signal victory. All who have laboured in the field will appreciate the bounty He has bestowed on His community in granting it a full year to strengthen the pattern of expansion and consolidation now everywhere established, in preparation for the tasks it will be called upon to undertake in its next global enterprise—a plan of five years' duration, the fifth in a series with the explicit aim of advancing the process of entry by troops.

153.2We feel moved, as we take pause on this festive occasion, to make clear that what evokes such a deep sense of pride and gratitude in our hearts is not so much the numerical feat you have achieved, remarkable as it is, but a combination of developments at the more profound level of culture, to which this accomplishment attests. Chief among them is the rise we have observed in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving.

153.3In recent messages we have expressed joy at witnessing the steady increase in the tempo of teaching across the globe. The discharge of this fundamental spiritual obligation by the individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. What the establishment of 1,500 intensive programmes of growth has made evident is how courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside. Even the most modest estimates suggest that there are now tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.

153.4In their efforts to present the essentials of the Faith plainly and unequivocally, the believers have benefited greatly from the illustrative example in Book 6 of the Ruhi Institute. Where the logic underlying that

presentation is appreciated, and the urge to convert it into a formula overcome, it gives rise to a conversation between two souls—a conversation distinguished by the depth of understanding achieved and the nature of the relationship established. To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation. Whether the first contact with such newly found friends elicits an invitation for them to enrol in the Bahá'í community or to participate in one of its activities is not an overwhelming concern. More important is that every soul feel welcome to join the community in contributing to the betterment of society, commencing a path of service to humanity on which, at the outset or further along, formal enrolment can occur.

153.5The significance of this development should not be underestimated. In every cluster, once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should become a centre of intense activity. In an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose. Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as "door-to-door", even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage—meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives—may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighbourhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. A rhythm of community life should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order.

153.6Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive programme of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in

their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

153.7To meet this challenge, the believers and the institutions that serve them will have to strengthen the institute process in the cluster, increasing significantly within its borders the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles; for it should be recognized that the opportunity now open to the friends to foster a vibrant community life in neighbourhoods and villages, characterized by such a keen sense of purpose, was only made possible by crucial developments that occurred over the past decade in that aspect of Bahá'í culture which pertains to deepening.

153.8When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá'í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.

153.9To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the

explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

153.10Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

153.11What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly over the next year so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.

153.12If the work of the tutor is to reach higher and higher degrees of excellence, it must be remembered that primary responsibility for the development of human resources in a region or country rests with the training institute. While striving to increase the number of its participants, the institute as a structure—from the board, to the coordinators at different levels, to the tutors at the grassroots—must lay equal stress on the effectiveness of the system in its entirety, for, in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress. At the level of the cluster, the coordinator must bring both practical experience and dynamism to his or her efforts to accompany those who serve as tutors. He or she should arrange periodic gatherings for them to reflect on their endeavours. Events organized to repeat the study of segments selected from the institute material may occasionally prove helpful, provided they do not inculcate a need for perpetual training. The capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans, through study of the sequence of courses and implementation of their practical component. And as men and women of various ages move along the sequence and complete their study of each course with the help of tutors, others must stand ready to accompany them in acts of service undertaken according to their strengths and

interests—particularly the coordinators responsible for children's classes, for junior youth groups and for study circles, acts of service crucial to the perpetuation of the system itself. To ensure that the proper measure of vitality is pulsating through this system should continue to be the object of intense learning in every country over the course of the next twelve months.

153.13Concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá'í community, a concern that resulted in two, coexisting realities. One, emulating the achievements of the Bahá'ís of Iran, was characterized by the capacity to offer systematic classes, from grade to grade, to children from Bahá'í families, generally with the aim of imparting basic knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith to rising generations. In most parts of the world, the number who benefited from such classes has been relatively small. The other reality emerged in areas where large-scale enrolments took place, both rural and urban. A more inclusive attitude dominated that experience. Yet while children from households of all kinds were at once eager and welcome to attend Bahá'í classes, various factors prevented lessons from being conducted with the required degree of regularity, year after year. How pleased we are to see this duality, a consequence of historical circumstances, begin to fall away as friends trained by institutes everywhere strive to offer classes, open to all, on a systematic basis.

153.14Such promising beginnings have now to be vigorously pursued. In every cluster with an intensive programme of growth in operation, efforts need to be made to systematize further the provision of spiritual education to increasing numbers of children, from families of many backgrounds—a requisite of the community-building process gathering momentum in neighbourhoods and villages. This will be a demanding task, one that calls for patience and cooperation on the part of parents and institutions alike. The Ruhi Institute has already been requested to expedite plans to complete its courses for training children's class teachers at different levels including the corresponding lessons, starting with youngsters aged 5 or 6 and proceeding to those aged 10 or 11, in order to close the present gap between existing lessons and its textbooks for junior youth, such as Spirit of Faith and the forthcoming Power of the Holy Spirit, which provide a distinctly Bahá'í component to the programme for that age group. As these additional courses and lessons become available, institutes in every country will be able to prepare the teachers and the coordinators required to put in place, grade by grade, the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements can be organized. Meanwhile, institutes should do their best to provide teachers with suitable materials, from among others currently in existence, for use in their classes with children of various ages, as necessary.

153.15The International Teaching Centre has earned our abiding gratitude for the vital impetus it lent to the efforts to secure the early attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan. To see the degree of energy it brought to this worldwide enterprise, following so tenaciously the progress in every continent and collaborating so closely with the Continental Counsellors, was to catch a glimpse of the tremendous power inherent in the Administrative Order. As the

Teaching Centre now turns its attention with equal vigour to questions related to the efficacy of activities at the cluster level, it will no doubt give special consideration to the implementation of Bahá'í children's classes. We are confident that its analysis of the experience gained in a few selected clusters this coming year, representative of diverse social realities, will shed light on practical issues which will make possible the establishment of regular classes, for children of every age, in neighbourhoods and villages.

153.16The rapid spread of the programme for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is yet another expression of cultural advance in the Bahá'í community. While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community—in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts—is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Account after account, in which junior youth in countries all over the planet give voice to their thoughts as participants in the programme, testifies to the validity of this vision. There is every indication that the programme engages their expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyse the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives. At an age when burgeoning intellectual, spiritual and physical powers become accessible to them, they are being given the tools needed to combat the forces that would rob them of their true identity as noble beings and to work for the common good.

153.17That the major component of the programme explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the programme enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the Holy Land. Already the accumulating body of knowledge and experience has given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the programme. To help others advance swiftly in this direction, the Office is establishing a network of sites in all continents, with the assistance of a corps of believers, that can be used to provide training to coordinators from scores upon scores of clusters. These resource persons continue to support coordinators upon their return to their respective clusters, enabling them to create a spiritually charged environment in which the junior youth programme can take root.

153.18Further knowledge is sure to accrue in this area of endeavour, although a pattern of action is already clear. Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the programme by schools and civic groups. Within the clusters that today are the focus of an

intensive programme of growth, there is a wide array of circumstances, from those with a few sporadic junior youth groups to those maintaining a number sufficient to require the services of a dedicated coordinator, who could receive ongoing support from a site for the dissemination of learning. To ensure that this capacity increases across the entire spectrum of these clusters, we are calling for 32 learning sites, each serving some twenty clusters with full-time coordinators, to be in operation by the end of the current Plan. In all other such clusters, priority should be given to creating the capacity over the coming year to offer the programme, multiplying the number of groups systematically.

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153.19The developments we have mentioned thus far—the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life, the efflorescence of an approach to study of the writings that is wedded to action, the renewal of commitment to provide spiritual education to the young in neighbourhoods and villages on a regular basis, and the spread in influence of a programme that instils in junior youth the sense of a twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society—are all reinforced, in no small measure, by yet another advance at the level of culture, the implications of which are far-reaching indeed. This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.

153.20In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labour together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their thoughts are centred at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe, propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side.

153.21Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among

individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community's mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

153.22That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfil these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

153.23The development that we are sure to witness in Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyse the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and

effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical, fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.

153.24Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programmes of growth.

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153.25Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

153.26In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the

community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.

153.27In our Ridván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labour at the level of the cluster, they would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

153.28Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the

Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

153.29Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. That the world civilization now on humanity's horizon must achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life is central to the Bahá'í teachings. Clearly this ideal has profound implications for the nature of any social action pursued by Bahá'ís, whatever its scope and range of influence. Though conditions will vary from country to country, and perhaps from cluster to cluster, eliciting from the friends a variety of endeavours, there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings—seeing in their fellow human beings gems of inestimable value and recognizing the effects of the dual process of integration and disintegration on both hearts and minds, as well as on social structures.

153.30Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the

cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

153.31In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

153.32In describing for you these new opportunities now opening at the level of the cluster, we are not asking you to alter in any way your current course. Nor should it be imagined that such opportunities represent an alternative arena of service, competing with the expansion and consolidation work for the community's limited resources and energies. Over the coming year, the institute process and the pattern of activity that it engenders should continue to be strengthened, and teaching should remain uppermost in the mind of every believer. Further involvement in the life of society should not be sought prematurely. It will proceed naturally as the friends in every cluster persevere in applying the provisions of the Plan through a process of action, reflection, consultation and study, and learn as a result. Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning.

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153.33Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of

estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of suffering out of His love for humanity? Look within your own ranks, at your dear Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. Do they not exemplify fortitude born of the love of God and the desire to serve Him? Does not their capacity to transcend the cruelest and most bitter persecution bespeak the capacity of millions upon millions of oppressed people of the world to arise and take a decisive part in building the Kingdom of God on earth? Undeterred by divisive social constructs, press on and bring Bahá'u'lláh's message to waiting souls in every urban neighbourhood, in every rural hamlet, in every corner of the globe, drawing them to His community, the community of the Greatest Name. Never do you leave our thoughts and prayers, and we will continue to implore the Almighty to reinforce you with His wondrous grace.

The Universal House of Justice

154

Second Anniversary of the Incarceration of the Yárán

9 May 2010

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

154.1It grieves our hearts to contemplate the passing of yet another year in which the seven former members of the Yárán remain imprisoned on baseless charges for which the authorities have no evidence whatsoever. The approach of the second anniversary of their incarceration calls to mind the multifarious forms of oppression being visited upon the members of the Bahá'í community in Iran of all ages and walks of life, including interrogations, summary arrests and imprisonment, deprivation of the means to a livelihood, wanton destruction of property, and the denial of education to Bahá'í students.

The heroic steadfastness of the friends in Iran in the face of such relentless persecution inspires their fellow believers around the globe to redouble their efforts to serve humanity and contribute to its material and spiritual progress. It has also led to the gradual, but undeniable, awakening of the conscience of fair-minded Iranians, who have been moved to express their concern at the violation of the human rights of their Bahá'í compatriots.

154.2We call upon the Bahá'ís of the world to organize special meetings of prayer around 14 May for the indomitable followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran, indeed, for all the people in that blessed land who are similarly subject to oppression, that the Hand of Divine Providence may grant them relief from their long ordeal. To this end we too offer our fervent supplications at the Sacred Threshold.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

155

Appointment of Two Continental Counsellors

11 May 2010

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

155.1We are delighted to announce the appointment of Mrs. Kini Musalo Geoghegan and Mr. Khumukcham Satish Meetei to the membership of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in Africa and Asia, respectively, to fill the vacancies created by the recent appointments to the International Teaching Centre.

The Universal House of Justice

156

Contract Signed for Gilded Tiles for the Shrine of the Báb

4 June 2010

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

156.1With gladdened hearts, we hasten to share with you the attainment of a significant milestone in the restoration work being undertaken on the Shrine of the Báb. Following an extensive and exacting search for a suitable manufacturer—a search that ended successfully in Portugal—a contract has been signed for the production of eleven thousand gilded tiles to cover the dome of that exalted Sepulchre, replacing the set which, after nearly sixty years' exposure to the elements, had suffered irreparable erosion. Stringent laboratory tests on the replacement tiles indicate that they will be fit to adorn the superstructure of the Shrine for no less than two centuries. The rigour of the manufacturing process, drawing on leading technology, is necessitated by the excellence demanded of the final article. Each tile will be fashioned from pure porcelain, in place of the clay used originally; moulded into one of more than seventy unique shapes and sizes; fired in computer-controlled kilns at temperatures of up to 1,400 Celsius; gilded with a reinforced finish prepared using a solution containing the most refined gold; subjected to scrutiny for imperfections; and upon approval, individually wrapped to preserve it during transportation. The first consignment is scheduled to reach the Holy Land by September. Our confidence in the tiles' durability is matched by our satisfaction that the cost involved does not exceed what is reasonable for so complex an act of craftsmanship, whereby an expanse of no less than two hundred and fifty square metres will regain the lustre intended by the Guardian for the august edifice that embosoms the sacred remains of a Manifestation of God. Only one original tile will remain: beneath it, placed there by Shoghi Effendi himself, is a fragment of plaster from the prison cell in Máh-Kú that once confined the Martyr-Herald of the Faith.

The Universal House of Justice

157

Publication of In Memoriam 1992–1997

1 August 2010

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

157.1The Universal House of Justice is most pleased to present your National Spiritual Assembly with a sample copy of In Memoriam 1992–1997, a supplement to the series of editions of The Bahá'í World. This volume contains some 180 articles about believers who had served the Faith in some significant manner and passed away between Ridván 1992 and Ridván 1997. Each article

provides an inspirational account of how these individuals translated into action their love for Bahá'u'lláh and His healing Message for mankind….
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

158
Legal Proceedings Against the Former Members of the Yárán
8 August 2010
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,

158.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to convey to you, on an urgent basis, the following information concerning the legal proceedings against the seven former members of the Yárán.

158.2As you may be aware, the final session in the trial of these Bahá'ís was held on 14 June 2010. It has now just been learned that a member of their legal team has been informed by the judge who is presiding over the case that each of the defendants has been sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. This ruling against individuals who are absolutely innocent of the charges against them represents a shameless miscarriage of justice and a gross violation of the rights of the prisoners to a fair trial. The attorneys who are acting on behalf of these believers are in the process of launching an appeal.

158.3It has not been possible as yet to confirm any details regarding the matter beyond those outlined above. You will be kept closely apprised of further developments, either through follow-up communications from our Department as information becomes available or through reports posted on the Web sites of the Bahá'í International Community and the Bahá'í World News Service.

158.4The House of Justice invites you and the believers throughout your communities to join it in offering prayers that the dearly loved, stalwart former members of the Yárán and their loved ones, as well as our cherished sisters and brothers throughout the Cradle of the Faith, may be comforted and sustained through the watchful care and unfailing grace of the Blessed Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

159
Centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Departure on His Journey to the West
29 August 2010
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,

159.1'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure one hundred years ago from Haifa for Port Said signalled the opening of a glorious new chapter in the annals of the Faith. He was not to return to the Holy Land for three years. Referring to that historic moment the Guardian would later write: "The establishment of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the Western Hemisphere—the most outstanding achievement that will forever be associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry—had … set in motion such tremendous forces, and been productive of such far-reaching results, as to warrant the active and personal participation of the Centre of the Covenant Himself…." With the inauguration of

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels to the West, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, hemmed in for more than half a century by the hosts of enmity and oppression, burst its restraints. For the first time since its inception, the recognized Head of the Faith enjoyed a freedom of action to pursue unencumbered its divinely prescribed mission.

159.2By any earthly measure, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would have seemed ill prepared to carry out the task before Him. He was sixty-six years old, an exile since childhood, with no formal schooling, a prisoner for forty years, in failing health, and unfamiliar with Western customs and languages. Yet He arose, without thought of comfort, undeterred by the risks involved, and utterly reliant upon divine assistance, to champion the Cause of God. He interacted with diverse peoples in nine countries on three continents. The scope and intensity of His tireless exertions were such as to “dumbfound His followers in East and West with admiration and wonder” and to “exercise an imperishable influence” on the course of the Faith’s future.

159.3Over the next few years, Bahá’ís around the world will joyously call to mind the many episodes associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s historic journey. But this anniversary is more than a time for commemoration. The words uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse. We should, therefore, reflect not only upon what the Master achieved and set in motion but also on the work that remains undone to which He has summoned us. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, He expressed His inmost longing:

O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá” in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.

159.4Nearly a century has passed since these words were recorded. Stage after stage of the Divine Plan has been successfully prosecuted. The Faith has been established in all corners of the world. We are present in those places that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá yearned to visit. Individuals, communities, and institutions are now endowed with the capacity necessary for systematic, sustained, and coherent action. During this precious period of remembrance, then, let each and every one of His faithful lovers arise and act in His Name. Let them offer their share, no matter how humble, to the progress of the Plan He authored—that priceless and everlasting bequest.

The Universal House of Justice

160

Completion of Work on the Ridván Garden

29 October 2010

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

160.1With joyful and grateful hearts we announce that the restoration and conservation work on the Ridván Garden in the Holy Land, which includes a circulating water system that recreates the island and an Ottoman flour mill that was in use during the time of Bahá'u'lláh, has now been successfully completed.
160.2That site of such exquisite beauty, designated by Him as "Our Verdant Isle", is once again open to pilgrims, who will have the opportunity to experience the tranquillity of the surroundings that greeted the Blessed Beauty when He visited it at the termination of His nine-year confinement within the walls of the prison-city of 'Akká.
The Universal House of Justice
161
Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
1 November 2010
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
161.1The Day of the Covenant, 26 November 2010, marks the opening of a new five-year term of service for the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith. It is with great joy that we announce the names of the Counsellors appointed for the coming term, whose number remains at eighty-one.
AFRICA (19 Counsellors): Selam Ahderom (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Ramchand Coonjul, Mariama Ousmane Djaouga, Maziar Djoneidi, Clément Thyrell Feizouré, Agatha Gaisie-Nketsiah, Kini Musalo Geoghegan, Amina Jaouane, Townshend Lihanda, Sehla Masunda, Katalayi Mbombo, Maina Mkandawire, Aggrey Zeyazi Munubi, Zowé Tiba Nganyadé, Albert Nshisu Nsunga, Helen Otia, Ahmad Parsa, Christopher Kiprotich Songok, Tiati à Zock
THE AMERICAS (19 Counsellors): José Luis Almeida, Ann Boyles, Ronny Brenes, Beatriz Carmona, Daniel Duhart, Jorge Henrique Guerreiro (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Ana Hilda de Lemus, Alison Milston, Borna Noureddin, Garth Pollock, Ganesh Ramsahai, Carmen Elisa de Sadeghian, Pejman Samoori, Bernardino Sánchez, Daniel Scott, Navid Serrano, Leticia de Solano, Anita Vandella Williams, Holly Woodard
ASIA (20 Counsellors): Jamil Aliyev, Enkhdelger Banzragch, Jabbar Eidelkhani, Bijan Farid, Nadera Fikri, Gloria Javid, Lee Lee Loh Ludher, Tarrant Matthew Mahony, Khumukcham Satish Meetei, Delafruz Nassimova, Lori McLaughlin Noguchi, Khursheda Porsayeva, Foad Reyhani (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Rajan Sawant, Omid Seioshanseian, Zebiniso Solieva, George Soraya, Ircham Hadi Sujadmiko, Mehranguiz Farid Tehrani, Myint Zaw Oo
AUSTRALASIA (11 Counsellors): Sohayla Asari, Ritia Kamauti Bakineti, Soheyla Bolouri, Kirk Johnson, Dinesh Kumar-Mills, Jalal Rodney Mills, U'ileiuluwehi Pimental, Kessia Aisoli Ruh, Tessa Scrine, Henry Tamashiro, Alan Wilcox (Trustee of the Continental Fund)
EUROPE (12 Counsellors): Naisan Azimi, Uta von Both (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Olga Daradur, Antonella Demonte, Andrej Donoval, Aiste Elijio, Shirin Fozdar-Foroudi, Zoraida García Garro, Saba Khabirpour, Bernard Lo Cascio, Firouzeh Moghbel-Naderi, Paul Verheij

161.2The following believers, who have earned our abiding gratitude for their self-sacrificing contributions to the progress of the Cause, are being relieved of the duties of membership on the Boards of Counsellors:
Farzin Aghdasi, Eugene S. Andrews, Fadel Ardakani, Fevziye Baki, Nidavanur Baskaran, Beatrice Benson, Desmond Godfrey Browne, David Chittleborough, Irene Chung, Vivien Craig, Olga Daynovskaya, Ehsanollah Hemmat, David Huang, Nadia Jaberi-Koppold, Eric Kingston, Deborah Kirton, Eddy Lutchmaya, Enos Makhele, Antônio Gabriel Marques Filho, Tsatsi Othaniel Mfete, Ruth Amos Mnyampi, Hannu Tapani Olkkonen, Jaya Gopan Ramasamy, Lateef Rasheed, Manijeh Reyhani, Ilhan Sezgin, Crystal Baker Shoaie, Marilyn Smith, Rodrigo Tomás, Gerardo Vargas, Robin White, Fereidoun Yazdani, Sohrab Youssefian
161.3We are confident that these dear friends will remain a source of inspiration and strength to the believers as they continue their dedicated efforts for the advancement of the Faith in the coming years. We shall offer supplications at the Sacred Threshold on their behalf, that divine blessings may surround their every endeavour in the path of service to Bahá'u'lláh.
161.4In our recent Ridván message, we announced to the Bahá'í world the achievement of the goal of the current Five Year Plan—to establish no less than 1,500 intensive programmes of growth worldwide—and outlined in significant detail the developments that have taken place in the Bahá'í community at the level of culture over the last decade and a half. We expressed the hope that, during this final year of the Plan, the friends would bend their energies towards strengthening the pattern of expansion and consolidation that has now been everywhere established, in preparation for the Five Year Plan to be launched at Ridván 2011. We are calling the Counsellors from all continents to the Bahá'í World Centre for a conference from 28 December 2010 to 1 January 2011, during which deliberations will be held on the features of the next Five Year Plan and on the decisive role the Counsellors are to play, together with their auxiliaries, in the critical period leading up to its launch and in the years that follow.
161.5It is our ardent prayer that the Blessed Beauty may vouchsafe unto these eighty-one souls His unfailing protection and unceasing confirmations as they arise to take up the high duties to which they have been called.
The Universal House of Justice

162
Commencement of the Excavation Work for the House of Worship in Chile
26 November 2010
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
162.1We are pleased to inform you that excavation work has now commenced in Chile on the land where the last continental House of Worship is to stand. This welcome development represents an important step towards the eventual emergence of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of South America, to be established in the environs of Santiago. Many obstacles have been overcome to reach this point; although further challenges can be expected to arise in the coming months and years, we have no doubt that the assistance of the Supreme Concourse will be vouchsafed at every stage.

162.2Since our message of April 2005 concerning the Temple project, further research has been carried out into how the special materials called for by the building's striking and original design—which itself has undergone refinement—can be produced. Taking all this into account, as well as factors related to prevailing economic conditions and the passage of time, we now anticipate the cost of the Temple's construction to be US$38 million. Contributions to the Chilean Temple Fund already exceed half this amount; US$18 million remains to be raised. It is our hope that, conscious of the no less pressing demands of the Five Year Plan, the friends will be moved to offer their share of material assistance without diminishing their vital support of the other Funds of the Faith.

162.3No doubt the friends in every part of the Bahá'í world will be heartened to learn of the milestone now reached and will join together in earnest supplication of the Blessed Beauty, beseeching Him to bring about the successful completion of this significant enterprise. To this end will we also offer ardent entreaties at the Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

163

Open Letter to the Head of the Judiciary in Iran

7 December 2010

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

163.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the enclosed copies, in English and Persian, of an open letter, dated 7 December 2010, from the Bahá'í International Community to Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Larijani, Head of the Judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The communication concerns the grave miscarriage of justice that has been perpetrated against Mrs. Faríbá Kamálábádí [Fariba Kamalabadi], Mr. Jamálu'd-Dín Khánjání [Jamaloddin Khanjani], Mr. 'Afíf Na'ímí [Afif Naimi], Mr. Sa'íd Ridá'í [Saeid Rezaie], Mr. Bihrúz Tavakkulí [Behrouz Tavakkoli], Mr. Vahíd Tízfahm [Vahid Tizfahm], and Mrs. Mahvash Thábit [Mahvash Sabet]—the seven Bahá'ís who formerly served as the members of the group known as the Yárán.

163.2As you are no doubt aware, the final session of the trial of these innocent believers was held on 14 June 2010. The verdict, which was handed down on 7 August 2010, found the defendants guilty of three charges pertaining to the role they played, as the members of the Yárán, in seeing to the social and spiritual needs of Iran's Bahá'ís. They were also found guilty of three charges that alleged they had engaged in activities aimed at undermining the security of their country. In each case, the maximum penalty—ten years in prison—was imposed, notwithstanding that there was no foundation whatever for any of the accusations that had been levelled against them. With respect to a seventh charge—tarnishing the reputation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the international arena and "spreading corruption on earth"—the court concluded that there was no evidence upon which to establish a finding of guilt.

163.3On 25 August 2010, the lawyers representing the seven Bahá'ís

submitted an appeal against the verdict, in which they detailed the flagrant procedural errors that had characterized the judicial proceedings and the wholly spurious nature of the accusations set out in the indictment. The appeal court ruled, on 12 September 2010, that there was no foundation to the charges related to undermining national security and accordingly overturned the sentence of a ten-year imprisonment for those alleged offences. It did, however, uphold the verdict on the charges related to the services of the seven Bahá'ís as the members of the Yárán.

163.4The ruling of the appeal court simply confirms that the authorities, knowing full well that there was no basis for the charges that the accused had acted against the interests of Iran, then unscrupulously distorted and misrepresented the religious beliefs of the defendants and their service to the Bahá'í community in order to declare them guilty. To add to this manifest injustice, the judiciary has not yet formalized the appeal verdict, thus depriving the prisoners of the right to seek bail or to be granted leave from prison. In defiance of all reason, the prisoners are now in the third year of what is shamelessly termed a "temporary" detention.

163.5Moreover, within mere days of the handing down of the original verdict, the prisoners were illegally transferred to Gohardasht Prison, which is notorious for its brutally harsh conditions. Now effectively placed in exile in contravention of Iran's statutes governing the transfer of prison inmates, they are forced to endure, amongst other indignities, appalling filth, pestilence, exposure to disease, and quarters so cramped that it is difficult for them to lie down or even to perform their daily prayers. In the midst of such conditions, they remain uncomplaining; nonetheless, it is clear from recent reports that their health has deteriorated and they have no access to adequate medical treatment.

163.6You are free to share the foregoing information and the enclosed communication with the Bahá'ís throughout your country. The enclosures may also be shared with others, including the media, as you deem appropriate. Should the House of Justice wish you to take additional action, such a request will be conveyed to you separately.

163.7The House of Justice calls upon you to invite the believers in your community to hold devotional gatherings dedicated to the Bahá'ís in Iran, that they may be enfolded in the grace and protection of the Blessed Beauty and that their cherished longing to be free to labour shoulder to shoulder with their fellow citizens for the advancement of their beloved nation may be realized.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Open Letter to the Head of the Judiciary in Iran

7 December 2010

Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Larijani

Head of the Judiciary

Islamic Republic of Iran

Your Honor,

163.8You are undoubtedly aware of the outcome of the trial and the subsequent

appeal of Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm—the seven individuals who before their arrest were responsible, as the members of the group known as the Yaran, for administering the social and spiritual affairs of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

163.9The lives of these seven Bahá'ís typify not only the lives of the Bahá'ís of Iran but also those of high-minded and noble-hearted Iranians of every creed and class. They are true citizens of that nation who have striven to dedicate themselves to its service. Their birthplaces span the entire country—from its capital city, to Sangsar, Yazd, Abadan, Ardestan, Mashhad, and Urumiyih. Their ages range from thirty-seven to seventy-seven. Some of them have aging parents; all of them have children, the youngest one of whom was only nine when his father was arrested. Their professional occupations are also varied and include developmental psychologist, founder of the first automated brick factory in Iran, manager of a textile factory, agricultural engineer, school principal, social worker, and optician. Alongside their professional pursuits and family duties, they have rendered, on a purely voluntary basis, distinguished service to the people of that land, as, for example, in the advancement of women, in the promotion of literacy among the country's general population, and in the provision of the means of education for the thousands of Bahá'í youth who have been denied admission to Iranian universities since the inception of the Islamic Revolution.

163.10Convinced that they had committed no wrong, and as there existed no proof whatsoever to support the accusations leveled against them, they had every hope that the judicial proceedings would exonerate them. Sadly, however, their hopes have thus far been frustrated, and the treatment they have received has unjustly violated every legal norm and every standard of fairness and equity. As history bears witness, whenever innocent citizens are brought before show trials, it is the judicial system itself and those who wield authority within it that are on trial before the public gaze. The case of these seven individuals, which from the outset has been watched with growing interest by Iranians and non-Iranians alike, has been marked by such egregious violations of the law at every turn as to call into question the adherence to the principle of justice by a system that claims to uphold Islamic values.

163.11The blatant injustice of a sentence to ten years' imprisonment handed down to such honest and law-abiding citizens impels us, as the representatives at the United Nations of one hundred and eighty-six national Bahá'í communities, to ask you to rectify this grave failure and accord the defendants the justice they have been denied. This request comes not only from their coreligionists throughout the world but from the United Nations, from governments and parliamentarians across the globe, from agencies of civil society, and from humanitarians and social thinkers, all of whom join their voices to ours in calling for the immediate release of these wronged individuals.

163.12The officials of the Ministry of Intelligence, resorting to many reprehensible measures—illegal detention, denial of proper access to legal representation, interrogation methods that contravene standards of civilized

behavior and aim to extract false confessions—all of which transgress even the current law of the land, exerted every effort to build a case against them. Despite this, the prosecutors were ultimately unable to present any credible evidence in support of their claims. Instead, what was exposed was the nefarious schemes of certain officials, as well as the inhumane conduct and sinister motives of the interrogators. Indeed, what is now starkly visible to all is the willingness of the authorities to trample the very standards of justice they are mandated to uphold on behalf of the people of Iran.

163.13The trial itself was so devoid of the impartiality that must characterize judicial proceedings as to render the process a complete mockery. The defendants, certain of their own innocence and having nothing to hide, had asked for an open hearing. What then, one might ask, was the reason for the judge to have declared the proceedings to be “open and public” and yet refuse requests for attendance from observers, including representatives of diplomatic missions? Why was it made so difficult for the families of the defendants to attend the trial? Why were journalists excluded, while government cameramen were allowed an active presence? What was the reason for permitting the menacing presence of the agents of the Ministry of Intelligence throughout the trial? How was it that the verdict issued by the judges could refer to the religion of the defendants as a “misguided sect”? Is this not a clear sign that the court has violated the legal principle of neutrality? The obvious conclusion is that such actions have been motivated by blind prejudice and hatred against the Bahá’í community for its religious beliefs. How can a just society, or a just world, be built on a foundation of irrational oppression and the systematic denial of basic human rights to any minority? Everything your country overtly professes to seek on the world stage is contradicted by your treatment of your own people at home.

163.14The 12 September 2010 ruling issued by the court of appeal overturned the verdict of the lower court in relation to the charges of espionage, collaboration with the State of Israel, and provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining state security. The lower court itself had already found the defendants not guilty of the charge of “tarnishing the reputation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the international arena” and of “spreading corruption on earth”. What remained of the case, therefore, were those charges that pertained to the activities undertaken by these seven individuals in administering the social and spiritual affairs of the Iranian Bahá’í community. Meanwhile, the judges, well aware that there were no grounds whatsoever for the charge of acting against the interests of Iran and its citizens, were under pressure from officials bent upon a finding of guilt. Consequently, the judiciary chose in essence to distort and present as illegal the religious beliefs of the defendants and their service to the Bahá’í community—a selfless service which their fellow Iranian Bahá’ís warmly acknowledged and appreciated. Thus, the seven were each sentenced to ten years in prison. This sentence has been strongly denounced not only by the defendants themselves, their families, and the Bahá’í International Community but by advocates of justice in Iran and the world over.

163.15Given that for the past twenty years the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been fully aware of the work of these individuals in managing the affairs of the Bahá'í community, to accuse them now of illegal activities is as baseless and unjust as it is inexplicable. Our open letter dated 4 March 2009 to the Prosecutor General of the Islamic Republic of Iran established in detail the spurious character of the charges leveled against the Yaran and we commend it to your attention. An unbiased reading of that letter will confirm that there are no grounds whatsoever on which the Islamic Republic could assert that the Bahá'ís of Iran, including these seven individuals, represent the least threat to public order or to the common weal in that land.
163.16There is not a shred of evidence to support the accusation that these Bahá'ís were seeking to compromise national security, participating in subversive activities, or engaging in propaganda against the regime, charges which the defendants themselves have categorically denied. Such accusations are entirely inconsistent with the outstanding record of the Bahá'ís in Iran and around the world, who regard service to one's homeland and to humankind as an inescapable moral obligation. Nor do they accord in any way with the Bahá'í teachings, which assert that "in every country where any of this people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty, and truthfulness." The approach adopted by the judiciary and the accusations leveled against these individuals constitute again a patent violation of the freedom of conscience and belief of Iranian citizens, and are a brazen contravention of Article 14 of the Iranian Constitution, which stipulates: "In accordance with the sacred verse, 'God doth not forbid you to deal with kindness and fairness towards those who have not made war upon you on account of your religion, or driven you forth from your homes' [60:8], the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims kindly and in accordance with the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights."
163.17Now in their third year of what is shamelessly still termed a "temporary" detention, these seven prisoners have been subjected to every manner of indignity and violation of their fundamental rights. Their high resolve and their gracious character amidst the hardships they have been made to endure stand in sharp contrast to the brutality of their oppressors and attest their forbearance and purity of motive. This is a truth to which the noble people of Iran can now bear witness. The accounts we have received indicate that fellow inmates admire their conduct and demeanor, see them as beacons of hope and sources of consolation and comfort, seek strength from their wisdom, and regard them as the symbols of the free spirit and sincere heart that are characteristics of the people of Iran.
163.18Your honor, we ask you, what purpose is served by seeking to extinguish such moral attributes and spiritual qualities? Are such acts of oppression faithful to the high principles extolled by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him)? In Gohardasht Prison, there are surely other innocent inmates. How can you allow any soul to be subjected to that prison's appalling state of filth, pestilence, disease, and the privation of facilities for basic personal hygiene? Such an odious and degrading environment is unworthy of even the most

dangerous criminals. Does the government of Iran believe the principles of Islamic compassion and justice to be consistent with the imposition of such conditions on citizens? Why are the prisoners' pressing needs for medical care and treatment ignored? Who will be called to account if the health of any of these seven further deteriorates? Why are these innocent individuals not given adequate food, and why are they confined to prison cells of such insufficient space as to make it difficult for them to lie down or even to perform their daily prayers? Why has the judiciary callously deprived them of their right to compassionate leave? Are not all of these privations intended to break their spirits and those of the other Bahá'ís of Iran? Consider how the members of the Bahá'í community are continually forced to withstand the slander of their beliefs and the distortion of their history in government-supported mass media; to endure provocations in the streets, from the pulpits, and with the support of certain officials, that incite hatred against them; to suffer illegal imprisonment; to see themselves denied access to higher education and to the means of earning a livelihood; to have their children suffer abuse and vilification in schools; and to witness their properties destroyed and their cemeteries desecrated with the support and approval of government authorities. Yet, what results have such efforts yielded? The response of the Bahá'ís of Iran to the persecution they have suffered in recent decades has made them, in the eyes of the Iranian population, embodiments of unyielding attachment to spiritual principle and of constructive resistance to oppression. What is more, it has brought about a heightened desire among that population to become acquainted with the verities of their Faith.

163.19In January 2010, the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, noted in a message addressed to the Bahá'ís in Iran that, when those in authority conspire against innocent citizens, their actions ultimately vitiate their own credibility. In a similar vein, in our 4 March 2009 letter to the Prosecutor General of the Islamic Republic, we pointed out that the decisions of the Iranian judiciary with respect to the Bahá'ís will have implications well beyond the Bahá'í community in that land and will extend to the very freedom of conscience of all its citizens. Our hope was that, for the sake of the honor and reputation of Iran, the judiciary would seek to be fair in their judgment.

163.20The Bahá'ís are not "others" in your country: they are an inseparable part of the Iranian nation. The injustices meted out to them are a reflection of the terrible oppression that has engulfed the nation. Your respect now for the rights of the Iranian Bahá'ís would signal a willingness to respect the rights of all the citizens of your country. Redressing the wrongs suffered by the Bahá'ís would bring hope to the hearts of all Iranians that you are ready to ensure justice for everyone. Our call, then, is in reality a call for respect of the rights of all the Iranian people.

163.21With our hearts filled with love for Iran and our earnest hopes for the exaltation and glory of that land, we urge you, in your capacity as the Head of the Judiciary, to release the former members of the Yaran from prison and,

along with them, all the Bahá'ís who are incarcerated across the country. These include Miss Haleh Rouhi, Miss Raha Sabet, and Mr. Sasan Taqva, the three young Bahá'ís who have now entered the fourth year of imprisonment in Shiraz for the crime of helping impoverished children to learn how to read and write. We likewise request that the Bahá'ís in that country be granted their full rights of citizenship, in order that they may be able to fulfill their heartfelt aspiration to contribute, alongside their fellow citizens, to the advancement of their nation. This, indeed, is no more than what you rightfully ask for Muslim minorities who reside in other lands. Bahá'ís merely seek the same treatment from you.

Respectfully,

Bahá'í International Community

164

The Five Year Plan, 2011–2016

28 December 2010

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

164.1Fifteen years have elapsed since, on an occasion such as this, we gave to the body of Counsellors assembled in the Holy Land the first intimation of the course the Bahá'í community would have to take, if it was to accelerate the dual process of its expansion and consolidation—a course which its accumulated experience had prepared it to steer with confidence. No need to remark on the distance traversed in a short decade and a half. The record of accomplishments speaks for itself. Today we invite you to begin deliberations on the next stage of the great enterprise on which the Bahá'í world is embarked, a stage that will stretch from Ridván 2011 to Ridván 2016, constituting the first of two consecutive Five Year Plans that will culminate at the centenary of the inauguration of the Faith's Formative Age. Over the coming days you are asked to formulate a clear conception of how the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will assist the community in building on its extraordinary achievements—extending to other spheres of operation the mode of learning which has so undeniably come to characterize its teaching endeavours, gaining the capacity needed to employ with a high degree of coherence the instruments and methods which it has so painstakingly developed, and increasing well beyond all previous numbers the ranks of those who, alive to the vision of the Faith, are labouring so assiduously in pursuit of its God-given mission.

164.2In our Ridván message this year, we described the dynamics of the process of learning that, through four successive global Plans, has steadily gathered momentum, enhancing the capacity of the friends to engage in grassroots action. The vista from this vantage point is stupendous indeed. With more than 350,000 souls worldwide who have completed the first institute course, capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character has risen perceptibly. In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends. A

near doubling in the reserve of Bahá'í children's class teachers in a five-year period, bringing the total to some 130,000, has made it possible for the community to respond wholeheartedly to the spiritual aspirations of the young. A sixfold increase in capacity over the same period to assist junior youth in navigating through such a crucial stage of their lives provides an indication of the level of commitment to that age group. What is more, everywhere, a notable number of friends find themselves ready to enter into conversation with people of varied backgrounds and interests and to undertake with them an exploration of reality that gives rise to a shared understanding of the exigencies of this period in human history and the means for addressing them. And fuelling the systematic multiplication of core activities across the globe, with no fewer than half a million known participants at a given time, are the efforts of close to 70,000 friends capable of serving as tutors of study circles.

164.3As made clear in our Ridván message, in the system thus created to develop its human resources, the community of the Greatest Name possesses an instrument of limitless potentialities. Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order. A decade ago, when we introduced the concept of a cluster—a geographic construct intended to facilitate thinking about the growth of the Faith—we provided an outline of four broad stages along the path of its development. As the Bahá'í community set about implementing the provisions of the Plan, this outline proved immensely useful in giving shape and definition to what is essentially an ongoing process. The abundant experience which has since accrued enables the believers now to conceive of the movement of a population, propelled by mounting spiritual forces, in terms of a rich and dynamic continuum. A brief review of the process that unfolds in a cluster, though well familiar to you all, will serve to underscore its fundamentally organic nature.

A programme of growth

164.4Invariably, opportunities afforded by the personal circumstances of the believers initially involved—or perhaps a single homefront pioneer—to enter into meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents dictate how the process of growth begins in a cluster. A study circle made up of a few friends or colleagues, a class offered for several neighbourhood children, a group formed for junior youth during after-school hours, a devotional gathering hosted for family and friends—any one of these can serve as a stimulus to growth. What happens next follows no predetermined course. Conditions may justify that one core activity be given precedence, multiplying at a rate faster than the others. It is equally possible that all four would advance at a comparable pace. Visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities. But irrespective of the specifics, the outcome must be the same. Within every cluster, the level of cohesion achieved among the core activities must be such that, in their totality, a nascent programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived. That is to say, in whatever combination and however small in number, devotional gatherings, children's classes and junior youth groups are being maintained

by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster. This initial flow of human resources into the field of systematic action marks the first of several milestones in a process of sustainable growth.

164.5All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members. To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants. In this, as in all their work, they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

Increasing intensity

164.6It is important to note that, as a programme of growth is being brought into existence, an emergent community spirit begins to exert its influence on the course of events. Whether activities are scattered across the cluster or concentrated in one village or neighbourhood, a sense of common purpose characterizes the endeavours of the friends. Whatever level of organization served to channel the early manifestations of this spirit, the systematic, coordinated multiplication of core activities necessitates that higher levels soon be attained. Through various measures, greater structure is lent to activity, and initiative, shaped largely by individual volition before, is now given collective expression. A complement of coordinators appointed by the institute moves into place—those for study circles, for junior youth groups, and for children’s classes. Any order of appointment is potentially valid. Nothing less than an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground should make this determination, for what is at stake is not compliance with a set of procedures but the unfoldment of an educational process that has begun to show its potential to bring about the spiritual empowerment of large numbers.

164.7Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process, other administrative structures are gradually taking shape. Out of the occasional meetings of a few believers emerge the regular deliberations of an

expanding core group of friends concerned with channelling into the field of service an increasing store of energy. As the process of growth continues to gather momentum, such an arrangement ultimately fails to satisfy the demands of planning and decision making, and an Area Teaching Committee is constituted, and reflection meetings institutionalized. In the joint interactions of the Committee, the institute and the Auxiliary Board members, a fully fledged scheme for the coordination of activities becomes operational—with all the inherent capacity needed to facilitate the efficient flow of guidance, funds, and information. By now, the process of growth in the cluster will conform to the rhythm established by pronounced cycles of expansion and consolidation, which, punctuated every three months by a meeting for reflection and planning, are unfolding without interruption.

164.8Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics. Specifically, the sequence of courses that we have recommended for use by institutes everywhere, which is facilitating so effectively the process of transformation under way, is designed to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance. The nature of relationships among individuals in this environment, all of whom consider themselves as treading a common path of service, was explained briefly in our Ridván message. We also indicated there that such an environment is not without its effects on the administrative affairs of the Faith. As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.

164.9Within this landscape of unfolding processes, emerging structures, and enduring fellowship, that moment which has come to be known as the “launching” of an intensive programme of growth represents conscious recognition that all the elements necessary to accelerate the expansion and consolidation of the Faith are not only in place but also functioning with an adequate degree of effectiveness. It signals the maturation of an ever-expanding, self-sustaining system for the spiritual edification of a population: a steady stream of friends is proceeding through the courses of the training institute and engaging in the corresponding activities, which serves, in turn, to increase the number of fresh recruits into the Faith, a significant percentage of whom invariably enters the institute process, guaranteeing the expansion of the system. This constitutes another milestone that the friends labouring in every cluster must, in time, reach.

164.10In reiterating here much of what we have stated on previous occasions, we hope to have impressed upon you how readily the movement of a population, inspired by the purpose and principles of the Cause, can be nurtured, when not made the object of extraneous complications. We have no illusion that the path traced out so summarily above is devoid of difficulty. Progress is achieved through the dialectic of crisis and victory, and setbacks are inevitable. A drop in participation, a disruption in the cycles of activity, a momentary breach in the bonds of unity—these are among the myriad challenges that may have to be met. Not infrequently the rise in human resources, or the ability to mobilize them, will fall short of the demands of rapid expansion. Yet the imposition of formulas on the process will not result in a pattern of growth characterized by the desired equilibrium. Temporary imbalances in the progress of different activities are intrinsic to the process, and they can be adjusted over time, if dealt with patiently. Scaling back one activity that is flourishing, on the basis of theoretical conceptions of how balanced growth can be achieved, often proves counterproductive. While the friends in a cluster might well benefit from the experience of those who have already established the necessary pattern of action, it is only through continued action, reflection and consultation on their part that they will learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come.

164.11Today, there are some 1,600 clusters worldwide where the friends have succeeded in creating the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth. Though significant, this accomplishment can by no means be considered the culmination of the process that has gathered momentum in each cluster. New frontiers of learning are now open to the friends, who are asked to dedicate their energies to the creation of vibrant communities, growing in size and reflecting in greater and greater degrees Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity. Such clusters will also need to serve as reservoirs of potential pioneers that can be dispatched, largely across the home front, to cluster after cluster, shedding in some the first rays of the light of His Revelation and strengthening in others the presence of the Faith, enabling all to progress quickly to the first milestone along the path of development, or beyond. With this in mind, we will call upon the community of the Most Great Name at Ridván 2011 to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a programme of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.

Advancing the frontiers of learning

164.12What we have described in the preceding paragraphs and in so many messages over the last decade and a half can best be viewed as the latest in a series of approaches to the growth of the Bahá'í community, each suited to specific historical circumstances. This divinely propelled process of growth was set in motion by the fervour generated in the Cradle of the Faith more than one hundred and sixty years ago, as thousands responded to the summons of a New Day, and received impetus through the exertions made by early believers to carry the message of Bahá'u'lláh to neighbouring countries in the East and scattered pockets in the West. It acquired greater structure through the

Tablets of the Divine Plan revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and gained momentum as the friends spread out systematically across the globe under the direction of the Guardian to establish small centres of Bahá’í activity and erect the first pillars of the Administrative Order. It gathered force in the rural areas of the world as masses of humanity were moved to embrace the Faith, but slowed considerably as the friends strove to discover strategies for sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. And, for fifteen years now, it has been steadily accelerating since we raised the call at the outset of the Four Year Plan for the Bahá’í world to systematize the teaching work on the basis of the experience it had gained through decades of difficult but invaluable learning. That the current approach to growth, effective as it is, must evolve still further in complexity and sophistication once it has taken root in a cluster, demonstrating ever more notably the “society-building power” inherent in the Faith, few would fail to recognize.

164.13Referring to the development of the global Bahá’í community, how often did the beloved Guardian encourage the friends to remain resolute in their purpose and persevere in their endeavours. “Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses,” he noted with satisfaction, “they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can mature and develop.” “It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive,” he reminded them, that “constitutes the one hope” of a disillusioned humanity. That this process will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time “its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order” is clear from his writings. “In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anaemic and lost their virtue,” he asserted so emphatically, “this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive,” is “taking shape,” is “crystallizing into institutions,” and is “mobilizing its forces”.

164.14What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá’í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard

of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.

164.15Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan. Wherever an intensive programme of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people. Let them not lose sight of the remarkable receptivity they found—nay, the sense of eager expectation that awaited them—as they gained confidence in their ability to interact with people of all walks of life and converse with them about the Person of Bahá’u’lláh and His Revelation. Let them hold fast to the conviction that a direct presentation of the Faith, when carried out at a sufficient level of depth and reinforced by a sound approach to consolidation, can bring enduring results. And let them not forget the lessons of the past which left no doubt that a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause, no matter how resourceful, no matter how consecrated, cannot attend to the needs of communities comprising hundreds, much less thousands, of men, women and children. The implications are clear enough. If, in a cluster, those shouldering responsibility for expansion and consolidation number in the tens, with a few hundred participating in the activities of community life, both figures should rise significantly so that by the end of the Plan, one or two hundred are facilitating the participation of one or two thousand.

164.16It is heartening to see that, already in some 300 of the 1,600 clusters worldwide with intensive programmes of growth in operation, the believers have entered the new arena of learning now open to them, and, in more than a few, they are extending its frontiers. Clearly, in all such clusters, strengthening the educational processes set in motion by the training institute, each with its own requisites—regularly held classes for the youngest members of society, close-knit groups for junior youth, and circles of study for youth and adults—is of paramount importance. Much of what this work entails was discussed in the Ridván message. Without exception, having witnessed the transformative effects of the institute process first hand, the friends in such clusters are striving to gain a fuller appreciation of the dynamics that underlie it—the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God. Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies; the stress they lay on memorization of the Creative Word; and the care they exercise in raising consciousness, without awakening the insistent self.

Enhancing administrative capacity

164.17Though the central elements of the process of growth remain unchanged in the clusters in the vanguard of learning, sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity. Different innovations have

already been introduced, on the basis of both geographic considerations and numerical growth. The division of the cluster into smaller units, the decentralization of the reflection meeting, the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators, the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field—these are some of the arrangements that have been made thus far. We have every confidence that, with your able assistance, the International Teaching Centre will follow these developments over the course of the next Plan, helping to consolidate the lessons learned into well-proven methods and instruments. To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.

164.18Whatever the nature of the arrangements made at the cluster level for coordinating large-scale activity, continued progress will depend on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and on the increased capacity of Regional Bahá'í Councils and ultimately National Spiritual Assemblies. In the Ridván message we expressed pleasure at noting the growing strength of National Assemblies, and we look to the coming five years with optimism, certain that we will see significant leaps forward in this respect. Moreover, we have no doubt that, in concert with National Assemblies, you will be able to help Regional Councils enhance their institutional capacity. There are currently 170 such administrative bodies in 45 countries worldwide, and their number is sure to climb during the next Plan. It will be imperative that all Regional Councils pay close attention to the operation of the training institute and the functioning of Area Teaching Committees. With this in mind, they will find it necessary to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it. These will include a well-functioning regional office that provides the secretary with basic organizational support; a sound system of accounting that accommodates divers channels for the flow of funds to and from clusters; an efficient means of communication that takes into consideration the reality of life in villages and neighbourhoods; and, where warranted, physical structures that facilitate intensified and focused activity. What is important to acknowledge in this respect is that only if the Councils themselves are engaged in a process of learning will such mechanisms prove to be effective. Otherwise, while ostensibly created to support learning in action by an increasing number of participants in neighbourhoods and villages, systems being developed may well work against it in subtle ways, stifling, unintentionally, rising aspirations at the grassroots.

164.19While collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils will be one of your primary concerns, your auxiliaries will need to direct more and more of their energies towards fostering institutional capacity at the local level, where the demands of community building assert themselves so unmistakably. To help you envision what lies ahead of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants everywhere, particularly in clusters experiencing

large-scale expansion and consolidation, we ask you to reflect, first, on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many rural areas of the world, in which the vast majority of such clusters today are to be found.

164.20As you are aware, often in a rural cluster made up of villages and perhaps one or two towns, while the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth is being established, the efforts of the friends are confined to a few localities. Once in place, however, the pattern can be extended quickly to village after village, as explained in our Ridván message this year. Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

164.21What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward: Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member's personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

164.22Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief

of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word." Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

164.23Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly's growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly's mind. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

164.24As the community grows in size and in capacity to maintain vitality, the friends will, we have indicated in the past, be drawn further into the life of society and be challenged to take advantage of the approaches they have developed to respond to a widening range of issues that face their village. The question of coherence, so essential to the growth achieved thus far, and so fundamental to the Plan's evolving framework for action, now assumes new dimensions. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised.

164.25Our Ridván message described a few of the characteristics of social action at the grassroots, and the conditions it must meet. Efforts in a village will generally begin on a small scale, perhaps with the emergence of groups of friends, each concerned with a specific social or economic need it has identified and each pursuing a simple set of appropriate actions. Consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find constructive expression. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential

pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them—the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá'í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance. Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends to take advantage of methods and programmes of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá'í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

164.26What is outlined in the foregoing paragraphs represents only a few of the attributes which Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many villages of the world will gradually develop in serving the needs of communities that embrace larger and larger numbers. As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as "the trusted ones of the Merciful among men". Thus will these Assemblies become "shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction."

164.27Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly's development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population. The first necessitates the division of the Assembly's area of jurisdiction into neighbourhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each. The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area—social, political, and cultural—with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

Service on Bahá'í institutions

164.28In setting out for you in these pages developments we are eager to see in the administrative work of the Faith during the next Five Year Plan, we are reminded of the repeated warnings raised by the Guardian in this regard. "Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause," he stated, "we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created." The Bahá'í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, "is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself". It is intended, he made clear, "to serve a twofold purpose". On

the one hand, “it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion” of the Cause “along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal.” On the other, “it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved.” And he went on to explain: “It should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá’í community.”

164.29It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá’í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

164.30Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá’í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one’s own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they “must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá’í Community and promote the common weal.” Bahá’í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá’í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tell us that “when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire’s distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it.” As He averred, “ye must in this matter—that is, the serving of humankind—lay

down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice.”
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164.31Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God, to promote learning, and to assist all in their endeavours to develop an upright and praiseworthy character. When the North American Bahá’í community embarked on its first Seven Year Plan, in pursuit of the responsibilities with which it had been charged in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian addressed to the friends in that land a letter of considerable length and great potency, dated 25 December 1938, subsequently published under the title The Advent of Divine Justice. Elaborating on the nature of the tasks at hand, the letter made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá’í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, “stand out as preeminent and vital”: rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice. Given the conditions of the world today, you would do well to reflect on the implications of his observations for the global effort of the Bahá’í community to infuse cluster after cluster with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.
164.32Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the “justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness” that must “distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá’í community.” Though applicable to all its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its “elected representatives, whether local, regional, or national,” whose sense of moral rectitude should stand in clear contrast to “the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests”. The Guardian called for “an abiding sense of undeviating justice” in a “strangely disordered world” and quoted extensively from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, setting the sights of the friends on the highest standards of honesty and trustworthiness. He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their lives—in their business dealings, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—and to observe its requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws and principles of the Faith. That political life everywhere has continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate in the intervening years, as the very conception of statesmanship has been drained of meaning, as policies have come to serve the economic interests of the few in the name of progress, as hypocrisy has been allowed to undermine the operation of social and economic structures, is evident. If indeed great effort was required for the friends to uphold the high standards of the Faith then, how much greater must be the exertion in a world that rewards dishonesty, that encourages corruption, and that treats truth as a negotiable commodity. Profound is the confusion that threatens the foundations of society, and unwavering must be the resolve of all those involved in Bahá’í activity, lest the slightest trace of self-interest becloud their

judgement. Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching Committee, every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and all members of every local, regional and national Bahá'í body, whether elected or appointed, appreciate the significance of the Guardian's plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of the moral rectitude which he described with such clarity. May their actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its high destiny and its inherent nobility.

164.33No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá'í enterprise today are the Guardian's forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, "with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness". He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied "by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters". We need not provide for you here evidence of the influence that such a deficient code now exerts on humanity as a whole; even the remotest spots on the globe are captivated by its enticements. Yet we feel compelled to mention a few points related specifically to the theme of purity. The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. And in this the friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the present-day order" must "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." Throughout the world today, young people are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Plan and the most ardent champions of the Cause; their numbers will, we are certain, increase from year to year. May every one of them come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.

164.34The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that "any division or cleavage" in the ranks of the Faith "is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals." He made clear that the friends should manifest "complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or colour." He went on to discuss at length the specific question of racial prejudice, "the corrosion of which," he indicated, had "bitten into the fibre, and attacked the whole social structure of American society" and which, he asserted at the time, "should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution." Independent of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures taken by the

American nation, and the Bahá'í community evolving within it, in addressing this particular challenge, the fact remains that prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity. While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

164.35The educational process associated with the training institute is, of course, helping to foster the spiritual conditions to which the Guardian referred in The Advent of Divine Justice, along with the many others mentioned in the writings that must distinguish the life of the Bahá'í community—the spirit of unity that must animate the friends, the ties of love that must bind them, the firmness in the Covenant that must sustain them, and the reliance and trust they must place on the power of divine assistance, to note but a few. That such essential attributes are developed in the context of building capacity for service, in an environment that cultivates systematic action, is particularly noteworthy. In promoting this environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of two fundamental, interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be eschewed.

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164.36Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá'í life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Bahá'í activity. The magnitude of the challenge facing the friends in this respect is not lost on us. They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences. At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of society, remoulding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end, they must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking

and doing—this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society. There are a few specific points we wish to mention in this connection.

164.37It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

164.38Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: “We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.” How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown. Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of Bahá’í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a programme of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.

164.39Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort. The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá’í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which

contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project with a clear beginning and a definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

164.40To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community. Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. The worldwide crisis of authority provides proof enough. So grievous have been its abuses, and so deep the suspicion and resentment it now arouses, that the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable—a situation made all the more perilous by the weakening of community ties.

164.41Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation. No sooner had "the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths." The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe. So it is that the individual, with no regard for "personal benefits and selfish advantages," comes to see him- or herself as "one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing," whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the friends come to recognize that "wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort" are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that "the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and

sacrifice," and that "the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal." And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. "With heart and soul", the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "things may be properly ordered and well arranged". This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order.

164.42And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian's words that "their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent." "Never" would they be "led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles." "With extreme humility," they approach their tasks and "endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection." Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious.

164.43Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not."

164.44As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.

The Universal House of Justice

Conference of the Continental Counsellors
1 January 2011
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
165.1For the past five days, the Continental Counsellors have been gathered in conference in the Holy Land, engaged in earnest deliberation at once insightful and clear visioned, well grounded and confident, on the progress of the Divine Plan. The joy and wonder of this gathering, now entering its closing moments, has come from the vivid retelling of your numerous exploits, deeds which secured the astonishing attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan one year early. It is hard to express in words how much love for you has been shown in these few, fleeting days. We praise God that He has raised up a community so accomplished and render thanks to Him for releasing your marvellous potentialities. You it is who, whether in collective endeavours or individual efforts, are presenting the verities of the Faith and assisting souls to recognize the Blessed Beauty. You it is who, in your tens of thousands, are serving as tutors of study circles wherever receptivity is kindled. You it is who, without thought of self, are providing spiritual education to the child and kindly fellowship to the junior youth. You it is who, through visits to homes and invitations to yours, are forging ties of spiritual kinship that foster a sense of community. You it is who, when called to serve on the institutions and agencies of the Cause, are accompanying others and rejoicing in their achievements. And it is all of us, whatever our share in this undertaking, who labour and long, strive and supplicate for the transformation of humanity, envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh, to be hastened.
165.2A new five-year horizon now beckons, rich with portent. The features of the Plan that will begin this Ridván are set out in a letter we addressed to the Counsellors’ Conference at its opening session and which was transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies the same day. We hope that you will be able to give it thoughtful study, alongside the message we addressed to you at Ridván 2010, at gatherings of all kinds—whether at the national, regional, or cluster level, in local communities, in neighbourhoods and villages, or in the home. We are certain that, through the consultations about the Plan in which you participate, your understanding will deepen and, conscious of the spiritual forces that support you, you will resolve to make this global enterprise a personal concern and become as occupied with the well-being of the human family as you are with that of your dearest kin. It brings us great joy that so many souls throughout the Bahá’í community are ready to thus distinguish themselves. But what gratifies us beyond this is the certain knowledge that victories will be won in the next five years by youth and adults, men and women, who may at present be wholly unaware of Bahá’u’lláh’s coming, much less acquainted with the “society-building power” of His Faith. For you possess a potent instrument for spiritually empowering the masses of humanity to take charge of their own destiny, an instrument tempered in the crucible of experience. You know well, and have heard clearly, the call of Bahá’u’lláh: “I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding

Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight."

165.3Our abiding prayers are with each of you.

The Universal House of Justice

166

Eliminating Racial Prejudice

10 April 2011

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

166.1The Universal House of Justice appreciates your thoughtful inquiry concerning the relationship between eliminating racial prejudice and participating in activities of the Five Year Plan, which was presented in your email letter…. No doubt, you have by now carefully studied the message of the House of Justice dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, which has a direct bearing on many of your questions.

166.2In your letter, you observe that the many activities carried out in the past by the American Bahá'í community to address racial concerns, despite their obvious merit and the results achieved to date, have been limited in their effect and have not been systematic in nature. Your review of such efforts suggests a cyclical pattern, with fits and starts, in which a certain course of action is presented with fanfare by the institutions, many believers take part although others remain on the sidelines, activities reach a peak, and then, after months or perhaps years, attention wanes, and the community is drawn to other areas until some incident occurs or a new heartfelt appeal is uttered, thus beginning the cycle anew. Simply to repeat the approaches implemented in the past, then, will surely not produce a satisfactory result.

The House of Justice notes that the pattern you describe was a characteristic common to many facets of community life, leading it, in 1996, to set the Bahá'í world on a new course. During the Four Year Plan, it wrote:

Our hopes, our goals, our possibilities of moving forward can all be realized through concentrating our endeavors on the major aim of the Divine Plan at its current stage—that is, to effect a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This challenge can be met through persistent effort patiently pursued…. But also of vital importance to bringing about entry by troops is a realistic approach, systematic action. There are no shortcuts. Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.

166.3After a decade and a half of systematic effort, a coherent pattern of activity that advances the growth and development of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society has emerged. The current stage of progress and the challenges that lie immediately ahead are summarized

in the Ridván 2010 and 28 December 2010 messages. From this perspective, it is possible to see how the challenge of addressing racial prejudice is an integral part of three broad areas of activity in which the Bahá'í world is currently engaged: expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society.

166.4The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action. Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods. There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá'í community. For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh. In an environment of love and trust born of common belief, practice, and mission, individuals of different races will have the intimate connection of heart and mind upon which mutual understanding and change depend. As a result of their training and deepening, a growing number of believers will draw insights from the Writings to sensitively and effectively address issues of racial prejudice that arise within their personal lives and families, among community members, and in social settings and the workplace. As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grassroots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly. And, at the national level, the National Assembly will guide, through its Office of External Affairs, the engagement of the Faith with other agencies and individuals in the discourse pertaining to race unity.

166.5You indicate that some friends wonder whether the Guardian's statement characterizing racial prejudice as "the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution" still applies to the racial situation in the United States, since it was written so long ago. The House of Justice has determined that it is not productive to approach the issue in this manner, as it gives rise to an implicit and false dichotomy that, either what the Guardian said is no longer important, or it is so important that it must be addressed before or apart from all other concerns. Yet, the situation is infinitely more complex. The American nation is much more diverse than in 1938, and the friends cannot be concerned only with relations between black and white, essential as they are. The

expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus more intractable. So too, the American Bahá'í community has evolved significantly and is no longer at the same stage of its development; it faces a wider range of challenges but also possesses greater capabilities. The House of Justice stated that the principles Shoghi Effendi brought to the attention of the American believers more than seventy years ago are relevant today, and they will continue to be relevant to future generations. It is obvious, however, that the "long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls" upon which the friends must tread, will take them through an ever-changing landscape that requires that they adapt their approaches to varying circumstances.

166.6In the 28 December message, the House of Justice explained that "A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society." Even if such a community were to focus the entirety of its resources on the problem of racial prejudice, even if it were able to heal itself to some extent of that cancerous affliction, in the face of such a monumental social challenge the impact would be inconsequential. Therefore, the friends must effectively assess the forces at work in their society and, beginning in neighborhoods and clusters, contribute their share to the process of learning and systematization which, as their numbers, knowledge, and influence grow, will transform their lives, families, and communities. Only if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community's affairs, only if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Bahá'ís by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.

166.7It is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice that the believers will appreciate the potentialities that exist within the current pattern of their organic activities for the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's highest aims for humanity and that they will seize their chance and commit their time, their resources, their energies—indeed their very lives—to these critical efforts for the betterment of the world.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

167

Conclusion of the Restoration Work on the Shrine of the Báb

12 April 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

167.1We are pleased to share with you the joyful tidings of the conclusion of

the restoration work on the Shrine of the Báb. This endeavour represents the most momentous among a series of projects recently carried out in the Holy Land—including the renovation of the interior and exterior of the International Archives Building; the regeneration of the Ridván Garden; the acquisition of extensive properties at Bahjí and the construction of a boulevard that provides access to the northern gate; and, adjacent to the Most Holy Shrine, the realignment of the perimeter of the northeast quadrant, presaging the completion of the full circle of surrounding gardens. All these add to the host of achievements being celebrated in these closing moments of the global enterprise which has absorbed the Bahá'í world for the last five years.

167.2Today the "Queen of Carmel", concealed from the gaze of the public for the larger part of the project, is unveiled and resplendent again, "crowned in glowing gold" on the Mountain of the Lord. The restoration of this majestic edifice was preceded by three years of preparations, entailing comprehensive studies to assess its condition, to analyse the impact of the environment upon it, and to determine approaches and materials for the renovation that would remain faithful to the original design as well as withstand the rigours of time. A myriad details pertaining to every element of the structure, from the gilded finial gracing the dome to the colonnade encircling the arcade, were attended to by highly skilled and dedicated craftspeople and a large band of other devoted volunteers from near and far, who lovingly laboured together with scrupulous care and with sensitivity to the sacred nature of the work before them.

167.3Among the significant aspects of this undertaking is the structural reinforcement that the entire building has undergone to ensure greater stability and enhanced resistance to seismic forces. Over 120 rock anchors have been fixed into the mountain behind the newly fortified retaining walls shielding the Shrine. The restoration of the exterior of the superstructure called for a methodical approach to treating the stonework and all of its intricate decorative features. The ornamental iron balustrades rising above the roof of the octagon have been repaired and refinished. Precisely 11,790 gilded tiles, meticulously fashioned in scores of shapes and sizes, have been placed in position on the carefully mended and reinforced dome, which now shines in the plenitude of its splendour. The three chambers added by Shoghi Effendi to the southern side of the original mausoleum, raised with infinite pains by the Master, have been refurbished and prepared to receive pilgrims and visitors for worship. It was in the central room of these three that we gathered early this morning to offer prayers of thanksgiving, as we faced that inner sanctuary within which rests the holy dust of the Blessed Báb.

The Universal House of Justice

2011–2016

The Five Year Plan

168

Ridván Message 2011

Ridván 2011

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

168.1At the opening of this glorious season our eyes are brightened as we behold the newly unveiled brilliance of the gilded dome that crowns the exalted Shrine of the Báb. Restored to the supernal lustre intended for it by Shoghi Effendi, that august edifice once again shines out to land, sea, and sky, by day and by night, attesting the majesty and holiness of Him Whose hallowed remains are embosomed within.

168.2This moment of joy synchronizes with the close of an auspicious chapter in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Only a single decade remains of the first century of the Formative Age, the first hundred years to be spent beneath the benevolent shade of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The Five Year Plan now ending is succeeded by another, the features of which have already been made the object of intense study across the Bahá’í world. Indeed, we could not be more gratified by the response to our message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and to the Ridván message of twelve months ago. Not satisfied with a fragmentary grasp of their contents, the friends are returning to these messages again and again, singly and in groups, at formal meetings and spontaneous gatherings. Their understanding is enriched through active and informed participation in the programmes of growth being nurtured in their clusters. Consequently, the Bahá’í community worldwide has consciously absorbed in a few months what it needs to propel it into a confident start to the coming decade.

168.3Over the same period, cumulative instances of political upheaval and economic turmoil on various continents have shaken governments and peoples. Societies have been brought to the brink of revolution, and in notable cases over the edge. Leaders are finding that neither arms nor riches guarantee security. Where the aspirations of the people have gone unfulfilled, a store of indignation has accrued. We recall how pointedly Bahá’u’lláh admonished the rulers of the earth: “Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber.” A word of caution: No matter how captivating the spectacle of the people’s fervour for change, it must be remembered that there are interests which manipulate the course of events. And, so long as the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician is not administered, the tribulations of this age will persist and deepen. An attentive observer of the times will readily recognize the accelerated disintegration, fitful but relentless, of a world order lamentably defective.

168.4Yet, discernible too is its counterpart, the constructive process that the Guardian associated with “the nascent Faith of Bahá’u’lláh” and described as “the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must erelong establish.” Its indirect effects can be seen in the outpouring of feeling, especially from the young, that springs from a longing to contribute to societal development. It is a bounty accorded to the followers of the Ancient Beauty that this longing, which wells up inexorably from the human spirit in every land, is able to find such eloquent expression in the work the Bahá’í community is carrying out to build capacity for effective action amongst the

diverse populations of the planet. Can any privilege compare with this?
168.5For insight into this work let every believer look to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the centenary of Whose “epoch-making journeys” to Egypt and the West is being marked at this time. Tirelessly, He expounded the teachings in every social space: in homes and mission halls, churches and synagogues, parks and public squares, railway carriages and ocean liners, clubs and societies, schools and universities. Uncompromising in defence of the truth, yet infinitely gentle in manner, He brought the universal divine principles to bear on the exigencies of the age. To all without distinction—officials, scientists, workers, children, parents, exiles, activists, clerics, sceptics—He imparted love, wisdom, comfort, whatever the particular need. While elevating their souls, He challenged their assumptions, reoriented their perspectives, expanded their consciousness, and focused their energies. He demonstrated by word and deed such compassion and generosity that hearts were utterly transformed. No one was turned away. Our great hope is that frequent recollection, during this centennial period, of the Master’s matchless record will inspire and fortify His sincere admirers. Set His example before your eyes and fix your gaze upon it; let it be your instinctive guide in your pursuit of the aim of the Plan.
168.6At the inception of the Bahá’í community’s first global Plan, Shoghi Effendi described in compelling language the successive stages by which the divine light had been kindled in the Síyáh-Chál, clothed in the lamp of revelation in Baghdád, spread to countries in Asia and Africa even as it shone with added brilliancy in Adrianople and later in ‘Akká, projected across the seas to the remaining continents, and by which it would be progressively diffused over the states and dependencies of the world. The final part of this process he characterized as the “penetration of that light … into all the remaining territories of the globe”, referring to it as “the stage at which the light of God’s triumphant Faith shining in all its power and glory will have suffused and enveloped the entire planet.” Though that goal is far from being fulfilled, the light already blazes intensely in many a region. In some countries it shines in every cluster. In the land where that inextinguishable light was first ignited, it burns bright despite those who would snuff it out. In diverse nations it achieves a steady glow across whole neighbourhoods and villages, as candle after candle in heart after heart is lighted by the Hand of Providence; it illuminates thoughtful conversation at every level of human interaction; it casts its beams upon a myriad initiatives taken to promote the well-being of a people. And in every instance it radiates from a faithful believer, a vibrant community, a loving Spiritual Assembly—each a beacon of light against the gloom.
168.7We pray earnestly at the Sacred Threshold that each one of you, bearers of the undying flame, may be surrounded by the potent confirmations of Bahá’u’lláh as you convey to others the spark of faith.
The Universal House of Justice
169
Call for Pioneers
23 May 2011

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

169.1Our message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors briefly described the process of growth which begins to unfold in a cluster, frequently as the result of a single homefront pioneer entering into meaningful conversation with local residents. We also indicated that more advanced clusters, in which the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth has been firmly established, will often serve as reservoirs of pioneers who can be dispatched to other clusters, especially on the home front—in some to initiate a systematic approach to sharing Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings and in others to strengthen the processes of expansion and consolidation that have already been established. There is no doubt that the movement of pioneers remains an indispensable feature of the spiritual enterprise in which the community of the Most Great Name is engaged.

169.2During the Five Year Plan recently concluded, over 3,500 international pioneers entered the arena of service to reinforce the work of the Faith in myriad ways across the globe. At the same time, we were most pleased to see a surge in the movement of homefront pioneers, their numbers matching those who arose to serve in the international field and their sacrificial efforts making a distinctive contribution to the early attainment of the goal of the Plan. In the next five years, the successful prosecution of the Plan will require the services of several thousand consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programmes of growth.

169.3National Spiritual Assemblies, in close collaboration with Continental Counsellors and Continental Pioneering Committees, will continue to play a crucial role in expanding the awareness of the believers about the critical needs of the Cause and in assisting with the settlement of pioneers in designated clusters. They will not, however, be asked to establish numerical goals at the outset, as was the practice in the past, for those to be dispatched beyond their borders during the coming five years. Rather, we will regularly call the attention of selected National Assemblies in different parts of the world to specific urgent pioneer needs, identified by the International Teaching Centre in the course of its ongoing endeavours to follow the progress of the Faith around the globe. It is hoped that National Assemblies will then be able to quickly send pioneers who respond to that particular appeal. In this regard, a promising pattern is developing in certain regions whereby believers arise to serve in a neighbouring country or in one that is further afield but within the same continent. This development brings with it the advantage of a more intimate familiarity with the culture and language of the country in which they settle, thereby increasing their effectiveness and the efficiency with which their services can be utilized.

169.4Beyond responding to the specific appeals for homefront and international pioneers that are issued from time to time by the institutions, the friends are of course welcome to arise at any time and from any place to settle in any area where they feel they can best contribute to the advancement of the Cause. Even

so, their endeavours would yield greater effect if, drawing on the advice of institutions, they were to direct their efforts to clusters—indeed, villages and neighbourhoods within clusters—that are the focus of systematic attention. It is our ardent hope that the believers will arise rank upon rank, with a clarity of vision born of experience and with complete reliance on the confirmations of God, to offer His life-giving Message to every eager soul, to every receptive population. Our prayers at the Sacred Threshold will accompany them as they strive to seize the abundant opportunities now opening before them.

The Universal House of Justice

170

Assault against the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education

25 May 2011

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

170.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to relay to you for your immediate attention the following information regarding a recent assault against the Bahá'í community by the Iranian authorities….

170.2Sometime on 21 May 2011, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, acting simultaneously in several cities across the country, including Gohardasht, Isfahan, Karaj, Sari, Shiraz, Tehran, and Zahedan, raided the homes of individuals who are closely involved in assisting with the operations of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. Initial reports indicate that at least thirty households were subjected to extensive searches and that the following sixteen Bahá'ís were arrested either immediately or the next day:

Gohardasht: Afrúz Farmánburdárí [Afrouz Farmanbordari]

Isfahan: Fu'ád Muqaddam [Foad Moghaddam]

Karaj: Vahíd Mahmúdí [Vahid Mahmoudi], Vahíd Mukhtárí [Vahid Mokhtari], Farhád Sidqí [Farhad Sedghi], Rámín Zíbá'í [Ramin Zibaie]

Sari: Amír-Húshang Amírtabár [Amir-Houshang Amirtabar], Navíd Asadí [Navid Asadi], Sadaf Thábitíyán [Sadaf Sabetian]

Shiraz: Amánu'lláh Mustaqím [Amanollah Mostaghim]

Tehran: Mahmúd Bádavám [Mahmoud Badavam], Suhayl Qanbarí [Soheil Ghanbari], Núshín Khádim [Noushin Khadem], Kámrán Murtidá'í [Kamran Mortezaie], Sháhín Nigárí [Shahin Negari]

City of residence unknown: DaníálUjí [Danial Oji]

170.3Mr. Vahíd Mukhtárí of Karaj is understood to have already been released. Eight other Bahá'ís were interrogated by Ministry of Intelligence officers and released immediately after. As further information becomes available, it will be conveyed to you.

170.4The actions of the authorities towards the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education underline the intent of the Iranian government to effect, by all means at its disposal, its policy to eliminate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in the land of its birth. You will recall that in 1991 a confidential memorandum on "The Bahá'í Question", issued by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, stated clearly the position of the Islamic Republic towards

the Bahá'í community. The memorandum specifies that Iran's Bahá'ís should be treated in such a way "that their progress and development are blocked". Included under the heading of educational and cultural status is the provision that Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

170.5As you are well aware, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that this policy has been enforced not only since the circulation of the 1991 memorandum but indeed since shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution, when Bahá'í students were expelled from university and Bahá'í university professors and lecturers were summarily dismissed from their positions. To mitigate the effects of this ban, in the late 1980s the Bahá'í community then made informal arrangements, using the volunteer services of the Bahá'í professors who had been fired from their jobs, to teach Bahá'í students at home. Since then, the Iranian government has made repeated attempts to bring to a halt this quiet, peaceful, and vital initiative. In 1998, more than thirty-six individuals who were assisting with this initiative were arrested in a series of raids conducted over a five-day period on more than 500 Bahá'í homes and much of the records and equipment used for the classes were confiscated. In subsequent years there have been periodic onslaughts of varying intensity against this endeavour, most notably in 2001 and 2003.

170.6You will recall that in 2006, a strong international outcry was raised over the flagrantly discriminatory practice that prevented Bahá'ís from sitting for the national university entrance examination because the forms announcing the results identified them as Muslims, which they could not in good conscience accept, as this constituted a recantation of their faith. When confronted about this, Iranian government officials stated, including in official responses, that the forms did not identify the student's religion but rather the religious studies subject on which he or she had been examined. The House of Justice decided to accept that assurance, and Bahá'í students who passed the entrance examinations began to register for university courses. However, the experience of the years that ensued has amply demonstrated that the policy to exclude Bahá'ís from Iranian institutions of higher learning, as articulated in the 1991 secret memorandum, remains fully operational. Despite the government's protestations that no one is prevented from attending university on account of his or her religion, qualified young Bahá'ís are prevented from taking their examinations or entering universities. Those who are matriculated continue to be either rejected at the enrolment phase or expelled from the universities—in some cases just prior to the completion of their courses of study—solely because they are Bahá'ís. It is evident that those few Bahá'ís who are being permitted to pursue their university studies for a time are there simply because this allows the authorities to deny that they prohibit Bahá'ís from access to higher education.

170.7There can be no doubt that the attacks on the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education are being carried out under a centrally orchestrated campaign aimed at demoralizing Bahá'í youth and eroding the formal educational level

of the community so as to hasten its impoverishment. Not content with excluding the believers from the nation's universities, the government is callously revitalizing its efforts to thwart the informal educational arrangements that the Bahá'í community has undertaken to enable its youth to expand their knowledge beyond the high school level….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

171

Denial of Higher Education to Bahá'í Youth in Iran

17 June 2011

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved friends,

171.1We were deeply distressed to learn of the raid conducted by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence on the homes of some of the believers associated with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) and of the arrests of some of the same devoted friends. However, the reports attesting to your steadfast determination to forge ahead with your efforts in pursuit of knowledge and learning have filled our hearts with joy.

171.2One of the outcomes of the 1979 revolution was the dismissal of Bahá'í professors and lecturers from universities and the debarring of Bahá'í youth from institutions of higher learning. Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran claims to uphold equal rights for all and the fact that the civil laws of the country provide no basis for such a deprivation, and although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, clearly stipulates access to higher education as an inalienable human right, the authorities, swayed by religious prejudice and acting in direct violation of the law and of international standards, have sanctioned this discrimination as official government policy and enforce it with determination.

171.3As a result of the requirement to specify one's religion on the application forms for the National University Entrance Examination, Bahá'í youth were unable to enter Iranian universities as their only alternative would have been to dissimulate their faith. When the efforts of Bahá'í lecturers and students to secure redress through representations to the judicial institutions of the land proved unavailing, the Bahá'í community arranged for the lecturers who had been dismissed to teach the youth who had been denied access to universities. Many members of the community lent their support to this effort. This educational initiative, this grassroots undertaking, was thus begun through the sacrificial exertions of individuals who sought to serve the cause of learning, despite the unfavourable conditions and without imposing the least burden or expense on the government. The institute gradually expanded, and in the early 1990s, it took the name of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. Over time a number of other distinguished lecturers in Iran and abroad, some of whom were not even members of the Bahá'í community, began to collaborate with the Institute.

171.4Bahá'í youth continued to be excluded from universities until, in 2006, following widespread and persistent protests around the world, a

representative of the Iranian government duplicitously stated before the international community that the enquiry about religion on the university entrance examination forms was not related to the religious beliefs of the students but was merely intended to clarify their choice of religious studies. The Bahá'í youth, highly sceptical of the veracity of this explanation but ready to demonstrate their goodwill, accepted the statement, and beginning in 2006, despite fresh obstacles that had been placed in their path, a number of them entered university. It soon became clear, however, that the claim advanced by the Iranian government representative before the international community was completely false, as later that year the head of the central security office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, in a confidential letter, instructed the administrators of 81 universities to dismiss any student as soon as he or she is identified as a Bahá'í.

171.5The official policy of the Iranian government to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity was laid out in a confidential document issued in 1991 by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution under the signature of its then secretary, Hujjatu'l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Reza Hashemi Golpaygani, and approved by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In this document, government agencies are asked to ensure that the "progress and development" of the Bahá'ís "are blocked", and explicit directives are given that Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís." Consequently, over the course of the past thirty years, Bahá'í youth have been denied access to Iranian universities and deprived of the opportunity to earn academic qualifications through the requirement to specify one's religion on the application forms, or under the pretext advanced by the country's Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization that the university entrance examination files of Bahá'í applicants were "incomplete", or through the expulsion of students as soon as they are identified as Bahá'ís, whether during the registration process, in the course of their studies, or even in the final stages before their graduation.

171.6The recent raid on the homes of those involved with BIHE is the fourth such attack aimed at suppressing this constructive and self-sustaining effort of the Bahá'í community. While the authorities vigorously use all the means at their disposal to debar Bahá'í youth from university, they resort to every possible deception to conceal this shameful policy from the Iranian people, from the international community, and from human rights agencies. At times they deny their actions through lies; at other times they endeavour to justify them through accusations that have long been rejected by the public; and now, in a desperate attempt to win the support of the Iranian people and of the international community, they brazenly seek to portray as illegal the very activities the Bahá'í community has been forced to undertake in order to educate its youth.

171.7Ever since the inception of this educational initiative it has been clear that BIHE could not issue official educational certificates. Notwithstanding this, the courses offered have been of the highest standard, and every attempt

has been made to meet the standards of learning established by the most reputable universities of the world. Given the aptitude of the students and their eagerness to learn, a number of leading universities in Europe, Australia, Canada, India, and the United States have come to recognize the capacity and level of achievement of BIHE's graduates and have admitted them, without undergraduate degrees, to Master's and PhD programmes. After receiving their graduate degrees, the vast majority of these students have selflessly chosen to return to Iran and many have in turn undertaken to teach at BIHE. Under such conditions, and considering that BIHE does not issue any official diplomas, to portray as illegal these efforts of the Bahá'í community to educate its youth is entirely baseless and absurd. It is as though one were to deny certain citizens access to available food supplies and when they undertake with untold hardship to cultivate their backyards in order to survive, declare their efforts illegal and destroy their crop. Persistence in these dehumanizing acts serves only to expose the irrational determination of the authorities to block the social progress of the Bahá'ís.

171.8In a land where learning is traditionally cherished and where the ideal of "seek thou knowledge from the cradle to the grave" has long been championed, and under a government which claims to be the advocate and preserver of the teachings of the Prophet of Islam Who proclaimed "seek after knowledge, even unto China", every true and noble Iranian bemoans with a heavy heart the fact that, contrary to all human values and without the least regard for the laws of the country, a group that shows no commitment to the glorious cultural history of that land and which—owing to its fanatical religious prejudice—has derived no benefit from true Islamic values is depriving some of the nation's young citizens of access to higher education. Now, after thirty years, this patent violation of human rights in Iran has spread to such a degree that it extends beyond the Bahá'ís to encompass thousands of other Iranian students and enlightened academics who are deprived of educational freedom; the matter has come to such a pass that there is even talk of limiting access to higher education for half of the country's population—namely, the women of that land.

171.9Acceptance of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh carries with it the commitment to strive for individual spiritual maturity and to participate in collective efforts to build a thriving society and contribute to the common weal. Science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The progress of the world of humanity dependeth upon knowledge, and its decline is due to ignorance. When the human race gaineth in knowledge it becometh heavenly, and when it acquireth learning it taketh on lordly attributes." To seek to acquire knowledge and learning and to study useful sciences and crafts are among the fundamental beliefs of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore, the long-term solution you have chosen as a means of counteracting the difficulties imposed upon you in the path of higher education is to engage in constructive collaboration with other proponents of peace and reconciliation to build a progressive and orderly society committed to the promotion of knowledge and social justice. You, the faithful lovers of

the Blessed Beauty who have remained immovable as a mountain in the tempest of trials and tribulations, place your trust in His Word and consider every woe as a blessing and every difficulty as a new opportunity to serve. With dynamism, patience, and fortitude, you are therefore determined to pursue the educational activities of BIHE and have accepted that these recent attacks will naturally result in temporary difficulties that may cause certain disruptions and require some adjustments in the way its affairs are conducted. You are well aware of the importance of maintaining the unity and harmony of the community, which, especially in these tumultuous days, is your shield and protection, and at all times you place your hopes in the outpourings of God's unfailing grace.

171.10The enlightened people of Iran and other well-wishers around the world stand with you. We, too, are following the situation with close attention. Rest assured that the valuable experience you have gained in providing higher education to students who have been deprived thereof will be an effective contribution to the advancement of learning among the youth of that nation—a nation renowned for the promotion of knowledge. Beyond them, countless oppressed people around the world will also find inspiration in your constructive and peaceful approach to opposing injustice and iniquity.

171.11We supplicate on your behalf in the Sacred Shrines and fervently implore God to unlock before your faces the portals of freedom and prosperity.

The Universal House of Justice

172

Passing of Peter Khan, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice

15 July 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

172.1We grieve at the sudden passing of our dearly loved former colleague Peter J. Khan, whose many years of service in the Holy Land, concluded so recently, are still fresh in our memories. By any measure, his was a remarkable life, one of earnest striving, of unbending resolve, of unflinching dedication to principle, and of constancy of effort. Discovering the Faith in his early youth, he had an unbroken record of outstanding service that included membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, of the Auxiliary Board for Propagation in North America, of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Australasia, and of the International Teaching Centre and that culminated in his election to the Universal House of Justice on which body he served for twenty-three years. His considerable intellectual gifts manifested themselves in every aspect of his service to the Cause of God: in his stalwart defence of the Covenant, in the exemplary manner in which he discharged his manifold administrative duties, in his acquainting generations of youth with the transforming vision of Shoghi Effendi, in his championing the advancement of women, in his diligent attention to the stewardship of the Faith's material resources, and in his presentations of the verities of the Cause with uncommon eloquence and endearing humour to unnumbered audiences—lifting hearts, stimulating minds, galvanizing spirits. The Faith of God has lost a distinguished servant.

172.2Our condolences are extended to his beloved wife Janet, his collaborator and devoted companion. We shall offer ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold

that his illumined soul may be joyously received in the Abhá Kingdom and immersed in the ocean of divine grace. We call upon the friends to hold befitting memorial gatherings in his honour throughout the Bahá'í community, including in all the Houses of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

173

International Financial Collaboration Programme

17 July 2011

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

173.1Over recent decades, a large number of national communities have been provided with valuable financial assistance from their sister communities across the Bahá'í world through the instrument of the international financial collaboration goals programme. In the last fifteen years, the approach adopted by the Universal House of Justice has been to invite selected National Spiritual Assemblies, once a new Plan had commenced, to assess how much they could contribute towards the acquisition and improvement of property and equipment by other national communities during the course of that Plan. On the basis of these estimates, the House of Justice then called upon them to assist communities in various countries as and when specific needs came to its attention.

173.2During the recently concluded Five Year Plan, 42 National Spiritual Assemblies participated in the financial collaboration goals programme, donating some US$2,000,000 to national Bahá'í communities in all parts of the world. These funds were used to meet a variety of needs: the acquisition of land and buildings for national and local Bahá'í Centres and for future Temple sites; the construction and renovation of Bahá'í properties, including the repair of buildings that suffered storm or earthquake damage; and the purchase of such items as an electricity generator, an office computer, and a motorcycle. Beyond that, the bonds of unity between geographically distant national communities have been strengthened and the worldwide solidarity of the believers enhanced.

173.3Your National Spiritual Assembly is one of 45 now being invited to participate in the international financial collaboration programme for the new Five Year Plan. You have been selected because the House of Justice believes you are in a position to assist other national communities which have not been endowed materially to the same extent. We would therefore appreciate receiving from you by 30 September 2011 an estimate of the amount you can offer as financial collaboration during this Five Year Plan. It would be helpful if you could provide a breakdown of the total sum you can make available, indicating how much you believe you can provide each year. If, in the months since Ridván 2011, you have already been asked to fulfil a specific goal, then the sum you were requested to contribute will be counted towards the amount you are able to offer in the first twelve months. To assist you in determining the total sum you can provide, we have been asked to inform you that the House of Justice anticipates that at least US$2,500,000 will be required to meet the financial collaboration goals to be assigned during the current Plan. Kindly

note that if monies remain from the pledge your Assembly made at the start of the previous Plan, these may be carried forward to form part of your new pledge.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

174

Appointment of Member of the InternationalBoard of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

19 July 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

174.1We are delighted to announce the appointment of Mr. Rodrigo Tomás to the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, in which capacity he will serve alongside fellow Trustees Mrs. Sally Foo and Dr. Ramin Khadem. Further, we have decided that, beginning at December 2012, the membership of the Board will be appointed at three-year intervals.

174.2We are deeply grateful to Mr. Grant Kvalheim for the outstanding service he has rendered as a member of the Board since it was first established six years ago.

The Universal House of Justice

175

Open Letter to the Minister of Science, Research and Technology in Iran

29 August 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

175.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the enclosed copies, in English and Persian, of an open letter dated 26 August 2011 from the Bahá'í International Community to the Honorable Kamran Daneshjoo, Minister of Science, Research, and Technology in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The communication concerns recent actions taken by the Iranian government aimed at bringing to a halt the operations of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), the informal educational initiative whereby the Bahá'í community of Iran has provided for the education of its youth who are deprived of access to higher education in Iran by official government policy. The letter gives a detailed history of the matter and calls upon Iran to work to bring to an end its oppressive practices—not only for the Bahá'í youth whose access to higher education it has obstructed but also for all other citizens in that country.

175.2The open letter and its enclosures are sent to you for your information only. You may share them with the believers in your country as you deem appropriate.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Open Letter to the Minister of Science, Research and Technology in Iran

26 August 2011

The Honorable Kamran DaneshjooMinister of Science, Research, and Technology
Islamic Republic of Iran

Sir:

175.3On 6 June 2011, the Iranian Student News Agency announced that the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology had declared the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) to be illegal. This declaration was made some days after raids by government agents on the homes of around thirty Bahá'ís associated with BIHE and the imprisonment of a number of these individuals.
175.4As you are aware, immediately following the Islamic revolution, in contravention of the laws in force at the time, Bahá'í students were expelled from your nation's universities and Bahá'í professors and lecturers dismissed from their positions. The government was insistent upon the enforcement of this injustice. Efforts to explore possible solutions with officials proved futile. By the late 1980s, it became clear that Bahá'ís could not enroll in university without denying their faith and that the government would not rectify this situation. Under these conditions, it was clearly impossible to establish a formal university for Bahá'ís; to seek a permit to do so in the face of overt government hostility would have been a fruitless, if not reckless, provocation. Consequently, the community made informal arrangements to use the volunteer services of dismissed professors to teach Bahá'í youth.
175.5As with any other program that benefits from organization and coordination, this undertaking was gradually systematized. It was later referred to as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. While the Bahá'í community did not publicize this initiative at that time, nonetheless over the years others in Iran and abroad learned about this endeavor and volunteered to assist with it. Because the community was determined to meet the needs of every young person, arrangements became somewhat elaborate. However, the initiative remained an internal activity of the community. Its pursuits were limited to youth within the Bahá'í community, and it was not involved in educating the members of the general public. Most often, classes were held in Bahá'í homes. Participation was voluntary and the benefit to the students was limited. They did not expect to receive an official degree, nor was anyone promised any other benefit, such as enhanced prospects of employment. The aim was to nurture the intellectual faculties of youth so as to prepare them for service to their society. This activity of the Bahá'í community is comparable to home education or private tutoring arranged by parents when children are unable to attend public schools. Were not such efforts well known in the past among Iranians who have always cherished and valued learning?
175.6Since the inception of this initiative, the Islamic Republic has made repeated attempts to hinder its progress and harass its participants. Homes of Bahá'ís have been summarily searched. In these raids, computers, books, and other educational tools that had been obtained through sacrifice and hardship were confiscated. Many of those involved in the endeavor were arrested and asked to sign a commitment to eschew association with it. The 1998 raid against 500 homes of Bahá'ís throughout Iran is an example of such attacks and serves to underscore the private and domestic nature of this undertaking.
175.7Such actions, as you know, have been conducted as a matter of official

government policy and as part of a systematic campaign to eliminate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in your country. A confidential memorandum on "The Bahá'í Question", issued in 1991 by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, stated clearly the position of the Islamic Republic toward the Bahá'í community. The memorandum specifies that Iran's Bahá'ís should be treated in such a way "that their progress and development are blocked". A copy of the document is enclosed. You are, no doubt, very familiar with the stipulation, under the heading of "educational and cultural status", that Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

175.8Experience over the years that ensued has amply demonstrated that the policy to exclude Bahá'ís from your country's institutions of higher learning remains in full effect. In 2006, as a result of extensive protests over the continued exclusion of Bahá'ís from your nation's universities, representatives of your government told the international community on several occasions that the reference to religion that was included on the university forms did not identify applicants by their religion but only specified the religious subject on which they were to be examined. The Bahá'í community, in good faith, accepted the explanation offered. Since then, Bahá'ís have attempted to sit for the annual national entrance examination, although the difficulties they have encountered have caused their number to diminish from year to year. Nonetheless, most of those who have taken the examination have successfully passed it, some with the highest marks possible.

175.9Months after their participation in the 2006 examinations, it transpired that—in the same year when you were publicly stating that your forms did not require Bahá'ís to deny their faith to be eligible to attend university—the Central Security Office of your own Ministry issued a letter to eighty-one universities throughout Iran, instructing them that "if Bahá'í individuals, at the time of enrollment at university or in the course of their studies, are identified as Bahá'ís, they must be expelled from university. Therefore, it is necessary to take measures to prevent the further studies of the aforementioned [individuals] and forward a follow-up report to this Office." A copy of this document is also enclosed.

175.10Thus, Bahá'í youth are blocked from access to higher education in one way or another. They sit for the university entrance examination, only to discover that they have been disqualified on the wholly specious claim that their applications were "incomplete". Universities refuse to enroll many of those who pass the examination. A small number who are able to enroll because their religion is overlooked at the time of registration are later expelled. In some particularly cruel instances, these expulsions have been effected just weeks or days prior to the completion of their courses of study. A fair measure of whether the Bahá'ís have access to higher education is not how many of them you permit to enter universities but how many of them were allowed to complete their studies. To any careful observer, it is evident that the only reason a few Bahá'í youth have been admitted into your universities is that

such actions permit your government's officials to deny that you prohibit Bahá'ís from gaining access to higher education—a claim that is blatantly duplicitous.

175.11And now a fresh measure of tribulation has befallen the Bahá'ís, as they are subjected to harsh treatment in interrogations about their involvement with their informal efforts for the education of youth. Individuals who assist with the educational program are threatened with imprisonment. Parents who host classes are notified that their homes will be expropriated if the classes continue. And students are warned against attending their classes and are instructed that they will never obtain a higher education so long as they do not abandon their faith and declare themselves to be Muslims. Yet, when the representatives of your government are confronted with these facts in the international arena, they continue to maintain that no one is deprived of education in Iran on account of his or her religion. How regrettable that the representatives of the Islamic Republic repeatedly peddle such obvious falsehoods, further undermining your government's credibility. When will the officials in Iran bring to an end the entrenched practice of saying one thing to Bahá'ís while offering a range of conflicting reassurances on the global stage?

175.12It is evident to the generality of the people of the world, especially promoters of social justice, academics, students, and indeed the majority of the people in Iran, that to actively deprive any youth of access to education is reprehensible and against all legal, religious, moral, and humanitarian standards. Many government officials to whom Bahá'ís appeal for redress, including staff in your own Ministry, sympathize with the Bahá'ís, telling them that their hands are tied because they have been ordered by their superiors to abide by the provisions of the 1991 memorandum of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council. All the while your government exacerbates the plight of young members of the Bahá'í community.

175.13How is it that a government would debar a population of young citizens from access to higher education and then, when their families, with the help of one another, make private arrangements that bring them together in their homes to study such subjects as physics and biology, pronounce such activity to be "illegal" by citing laws that are in fact intended to guide the operation of educational institutions that serve the general public? Why is the government so ruthless in the face of the earnestness of Bahá'í youth to obtain higher education? Are not the professors in your universities calling upon their own students to cultivate the same commitment to learning?

175.14Even though the Bahá'í community's program of higher education has never been in a position to formally award degrees to its students who have studied in this educational endeavor, the academic accomplishments of scores of graduates of these classes and their eagerness to learn have led universities in many lands to accept their work as qualifying them for post-graduate studies. What has evoked the deep admiration of the professors and classmates of those who have gone abroad for such studies is the determination evinced by these students to return to Iran after the completion of their studies despite the numerous obstacles they face and their

readiness to accept every manner of hardship in their longing to contribute to the advancement of their country. Why is such dedication to the betterment of the country unappreciated by the government of Iran?

175.15One strains to cite another example of a government that has devoted itself so systematically to blocking the educational advancement of a minority community. For it is not merely that Bahá'ís face social and institutional obstacles to their progress, as do many minorities. Nor is it simply that government policies prevent Bahá'ís from obtaining higher education, as deplorable as such an official action is. You go further, with no acceptable reason or basis, declaring it illegal for some of your citizens to use their minds to acquire knowledge for themselves!

175.16The government of Iran now threatens Bahá'ís with widespread arrest if they do not discontinue their involvement with the higher education of Bahá'í youth. The charges are, however, very vague. What is "illegal"? To study? To learn? To accompany others in their quest to acquire knowledge? Why debar Bahá'í youth from studying or gathering together to learn, or disallow a dismissed university professor from sharing his or her learning with young people who are deprived of access to education? Ultimately, which is illegal: a government policy that excludes its citizens from higher education on the basis of their religious affiliation or the efforts of a community to educate its own youth? It is all too apparent that declaring the current efforts of the Bahá'í community to educate its youth to be illegal is, alas, but one more ploy—a transparent attempt to misuse the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government in order to get the Bahá'ís themselves to become complicit in retarding the progress of their own community.

175.17In the eyes of Bahá'ís, government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society merits both respect and wholehearted support; indeed obedience to the government is a feature of Bahá'í beliefs. This obedience, however, is not absolute. They will not, for instance, accept the least compromise on matters of fundamental spiritual principle—the education of children and youth is one such principle.

175.18Among the Bahá'í teachings is that God "has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world." "Knowledge," according to our Writings, "is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent"; its acquisition is "incumbent upon everyone". It is "a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him." Further, it is stated, "The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge." And parents are enjoined "to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son" and "to rear them in the bosom of sciences and arts."

175.19Thus, Bahá'ís consider the acquisition of knowledge to be the duty of every individual ordained by the Almighty in order to develop the latent gems of human capability and contribute to the betterment of society. All should be accorded freedom to acquire it; no government should deny this fundamental and

sacred right to its citizens. Nevertheless, in response to recent government actions, the Bahá'ís of Iran are engaged in a review of their activities over the past twenty years to provide higher education to their youth and, if necessary, will make changes so as to more explicitly emphasize the informal nature of their efforts. They do this to once again demonstrate their good will.

175.20You are well aware that Bahá'ís cannot abandon their responsibility to ensure that their young people receive in Iran the best, the most useful education that can be provided to them, nor will they deny their faith to gain access to higher education. We call on you, as the Minister responsible for the higher education of your nation's youth, to work to bring the unjust and oppressive practices of the government of the Islamic Republic to an end not only for the Bahá'í youth but also for all other citizens.

Respectfully,

[signed: Bani Dugal]Principal Representative,Bahá'í International Community

176

Passing of Violette Nakhjavání

14 September 2011

To the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of France and Uganda

176.1We grieve, with sorrowful hearts, the loss of a faithful, illustrious handmaiden of the Blessed Beauty, Violette Nakhjavání, whose decades of exemplary service to the Cause of God—unabated even in her final months—have enriched the annals of the Cause and won her admirers in every quarter and across the generations. In instant response to the call of Shoghi Effendi for pioneers to arise during the momentous African Campaign, she and her family were among the first to reach that continent and carry there the message of God's new Revelation. Too numerous to recount are the unstinting services she rendered thereafter, for forty years and more, here in the Holy Land. And, beyond all this, posterity will forever associate her name with her beloved Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, to whom she was a confidante, a devoted friend, and a tireless companion on world-spanning journeys. Her memories of those outstanding travels feature prominently in the works she authored, themselves constituting an invaluable addition to Bahá'í literature.

176.2To her distinguished husband, Mr. 'Alí Nakhjavání, and her dearly loved children and grandchildren we convey our heartfelt condolences and assure them of our ardent supplications in the Sacred Shrines for the progress of her soul. We advise the holding of befitting memorial meetings in her honour, including at the House of Worship in Kampala.

The Universal House of Justice

177

Appointment of Continental Counsellor

12 October 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

177.1For compelling personal reasons, Mr. Jorge Henrique Mantovani Guerreiro has asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as a member of the Continental

Board of Counsellors in the Americas. We have, with much regret, assented to his request. Mr. Guerreiro has earned our warm gratitude for the contributions he has made to the work of the Faith as a Counsellor, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround him as he continues his valuable labours in other fields of service to the Cause.

177.2To fill the vacancy thus created, we announce the appointment of Mrs. Ingrid Umpierre Conter to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas for the remainder of the present term.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

178

Expanded Function of the Office of Correspondence

1 November 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

178.1In the letter dated 9 November 1999 sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies, it was announced that the Office of Correspondence at the Bahá'í World Centre would be handling a range of routine correspondence, which would be sent over its own signature. This was a further development in the process by which the Universal House of Justice, in order to concentrate on matters requiring its direct attention, has progressively referred to various departments at the World Centre subjects that can be handled in other ways.

178.2As a further step in this process, the House of Justice has asked us to inform you that the range of incoming communications to which the Office of Correspondence will respond has been expanded and will include queries received from Bahá'í institutions and individual believers that can be answered by sharing responses provided on previous occasions to similar questions. In carrying out this function, the Office, in accordance with policies laid down for this purpose, will draw on a large body of communications sent over the years by the House of Justice or on its behalf. Of course, it is hoped that the friends will, in the first instance, direct their inquiries to their Local or National Spiritual Assemblies.

178.3You are free to share this information with the members of your community as you deem appropriate.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

179

Release of Summary of Achievements and Learning for the Five Year Plan, 2006–2011

3 November 2011

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

179.1At the request of the Universal House of Justice, we enclose for your Assemblies three complimentary copies and for each Regional Bahá'í Council under your jurisdiction one copy of The Five Year Plan, 2006–2011: Summary of Achievements and Learning, prepared under the supervision of the International Teaching Centre. Although its primary focus is on the expansion

and consolidation of the Faith, this work also describes many of the Bahá'í community's activities in the areas of social and economic development; relations with government, civil society, and the public; and achievements at the Bahá'í World Centre. Through careful reading, one may gain an appreciation of the progress made to date and be inspired to meet the opportunities that lie ahead….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

180

The Trial of Bahá'ís Involved with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education in Iran

6 November 2011

Selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

180.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the following information for your urgent attention….

180.2It was reported on 20 October 2011 that these seven Bahá'ís—Mahmúd Bádavám [Mahmoud Badavam], Núshín Khádim [Noushin Khadem], Vahíd Mahmúdí [Vahid Mahmoudi], Kámrán Murtidá'í [Kamran Mortezaie], Farhád Sidqí [Farhad Sedghi], Ríyád Subhaní [Riaz Sobhani], and Rámín Zíbá'í [Ramin Zibaie]—had, on two separate days, been taken to court in handcuffs and chained at their ankles, where, in the presence of their attorneys, they were informed of the verdict. As you are aware, Vahíd Mahmúdí and Kámrán Murtidá'í were each sentenced to five years in prison, and four-year prison sentences were imposed on each of the remaining five defendants.

180.3No written copy of the verdict has been provided to the prisoners or their lawyers; therefore, it is not possible to comment on it in detail. However, transcripts made by those present at the hearing indicate that the Bahá'ís were all found guilty of "membership of the deviant Bahaist sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country." The judgements also cast the activities of the accused in support of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education as crimes and as evidence of their purported aim to subvert the State. There is, of course, no foundation whatever to the judiciary's assertion that the seven sought to undermine Iranian national security, and the authorities are themselves fully aware that such an accusation is utterly without credence. The prohibition on the attendance of foreign diplomats at the trials and the refusal of the judiciary to provide written documentation of the verdict to the accused demonstrate how unjustifiable are the assertions and actions of the government.

180.4The judgement nonetheless clearly exposes the blatant religious discrimination that is at the heart of this case. Citing that Iran's Constitution upholds the rights of all the nation's citizens, the authorities persistently deny that Bahá'ís are persecuted on account of their religion. In practice, however, as this particular case clearly illustrates, the rights of the Bahá'ís are routinely and deliberately flouted by the government….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
181
Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Dedicationof the House of Worship in India
9 November 2011
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India
181.1We extend our warm and loving greetings to all who have gathered on the auspicious occasion of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the dedication of the Bahá'í House of Worship in India. The multitudes who have thronged its halls, from every corner of your country and, indeed, from nations across the globe, have witnessed its power to harmonize the manifest diversity of its visitors, to awaken nobility in hearts, and to strengthen hope for peace. Under the shadow of this magnificent edifice, millions who seek God have found tranquillity and been uplifted by the songs of praise and exaltation that rise from its inner sanctum.
181.2Since its inauguration a quarter of a century ago, the Temple has not only given expression to humanity's deep-felt longing to worship God but also demonstrated its efficacy in translating and transfusing that worship into a dynamic and dispassionate service for the betterment of humankind. Those who visit the House of Worship are both enchanted by its exquisite beauty and attracted to the harmony and shared understanding they see reflected in the Bahá'í community, a community that pursues its activities to transform society with energy and vitality yet remains deeply aware that in doing so it must place its complete trust in God, reliant upon His unfailing confirmations and assistance.
181.3How marvellous has been the progress your community has witnessed since the Temple received its first contingent of visitors! Bahá'ís across the length and breadth of India have been inviting increasing numbers of their fellow citizens to join them in the great spiritual enterprise upon which they have embarked, as they learn, with ever greater effectiveness, to address the needs of society through the education of children, the empowerment of youth, the strengthening of the devotional character of their communities, and the exploration of the application of the teachings of God to their individual and collective lives. It is our hope that thousands, nay, millions will join the Bahá'ís in these endeavours, serving side-by-side in a spirit of humility and forgetful of self, to meet the manifold challenges that lie ahead and to work to build a civilization that will achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life. That they may reach heights of success as yet unattained will be the object of our ardent supplications in the Holy Shrines.
The Universal House of Justice
182
Passing of Ian Semple, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice
1 December 2011
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
182.1Our hearts are laden with sorrow at the passing to the Abhá Kingdom of our dearly loved former colleague Ian C. Semple, staunch, clear-sighted,

outstanding servant of the Blessed Beauty. Having embraced the Cause of God in the prime of his youth while at university, he devoted his considerable energies, eloquent pen and keen intellect to its protection and to the promotion of its vital interests throughout the rest of his life. A distinguished record of six decades of uninterrupted labour in the Divine Vineyard included service as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, of the Auxiliary Board for Propagation in Europe and of the International Bahá'í Council, and culminated in forty-two years of membership of the Universal House of Justice from its establishment in 1963 until 2005. The shining qualities of his being, his immense courtesy, surpassing humility, purity of heart, irrepressible joy and unfailing optimism—all born of an unshakeable faith in the Word of God and its capacity to redeem humankind—endeared him to everyone who had the privilege of knowing him.

182.2We extend our loving sympathy to his beloved wife, Louise, to his dear children, Michael, Nicholas and Jennifer, and to his grandchildren for the loss they have sustained and pray for the bounties of God to surround them. May Ian's valiant soul receive a joyous welcome in the celestial realms above and be richly rewarded for his fealty and his exemplary dedication to duty. We call upon the friends everywhere to hold memorial gatherings in his honour, including befitting commemorative services in the Houses of Worship throughout the world.

The Universal House of Justice

183

The Courses of the Training Institute

12 December 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

183.1Across the globe Bahá'í communities are intently engaged in executing the provisions of the Five Year Plan. Its opening months now behind us, there is every indication that the study of recent guidance and deliberations on the nature and extent of capacity developed thus far are bearing fruit in focused, highly unified action at the grassroots. Principally through the efforts of homefront pioneers, in several hundred newly opened clusters, the first stirrings of a programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can already be felt, while in several hundred more, further along the continuum of growth, a pattern of rigorous activity is taking hold. Meanwhile the friends in those clusters in the forefront of learning are gaining mastery over the dynamics that characterize rapidly expanding, relatively large communities.

183.2In this connection, we are particularly happy to note the degree of effort being exerted in every country to lend an added measure of vitality to the institute process, so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order. The operation of the institute board; the functioning of coordinators at different levels; the capabilities of friends serving as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, teachers of children's classes; and the

promotion of an environment conducive at once to universal participation and mutual support and assistance—nowhere is the centrality of these to the fulfilment of the community's God-given mission lost on the friends. What has been especially heartening to observe in this respect is the widespread mobilization of resources dedicated to the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. No less encouraging is the zeal with which institutes have greeted the challenge of preparing teachers for successive grades of Bahá'í children's classes as additional materials for this purpose have been made available. It seems timely, then, to offer National Spiritual Assemblies and their training institutes further guidance on the implementation of the main sequence of courses and those that branch off from it.

The path of service

183.3A number of years ago, to aid the believers in thinking about the process of growth at the level of the cluster, we introduced the concept of two complementary movements. The progress of a steady, ever-widening stream of individuals through the courses of the institute represents one of these. It is not only responsible for giving impetus to the other—the development of the cluster, discernable in the collective capacity to manifest a pattern of life in conformity with the teachings of the Faith—but also dependent on it for its own perpetuation. It was in view of mounting evidence of the effects of the Ruhi Institute curriculum on these two mutually reinforcing movements that we recommended its adoption worldwide six years ago. At the time, we did not comment specifically on the pedagogical principles governing the curriculum; nevertheless, it should be apparent to the friends that the curriculum possesses desirable characteristics, some of which have been described in broad terms in our messages regarding the current series of global Plans. Of particular significance is its organizing principle: developing capacity to serve the Cause and humanity in a process likened to walking a path of service. This conception shapes both content and structure.

183.4The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.

183.5At present the main sequence consists of eight courses, though it is understood there may eventually be as many as eighteen that will address acts of service related to such requirements as coordination and administration, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. There are currently

two points along the sequence at which an individual may choose to follow a specialized path of service. The first appears at Book 3. From among the friends who complete it and begin to offer a relatively simple class for children in the first grade of a programme for their spiritual education, a percentage will want to dedicate themselves to this field of service, pursuing in time a series of progressively more complex branch courses for teaching Grades 2 to 6. This does not mean that they will abandon study of the main sequence. Indeed, courses that make up a specialized path of service anticipate that participants are continuing to progress, each at a pace suitable to his or her situation, along the path traced out by the main sequence. Book 5, which seeks to raise up animators of junior youth groups, constitutes the second point at which a series of courses branch out.

183.6Additional avenues of exploration will no doubt appear along the main sequence in due time. Some may be of universal interest, such as the two mentioned above, while others may be limited to specific local needs. As with the main sequence itself, content and structure must emerge out of continued collective experience in the field, an experience that is not haphazard or subject to the forces of personal preference but is guided by the institutions of the Faith. The generation of such an experience will call for a still greater infusion of energy from a much larger portion of the population, and it would be premature, in all but a few places, for institutes to give attention to the creation or implementation of other branch courses at this juncture in the unfoldment of the current series of global Plans.

Coordination

183.7Clearly, the approach to capacity building described above represents an attempt to achieve a certain dynamics within a population that brings together service and the generation of knowledge and its diffusion, a subject which we discussed, albeit briefly, in our Ridván 2010 message. Here we address a few practical considerations, which the emergence of the two aforementioned specialized paths of service has made all the more relevant.

183.8At any given moment it is possible to view from one of two perspectives what occurs in a cluster as the pattern of action promoted by the Five Year Plan, through which is woven the fabric of a vibrant community life, gathers in strength. Both perspectives are equally valid; each offers a particular way of thinking and speaking about what is taking place. From one perspective an educational process with three distinct stages appears in sharp relief: the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults. In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.

183.9From another perspective one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced

as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan. The question of teaching among receptive populations moves to the foreground in this light, and the challenge of seeking out souls who are willing to engage in a conversation about the world around them and participate in a collective effort to transform it comes into focus.

183.10It is especially at the level of coordination that it proves indispensable to step back and view from these two vantage points what is essentially one reality. Doing so makes it possible to analyse accurately, to assess strategically, to allocate wisely, and to avoid fragmentation. At this point, then, early in the execution of the Plan, it seems more vital than ever for attention to be devoted to the issue of coordination. Though the basic elements of an effective organizational scheme are already well understood, the form it should assume under diverse circumstances is in need of articulation. We have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow efforts made in this direction, particularly in the several hundred furthest advanced clusters worldwide, in order to effect the rapid systematization of lessons learned.

183.11In all such clusters, where the demands of large-scale growth are asserting themselves, each stage of the educational process promoted by the training institute must receive added support. The work of the coordinator should be reinforced by assistance from a growing number of experienced individuals, and meetings for the exchange of information and insights become regular and more systematic in approach. So, too, must periodic occasions be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children’s classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole. And they, in turn, should meet on a regular basis with the Area Teaching Committee. Further, if an adequate flow of information, guidance and much-needed funds is to reach the cluster, a parallel set of steps will have to be taken by the board of the institute to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.

183.12One final point merits reflection in this respect. Nearly all of the several hundred clusters under consideration are associated with one or another of some forty sites for the dissemination of learning established by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre in response to the overwhelming demand for the junior youth programme experienced throughout the world. Institutes operating in these clusters have already benefited over the past year from knowledge gained through the sites, particularly in relation to coordination of the programme. Without question, the capacity to sustain scores of junior youth groups lent a powerful impetus to the progress of all such clusters and contributed decisively to the subsequent development of study circles and children’s classes. Sites supported by the Office of Social and

Economic Development will continue to assist training institutes in addressing the complex set of questions arising out of the implementation of a programme for an age group whose enormous potential must remain the object of ongoing exploration. We look to the institutes themselves, however, to foster the learning process necessary to manage large numbers of children's classes and study circles, to put in place a scheme at the cluster level that will strengthen coordination across their three defined areas of action, and to open the flow of resources from the regional level into the grassroots—this, to ensure the seamless progression of sizeable contingents from one stage of the educational process to the next and to facilitate the steady unfoldment of cycles of activity so essential to systematic growth.

Classes for children

183.13Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses. The units that comprise the three books currently available contain both materials for study by teachers and lessons for children, allowing institutes to establish without delay the first three grades of a six-year programme. To raise up an initial corps of teachers for these grades, they may well have to employ temporary measures. A good scheme of coordination, built incrementally in keeping with demands on the ground, should make it possible to respond to exigencies with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the integrity of the overall educational process in the long term.

183.14Besides the systematic training of teachers for successive grades, institutes will need to learn about the formation of classes for distinct age groups in villages and neighbourhoods; the provision of teachers for various classes; the retention of students year after year, grade after grade; and the continued progress of children from a wide variety of households and backgrounds—in short, the establishment of an expanding, sustainable system for child education that will keep pace with both the growing concern among parents for their youngsters to develop sound moral structures and the rise in human resources in the community. The task, while immense, is relatively straightforward, and we urge institutes everywhere to give it the attention which it so clearly deserves, focusing especially on the implementation of the first three grades of the programme and remembering that the quality of the teaching-learning experience depends, to a great extent, on the capabilities of the teacher.

183.15A word of caution seems to be in order. It is certainly not incorrect to speak of "training" children's class teachers or, for that matter, animators of junior youth groups. Institutes, however, ought to take care, lest they begin to perceive their work as training in techniques, losing sight of the conception of capacity building at the heart of the institute process that entails a profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Educational materials

183.16In light of the foregoing paragraphs, the question of educational materials specifically as they pertain to children's classes and to junior

youth groups has to be considered. With regard to the former, we explained in our Ridván 2010 message that the lessons prepared by the Ruhi Institute would constitute the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements could be organized. Whether or not any additional elements are required to reinforce the educational process for each grade would generally be determined by teachers themselves, on the basis of specific circumstances, not infrequently in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level. It is assumed that, if found to be appropriate, any additional items would be selected from resources readily available. There will seldom be cause to formalize the use of such items, whether directly through their adoption by training institutes or indirectly through their widespread systematic promotion.

183.17In the case of junior youth groups, a similar approach is encouraged by the Office of Social and Economic Development. The core of the programme consists of a series of textbooks studied by the groups. We understand that, at present, seven of a projected eighteen textbooks, exploring a range of themes from a Bahá'í perspective, though not in the mode of religious instruction, are available. These form the major component of a three-year programme. Another nine textbooks will provide a distinctly Bahá'í component, and two of these are currently in use. Animators are advised to complement study with artistic activities and service projects. As with children's class teachers, the institute coordinator at the cluster level can offer animators assistance in determining how to proceed. Yet, most often, such projects and activities are selected by the junior youth themselves, in light of their own circumstances and inclinations, in consultation with the group's animator.

183.18In all such matters, those serving as teachers and animators alike are called upon to exercise discretion. Education is a vast field, and educational theories abound. Surely many have considerable merit, but it should be remembered that none is free of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. An educational process should, for example, create in a child awareness of his or her potentialities, but the glorification of self has to be scrupulously avoided. So often in the name of building confidence the ego is bolstered. Similarly, play has its place in the education of the young. Children and junior youth, however, have proven time and again their capacity to engage in discussions on abstract subjects, undertaken at a level appropriate to their age, and derive great joy from the serious pursuit of understanding. An educational process that dilutes content in a mesmerizing sea of entertainment does them no service. We trust that, in studying the institute courses, teachers and animators will find themselves increasingly equipped to make judicious decisions in selecting any materials or activities necessary, whether from traditional educational sources or from the wealth of items, such as songs, stories, and games, that are sure to be developed for the young in the Bahá'í community in the years to come.

183.19Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world

civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works. It is with such considerations in mind that we welcome the decision of the Ruhi Institute, in formulating its courses, to leave for the friends to address locally issues related to artistic activity. What we ask at this stage, then, when energies are to be invested in the extension of children's classes and junior youth groups, is that the multiplication of supplementary items for this purpose be allowed to occur naturally, as an outgrowth of the process of community building gathering momentum in villages and neighbourhoods. We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted. Further, every effort should be made to protect spiritual education from the perils of commercialization. The Ruhi Institute itself has explicitly discouraged the proliferation of products and items that treat its identity as a brand to be marketed. We hope that the friends will respect its diligence in this matter.

183.20In this connection, it gives us pleasure to inform you that we have created an International Advisory Board to assist the Ruhi Institute in overseeing its system for the preparation, production, and distribution of materials, the content and structure of which now draw extensively on Bahá'í experience worldwide in applying the teachings and principles of the Faith to the life of humanity. As it gradually takes up its work, the Board will be able to respond to related issues and follow the development of supplementary materials that are aligned with the direction set by the global Plans.

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183.21In closing, we feel compelled to address a few words to training institutes throughout the world: It should be remembered that the Bahá'í children's class teacher and the junior youth group animator, entrusted with so much responsibility for strengthening the moral foundations of the community, will, in most places, be a young person in his or her teens. Increasingly these young people will emerge, it can be expected, from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme imbued with a strong twofold purpose, both to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society. But they may also come from any one of a number of educational backgrounds with all the hope in their hearts that, through

strenuous concerted effort, the world will change. Irrespective of particulars, they will, one and all, share in the desire to dedicate their time and energy, talents and abilities, to service to their communities. Many, when given the opportunity, will gladly devote a few years of their lives to the provision of spiritual education to the rising generations. In the young people of the world, then, lies a reservoir of capacity to transform society waiting to be tapped. And the release of this capacity should be regarded by every institute as a sacred charge.

The Universal House of Justice

184

Recitation of the Tablet of Visitation at Holy Day Observances

8 February 2012

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

184.1Your email letter of 26 September 2011 regarding the time at which the Tablet of Visitation is to be recited during programs held to commemorate the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to respond as follows.

184.2As you know, the Bahá'í day starts and ends at sunset. While on some of the anniversaries the believers may gather at any time during the day they find convenient, the Guardian has advised that, if feasible, the friends should commemorate certain Holy Days at the following times:

The Declaration of the Báb at about 2 hours after sunset.

The First Day of Ridván at about 3:00 p.m.

The Martyrdom of the Báb at about noon.

The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh at 3:00 a.m.

The Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at 1:00 a.m.

184.3The House of Justice has further clarified that the observance of those Holy Days for which particular times are specified, as indicated above, is to take place at local standard time, rather than daylight saving time. In accordance with this schedule, the observances held on each Holy Day succeed one another for an entire twenty-four hours, as the earth turns on its axis. If two neighboring communities in different time zones wish to hold a joint meeting, they would, presumably, use the standard time of the zone in which they meet. In high latitudes, where there are extremes of daylight and darkness, it is permissible to go by the clock.

184.4Nothing has been found in the Writings to indicate that reciting the Tablets of Visitation is mandatory at commemorations of the anniversaries associated with the Central Figures of the Faith, nor has any Text been found concerning the timing of the recitation of these Tablets during Holy Day observances. Although, as an act of reverence, the friends generally stand and face the Sacred Threshold when reciting the Tablet of Visitation in, or within the precincts of, one of the Holy Shrines, nothing has been found in the Writings requiring the friends to stand and face the Qiblih whenever the Tablets of Visitation are read on other occasions. All questions concerning such secondary matters are left to the discretion of the relevant National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, which are entrusted with the responsibility of

ensuring that Holy Day observances are conducted in the proper spirit. The friends should safeguard the unity of the community and not allow any of these points to become a cause of argument and disagreement. Certainly no issue should be made about such matters while a Holy Day program is being held.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
185
Developments in the Emergence of the Mother Temple of South America
16 February 2012
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
185.1With joy we announce several major developments in connection with the emergence of the Mother Temple of South America. Two weeks ago the contract for the construction of the foundation of the building and all concrete work was awarded to a reputable firm in Chile. Following the completion of the excavation and grading for the foundation and plaza, work has now begun on the basement, service tunnel, main floor and mezzanine structure, incorporating important features for seismic resistance based on extensive computational modelling and analysis. And today, after several months of evaluation and assessment of alternative bids, the contract for the fabrication and erection of the Temple's complex steel superstructure was signed with a well-known German company. The skeletal framework will stand thirty metres high and support five hundred tonnes of exterior and interior cladding of translucent cast glass and carved stone. The nine linked sections of the metal structure will be bound together through an intricate anchorage system that will ensure the connections will not detract from the sublime aesthetic effect of the completed design.
185.2May the followers of the Blessed Beauty throughout the world draw inspiration from these recent developments as they exert themselves—sacrificially, generously, unitedly—to contribute to the advancement of the Cause by word and deed.
The Universal House of Justice
186
Passing of Anneliese Bopp, Former Memberof the International Teaching Centre
21 February 2012
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
186.1We are deeply saddened at the passing of dearly loved Anneliese Bopp, tireless promoter of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Born to a family closely connected with the earliest stirrings of the Cause in Germany, she was a steadfast handmaiden of the Blessed Beauty whose efforts over so many years did much to advance His Faith on the European continent. Among her innumerable contributions was an intimate involvement in the construction of the Mother Temple in Europe, completed while she served as Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany. In 1970 she was appointed to the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe; nine years later she was called to serve as a Counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre, in which capacity she laboured, until 1988, with exemplary devotion. Even in her life's twilight,

Anneliese attentively followed developments in the Faith and vital matters pertaining to the progress of humankind. We remember with profound admiration her indomitable spirit, her clarity of thought, her disarming candour; we grieve the loss of one of the Faith's champions.

186.2To her family, and to all who loved her, we extend our sympathy, assuring them of our heartfelt prayers in the Holy Shrines for her soul's joyful passage into the eternal realms. We advise the holding of befitting memorial gatherings in her honour by the friends everywhere, including in all Houses of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

187

Ridván Message 2012

Ridván 2012

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

187.1Midafternoon on the eleventh day of the Ridván festival one hundred years ago, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, standing before an audience several hundred strong, lifted a workman's axe and pierced the turf covering the Temple site at Grosse Pointe, north of Chicago. Those invited to break the ground with Him on that spring day came from diverse backgrounds—Norwegian, Indian, French, Japanese, Persian, indigenous American, to name but a few. It was as if the House of Worship, yet unbuilt, was fulfilling the wishes of the Master, expressed on the eve of the ceremony, for every such edifice: "that humanity might find a place of meeting" and "that the proclamation of the oneness of mankind shall go forth from its open courts of holiness".

187.2His listeners on that occasion, and all who heard Him in the course of His travels to Egypt and the West, must have but dimly comprehended the far-reaching implications of His words for society, for its values and preoccupations. Still today, can anyone claim to have glimpsed anything but an intimation, distant and indistinct, of the future society to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is destined to give rise? For let none suppose that the civilization towards which the divine teachings impel humankind will follow merely from adjustments to the present order. Far from it. In a talk delivered some days after He laid the cornerstone of the Mother Temple of the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form," that "the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs". These, and countless other utterances of the Master to which the Bahá'í community is turning time and again in this centennial period, raise awareness of the distance that separates society as it is now arranged from the stupendous vision His Father gifted to the world.

187.3Alas, notwithstanding the laudable efforts, in every land, of well-intentioned individuals working to improve circumstances in society, the obstacles preventing the realization of such a vision seem insurmountable to many. Their hopes founder on erroneous assumptions about human nature that so permeate the structures and traditions of much of present-day living as to have attained the status of established fact. These assumptions appear to make no

allowance for the extraordinary reservoir of spiritual potential available to any illumined soul who draws upon it; instead, they rely for justification on humanity's failings, examples of which daily reinforce a common sense of despair. A layered veil of false premises thus obscures a fundamental truth: The state of the world reflects a distortion of the human spirit, not its essential nature. The purpose of every Manifestation of God is to effect a transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humanity. And this transformation naturally occurs as a growing body of people, united by the divine precepts, collectively seeks to develop spiritual capacities to contribute to a process of societal change. Akin to the hard earth struck by the Master a century ago, the prevailing theories of the age may, at first, seem impervious to alteration, but they will undoubtedly fade away, and through the "vernal showers of the bounty of God", the "flowers of true understanding" will spring up fresh and fair.

187.4We yield thanks to God that, through the potency of His Word, you—the community of His Greatest Name—are cultivating environments wherein true understanding can blossom. Even those enduring imprisonment for the Faith are, by their untold sacrifice and steadfastness, enabling the "hyacinths of knowledge and wisdom" to flower in sympathetic hearts. Across the globe, eager souls are being engaged in the work of constructing a new world through the systematic implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan. So well have its features been grasped that we feel no need to comment further on them here. Our supplications, offered at the Threshold of an All-Bountiful Providence, are for the assistance of the Supreme Concourse to be vouchsafed to every one of you in contributing to the progress of the Plan. Our fervent desire, bolstered by witnessing your consecrated efforts during the past year, is that you will intensify your sure-footed application of the knowledge you are acquiring through experience. Now is not the time to hold back; too many remain unaware of the new dawn. Who but you can convey the divine message? "By God," Bahá'u'lláh, referring to the Cause, affirms, "this is the arena of insight and detachment, of vision and upliftment, where none may spur on their chargers save the valiant horsemen of the Merciful, who have severed all attachment to the world of being."

187.5To observe the Bahá'í world at work is to behold a vista bright indeed. In the life of the individual believer who desires, above all, to invite others into communion with the Creator and to render service to humanity can be found signs of the spiritual transformation intended for every soul by the Lord of the Age. In the spirit animating the activities of any Bahá'í community dedicated to enhancing the capacity of its members young and old, as well as of its friends and collaborators, to serve the common weal can be perceived an indication of how a society founded upon divine teachings might develop. And in those advanced clusters where activity governed by the framework of the Plan is in abundance and the demands of ensuring coherence amongst lines of action are most pressing, the evolving administrative structures offer glimmerings, however faint, of how the institutions of the Faith will incrementally come to assume a fuller range of their responsibilities to promote human welfare and progress. Clearly, then, the

development of the individual, the community, and the institutions holds immense promise. But beyond this, we note with particular joy how the relationships binding these three are marked by such tender affection and mutual support.

187.6By contrast, relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large—the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society—reflect the discord that characterizes humanity's turbulent stage of transition. Unwilling to act as interdependent parts of an organic whole, they are locked in a struggle for power which ultimately proves futile. How very different the society which 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in unnumbered Tablets and talks, depicts—where everyday interactions, as much as the relations of states, are shaped by consciousness of the oneness of humankind. Relationships imbued with this consciousness are being cultivated by Bahá'ís and their friends in villages and neighbourhoods across the world; from them can be detected the pure fragrances of reciprocity and cooperation, of concord and love. Within such unassuming settings, a visible alternative to society's familiar strife is emerging. So it becomes apparent that the individual who wishes to exercise self-expression responsibly participates thoughtfully in consultation devoted to the common good and spurns the temptation to insist on personal opinion; a Bahá'í institution, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aims not to control but to nurture and encourage; the community that is to take charge of its own development recognizes an invaluable asset in the unity afforded through whole-hearted engagement in the plans devised by the institutions. Under the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the relationships among these three are being endowed with new warmth, new life; in aggregate, they constitute a matrix within which a world spiritual civilization, bearing the imprint of divine inspiration, gradually matures.

187.7The light of the Revelation is destined to illumine every sphere of endeavour; in each, the relationships that sustain society are to be recast; in each, the world seeks examples of how human beings should be to one another. We offer for your consideration, given its conspicuous part in generating the ferment in which so many people have recently been embroiled, the economic life of humanity, where injustice is tolerated with indifference and disproportionate gain is regarded as the emblem of success. So deeply entrenched are such pernicious attitudes that it is hard to imagine how any one individual can alone alter the prevailing standards by which the relationships in this domain are governed. Nevertheless, there are certainly practices a Bahá'í would eschew, such as dishonesty in one's transactions or the economic exploitation of others. Faithful adherence to the divine admonitions demands there be no contradiction between one's economic conduct and one's beliefs as a Bahá'í. By applying in one's life those principles of the Faith that relate to fairness and equity, a single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself. Humanity is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire; we look to you to foster communities whose ways will give hope to the world.

187.8In our Ridván message of 2001, we indicated that in countries where the

process of entry by troops was sufficiently well advanced and conditions in national communities were favourable, we would approve the establishment of Houses of Worship at the national level, whose emergence would become a feature of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith. With exceeding joy we now announce that national Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up in two countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea. In these, the criteria we set are demonstrably met, and the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable. With the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago under way, the initiation of projects for building national Houses of Worship offers yet another gratifying evidence of the penetration of the Faith of God into the soil of society.

187.9One more step is possible. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "one of the most vital institutions in the world", weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. The union of these two is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the Plan, particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. The correlation of worship and service is especially pronounced in those clusters around the world where Bahá'í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in social action is apparent. Some of these have been designated as sites for the dissemination of learning so as to nurture the friends' ability to advance the junior youth programme in associated regions. The capacity to sustain this programme, as we have recently indicated, also fuels the development of study circles and children's classes. Thus, beyond its primary purpose, the learning site fortifies the entire scheme of expansion and consolidation. It is within these clusters that, in the coming years, the emergence of a local Mashriqu'l-Adhkár can be contemplated. Our hearts brimming with thankfulness to the Ancient Beauty, we rejoice to inform you that we are entering into consultations with respective National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the erection of the first local House of Worship in each of the following clusters: Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; and Tanna, Vanuatu.

187.10To support the construction of the two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, we have decided to establish a Temples Fund at the Bahá'í World Centre for the benefit of all such projects. The friends everywhere are invited to contribute to it sacrificially, as their means allow.

187.11Beloved co-workers: The ground broken by the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá a hundred years ago is to be broken again in seven more countries, this being but the prelude to the day when within every city and village, in obedience to the bidding of Bahá'u'lláh, a building is upraised for the worship of the Lord. From these Dawning-Points of the Remembrance of God will shine the rays of His light and peal out the anthems of His praise.

The Universal House of Justice

Review of Online, Self-Published Books
6 May 2012
To a National Spiritual Assembly
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
188.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 27 February 2012 regarding the need for and the nature of review for online, self-published books. We have been asked to reply as follows. Formal electronic publications, such as electronic books and articles in online journals, are to be submitted to the National Spiritual Assembly to undergo a process of review before they are made widely available, in the same manner as the long-standing procedure for review applied to printed works.
188.2More generally, there is no list of detailed rules to guide believers who are striving to contribute in various ways to the Bahá'í presence on the Web, nor is there any particular initiative under way to multiply the number of individuals engaged in such activities. Naturally, any website developed by a Bahá'í would avoid presenting inaccurate descriptions of the Faith and would take care to uphold its dignity. While responsibility for providing authoritative information about the Faith, its history, and the activities of its community of adherents clearly falls to the institutions, a growing number of individual believers are finding spaces in which they can appropriately offer insights drawn from their understanding of the teachings on a wide range of issues, thus enriching the Faith's presence online. In this connection, the House of Justice hopes that National Spiritual Assemblies will become increasingly adept at assisting the friends to appreciate the difference between those areas of activity which are the preserve of the institutions; those in which efforts, while belonging to individuals, may proceed only under the close supervision of the institutions—certain endeavours concerned with defending the rights of the Bahá'í community, for example—and those, usually modest in scope and scale, in which believers may pursue their own initiatives as a contribution to the overall progress of the Faith.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
189
Contributions to the Temples Fund
27 June 2012
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
189.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to inform you that the announcement in its Ridván 2012 message regarding the raising up of two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs has been greeted with expressions of joy and excitement from across the world and that contributions are already being made to the Temples Fund. Alongside this outpouring of enthusiasm, the House of Justice was particularly touched to receive intimations that the believers in Iran are very eager to be allowed to contribute to this Fund.
189.2The House of Justice considers that at this time any such material offering from the Bahá'ís in Iran risks being misrepresented by the enemies of the Faith and could become a cause of fresh injury to the members of this

already sorely tried community. Therefore, it is best that they continue to expend their resources for the betterment of their society and the financial support of their community. Yet, the yearning of these steadfast believers to promote the interests of the Cause and provide for its needs worldwide should not be left unanswered. The House of Justice has, accordingly, decided to contribute five million dollars to the Temples Fund on their behalf.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

190

Document Highlighting Effort by the Iranian Government to Intensify Its Oppression of Bahá'ís in Semnan and Other Cities

7 August 2012

Selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

190.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you for your urgent attention the enclosed document, which highlights in some detail a concerted effort being pursued by the government in Iran to intensify its oppression of the Bahá'ís in Semnan and in a number of other cities, including Abadeh, Aligudarz, Bukan, Isfahan, Ivel, Khorramabad, Laljin, Mashhad, Parsabad, Rafsanjan, Ravansar, and Shiraz. The methods being employed by the authorities in Semnan are outlined below.

190.2As you are aware, a conspicuous component of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been the effort to rouse local populations against Bahá'ís wherever they reside, often conducted from the local pulpits as an adjunct to the ongoing publication of virulent propaganda against the Faith in the government-controlled national mass media. The recent special report of the Bahá'í International Community, titled Inciting Hatred: Iran's Media Campaign to Demonize Bahá'ís, provides a detailed survey of this nationwide undertaking for the period from December 2009 to May 2011. It includes events in Semnan, where in 2008 and 2009 a series of anti-Bahá'í public seminars and rallies was held at which the local citizenry was urged to eschew associating with Bahá'ís, to refrain from conducting business with them, and to expel them from the town. One such event, held in late 2008, began with two short anti-Bahá'í videos misrepresenting the activities and intentions of "the perverse Bahaist sect" and was introduced by the head of the Kánún-í Rahpúyán-í Visál [Kanoun-e Rahpouyan-e Vesal], Hujjatu'l-Islám Siyyid Muhammad Anjavínizhád [Hojjatu'l-Islam Seyyed Muhammad Anjavinizhad], who was brought to Semnan from his home in Shiraz for the seminar. During 2009, incendiary sermons were also preached against Bahá'ís by the local clergy, and local agents of the Ministry of Intelligence surreptitiously engaged in defaming the believers in a further attempt to isolate them from their fellow citizens.

190.3Alongside the dissemination of propaganda against the Faith, mounting evidence of an orchestrated effort, in the past three years, by the government of Iran to vastly escalate the persecution of Bahá'ís has led the Bahá'í International Community to voice concern over this unacceptable mistreatment of the believers. In Semnan, a range of coordinated acts of

persecution are being carried out simultaneously by various ministries, departments, and offices of the government, usually also involving the clergy. These include coercing the Bahá'ís to cease holding their community gatherings; seeking to prevent them from interacting with Muslim friends, colleagues, and neighbors; engaging in far-reaching efforts to obstruct the Bahá'ís from earning a livelihood; attacking Bahá'í-owned properties; attempting to destroy the Bahá'í cemetery and to prevent the Bahá'ís from burying their dead there; conducting summary raids on Bahá'í homes; allowing the cruel treatment of Bahá'í schoolchildren by their teachers, school administrators, and clerics; and subjecting Bahá'ís to repeated summoning for interrogation and revolving arrests. In addition, Bahá'ís are under constant and close surveillance, such that they are followed everywhere by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, who then appear at their homes or summon them for questioning about their interactions with non-Bahá'ís; so frequently is this occurring that young Bahá'í children have come to fear that a knock on the door will mean the arrest of their parents. The objective of this intensification appears to be to terrorize and harass Bahá'ís with a view to determine how best to effect the government's official policy to eliminate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in Iran. Bahá'ís are often told by government officials that the authorities want them out of the country altogether. The Bahá'ís of Semnan have been placed in a crucible in which the authorities are assaying their approach to "the Bahá'í question".

190.4It is not known why the Bahá'í community of Semnan has been singled out for such severe treatment, but it is perhaps significant that this is the home district of Mr. Jamálu'd-Dín Khánjání [Jamaloddin Khanjani], one of the former members of the Yárán, and that many members of his family live there. The Ministry of Intelligence has long been mistaken in regarding Mr. Khánjání as somehow holding a position of power and authority over the Bahá'í community of Iran….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

191

Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice

5 November 2012

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Beloved Friends,

191.1In view of the heavy burden of work resting upon members of the Universal House of Justice, Dr. Farzam Arbab and Mr. Kiser Barnes have, after prayerful consideration as to the best interests of the Cause of God and in light of their advanced ages, requested permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.

191.2It is with deep regret that the House of Justice has accepted the resignation of these much-loved members. Dr. Arbab was first elected to the Body in 1993 and Mr. Barnes in 2000, and they will continue to serve on the institution until the date of the completion of the election of the Universal

House of Justice at the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention to be held at Ridván 2013.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice
192
Importance of the Junior Youth Empowerment Program
14 November 2012
The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
192.1As you are aware, the Universal House of Justice recently had the opportunity to consult with the International Teaching Centre and the Counsellors serving North America regarding the process of growth in that region. It was pleased to learn of the enthusiastic response to the letter dated 9 August 2012 and the progress made in orienting the new Regional Bahá’í Councils and training institutes. Your ever more robust, collaborative relationship with the Counsellors and the promising developments unfolding in your most advanced clusters, particularly those that have benefited from their association with the learning sites for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in North America, were a source of great joy. Indeed, it is understood that about half of the current junior youth groups and their participants are found in these thirty-one clusters. The experience of these clusters, carefully garnered over several years, portends the revitalization and further acceleration of your existing programs of growth, as well as the establishment and rapid advancement of many more.
192.2Throughout the world, across all classes and social groups, there has been a ready response from youth who are invited to examine the forces shaping their society and their role in contributing to its constructive transformation through service as animators of junior youth groups. Time and again it has been seen that consideration of, and reflection upon, the profound concepts addressed in Book 5 of the Ruhi Institute release the deep reservoirs of commitment to significant social change that young people possess. Engaging their fertile minds in an exploration of such ideas gives rise to profound conversations that leave their mark and find expression in action. Those who are inclined to establish a junior youth group are assisted to do so, and in this way, the program’s reach in a town or neighborhood is expanded in a relatively short period, even if there are only a limited number of human resources available within the Bahá’í community.
192.3The merit of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program lies, first and foremost, in its effectiveness at enhancing the power of expression and the quality of spiritual perception within its participants and in assisting them to develop the capabilities necessary for a life of meaningful service to their communities. Repeated accounts from officials, parents, and young people themselves testify to the power of the program to shape character and bring forth the praiseworthy qualities latent in junior youth. Yet, even more, the benefits of the program are experienced in every stage of the educational process in which the Bahá’í community is engaged, as well as in the scheme of community building in which the spiritual empowerment program is embedded.

By multiplying vibrant junior youth groups, a community learns a great deal about, for instance, how capable human resources are increased and deployed; how capacity for service is raised within cohorts of individuals; how an expanding program can be effectively coordinated; and how initiating one activity can, quite naturally, lead to the emergence of others. And as a consequence of the organic unfoldment of the educational process and the participants' ongoing spiritual and moral development, all facets of the growth program are, in time, extended and enhanced.

192.4Galvanized by such a perspective, the Counsellors left the Holy Land with renewed resolve and focused purpose. They will soon consult with you about possibilities for accelerating progress in clusters with established programs of growth by disseminating learning through regional institutes, as well as for finding capable individuals who can carry this dynamic approach to hundreds of additional clusters. To support this effort, it is envisioned that the number of learning sites in North America should rise to seven and the associated clusters to seventy; the House of Justice has asked the Office of Social and Economic Development to attend to this vital need.

192.5The House of Justice is confident that the devoted endeavors of your Assembly, grounded in the experience derived from those clusters at the frontiers of learning, will yield abundant results and enable you to achieve all of your objectives in the current Plan. You are assured of its fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines to this end.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

193

Release of a Statement on Social Action

26 November 2012

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

193.1Enclosed is a statement prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre on the subject of social action, which has been approved by the Universal House of Justice for distribution. We have been asked to provide you with a copy and to commend it to your study. As you will see, the statement offers a brief overview of the involvement of the Bahá'í community in the area of social and economic development, placing it in the context of current activity at the level of the cluster. In this connection, the House of Justice has requested us to make clear that the distribution of the document should not be seen as a call for widespread action in this area; it is intended as an instrument to raise further consciousness about the nature of social action and some of the methods it employs. The opening paragraph of the statement sets out the conditions, as explained by the House of Justice, that make engagement in this sphere of endeavour propitious.

193.2You are encouraged to share the document with those friends and agencies in your communities you feel would do well to become acquainted with its content. For your information, the International Teaching Centre, at the request of the House of Justice, will be advising the Continental Counsellors to provide the statement to all members of the Auxiliary Boards for the

Propagation and Protection of the Faith, that they might study it thoroughly and stand ready to lend the necessary assistance to the friends in clusters where the institute process is strong and human resources adequately abundant to support activity in this arena.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

194

Convocation of 95 Youth Conferences

8 February 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

194.1Within communities of every size and strength, we are glad to see the processes of the Five Year Plan kindling the spirit of service and stimulating purposeful action. Examples appear every day of how the act of reaching out to touch individual hearts, acquainting souls with the Word of God, and inviting them to contribute to the betterment of society can, in time, tend to the advancement of a people. This collective movement becomes discernible when the Plan's elements are combined into a well-coordinated cluster-wide effort, the dynamics of which are becoming increasingly familiar. Such a cluster becomes the setting for experienced believers as much as those newly introduced to the Faith, whatever their age or background, to work side by side, accompanying one another in their service, enabling everyone to participate in the unfoldment of the Plan.

194.2From the panorama of the Bahá'í world engaged in earnest activity, one phenomenon strikes us especially: the decisive contribution made by youth on every continent. In this phenomenon we see the vindication of the hopes the beloved Guardian invested in them "for the future progress and expansion of the Cause" and of the confidence with which he laid upon their shoulders "all the responsibility for the upkeep of the spirit of selfless service among their fellow-believers". We are struck, too, by the number of youth who, after only a brief association with the Bahá'í community, commit themselves to meaningful acts of service and quickly discover their affinity with the Faith's community-building endeavour. Indeed, in contemplating both the Bahá'í youth and their like-minded peers, we cannot but rejoice at their eagerness to take on a measure of responsibility to aid the spiritual and social development of those around them, especially ones younger than themselves. In an age consumed by self-interest, in which even spiritual affiliation is weighed in the scales of reward and personal satisfaction, it is heartening to encounter individuals from their mid-teens to their twenties—those upon whom the sights of an aggressive materialism are decidedly trained—who are galvanized by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and are ready to put the needs of others before their own. That such high-minded youth, by dint of their own exertions as well as the momentum they lend to the whole community, should be contributing so effectively to efforts everywhere under way bodes well for the anticipated acceleration of these efforts.

194.3What has been accomplished in the past two years will, surely, be far surpassed, not just in the concluding years of this present Plan but in the

remaining years of the first century of the Formative Age. To spur on this mighty enterprise and to summon today's youth to fully assume the responsibilities they must discharge in this fast-contracting interval, we announce the convocation of 95 youth conferences, between July and October, planned for locations that span the globe: Accra, Addis Ababa, Aguascalientes, Almaty, Antananarivo, Apia, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Bardiya, Battambang, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Boston, Brasília, Bridgetown, Bukavu, Cali, Canoas, Cartagena de Indias, Chennai, Chibombo, Chicago, Chisinau, Cochabamba, Daidanaw, Dakar, Dallas, Danané, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka, Dnipropetrovsk, Durham (United States), Frankfurt, Guwahati, Helsinki, Istanbul (2), Jakarta, Johannesburg, Kadugannawa, Kampala, Kananga, Karachi, Khujand, Kinshasa, Kolkata, Kuching, Lae, Lima, London, Lubumbashi, Lucknow, Macau, Madrid, Manila, Matunda Soy, Moscow, Mwinilunga, Mzuzu, Nadi, Nairobi, New Delhi, Oakland, Otavalo, Ouagadougou, Panchgani, Paris, Patna, Perth, Phoenix, Port-au-Prince, Port Dickson, Port Moresby, Port-Vila, San Diego, San José (Costa Rica), San Jose City (Philippines), San Salvador, Santiago, Sapele, Sarh, Seberang Perai, South Tarawa, Sydney, Tbilisi, Thyolo, Tirana, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Verona, Yaoundé. We extend an invitation to these gatherings to every youth who recognizes in the methods and instruments of the Plan potent means for movement towards a better society. And from Bahá'ís of all ages, we invite wholehearted support for the participants upon whose efforts so much depends.

194.4Beloved friends: To every generation of young believers comes an opportunity to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity, unique to their time of life. For the present generation, the moment has come to reflect, to commit, to steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we entreat the Ancient Beauty that, from out a distracted and bewildered humanity, He may distil pure souls endowed with clear sight: youth whose integrity and uprightness are not undermined by dwelling on the faults of others and who are not immobilized by any shortcomings of their own; youth who will look to the Master and "bring those who have been excluded into the circle of intimate friends"; youth whose consciousness of the failings of society impels them to work for its transformation, not to distance themselves from it; youth who, whatever the cost, will refuse to pass by inequity in its many incarnations and will labour, instead, that "the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world."

The Universal House of Justice

195

Non-involvement in Partisan Politics

2 March 2013

To the Bahá'ís of Iran

Dearly loved Friends,

195.1For three and a half decades now, wave after wave of persecution, varying in intensity, has battered your sorely tried and valiant community, a barrage that is but the latest in a series unleashed over one hundred and sixty years ago. Yet, contrary to the expectations of those bent on sapping the strength of

the community of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers in His homeland, their machinations have served ultimately to reinforce its foundations and fortify its ranks. More and more of your compatriots, themselves victims of oppression, not only see clearly the trail of injustices that have been perpetrated against Bahá’ís down the years but also recognize in your unbroken record of disinterested service to society a force of constructive change. As sympathy towards you continues to grow, so do the voices calling for the removal of the obstacles that have prevented you from participating in the life of society in all of its dimensions. Not surprisingly, then, questions regarding the posture held by Bahá’ís everywhere towards political activity have taken on greater significance in the eyes of your fellow citizens.

195.2Historically, of course, the position in which the Iranian Bahá’í community has found itself in this respect has been a peculiar one. It has been falsely accused, on the one hand, of being politically motivated, leagued against the prevailing regime—the agent of whatever foreign power the accuser finds most convenient to his purpose. On the other hand, the uncompromising refusal of the members of the community to participate in partisan political activity has been portrayed as a lack of concern for the affairs of the Iranian people. Now that the true intentions of your oppressors have been laid bare, it behoves you to respond to the growing interest of your fellow citizens in understanding the Bahá’í attitude towards politics, lest misconceptions be allowed to weaken the bonds of friendship you are establishing with so many souls. In this, they deserve more than a few statements, however important, that evoke images of love and unity. To assist you in conveying to them a vision of the framework that shapes the Bahá’í approach to the subject, we are providing you with the comments below.

195.3Inseparable from the Bahá’í perspective on politics is a particular conception of history, its course and direction. Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá’u’lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race. Not unlike the individual who passes through the unsettled yet promising period of adolescence, during which latent powers and capacities come to light, humankind as a whole is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.

195.4Bahá’ís are encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check

unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose. Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Bahá'ís, of course, strive to align themselves, individually and collectively, with forces associated with the process of integration, which, they are confident, will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.

195.5Such is the view of history that underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá'í community.

195.6As you know from your study of the Bahá'í writings, the principle that is to infuse all facets of organized life on the planet is the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity. That humanity constitutes a single people is a truth that, once viewed with scepticism, claims widespread acceptance today. The rejection of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. Yet, however promising the rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will take decades—nay, centuries—to unfold. For the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature; the deterioration of the home environment, with the accompanying rise in the systematic exploitation of women and children worldwide, makes clear how pervasive are the misbegotten notions that define relations within the family unit; the persistence of despotism, on the one hand, and the increasing disregard for authority, on the other, reveal how unsatisfactory to a maturing humanity is the current relationship between the individual and the institutions of society; the concentration of material wealth in the hands of a minority of the world's population gives an indication of how fundamentally ill-conceived are relationships among the many sectors of what is now an emerging global community. The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society.

195.7What should be stated plainly here is that Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation thus envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts. Nor are they trying to create a movement that would seek to impose on society their vision of the future. Every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving. Unity will progressively be achieved, as foreshadowed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in different realms of social existence, for instance, "unity in the political realm", "unity of thought in world

undertakings", "unity of races" and the "unity of nations". As these come to be realized, the structures of a politically united world, which respects the full diversity of culture and provides channels for the expression of dignity and honour, will gradually take shape.

195.8The question that occupies the worldwide Bahá'í community, then, is how it can best contribute to the civilization-building process as its resources increase. It sees two dimensions to its contribution. The first is related to its own growth and development, and the second to its involvement in society at large.

195.9Regarding the first, Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men; that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few; that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances; that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated; that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity; that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.

195.10Numerous, of course, are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to

enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory “other” or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. To explore questions such as these and the many others certain to arise, the Bahá’í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned—these are, themselves, the object of regular examination.

195.11The overall direction of the process of learning that the Bahá’í community is pursuing is guided by a series of global plans, the provisions of which are established by the Universal House of Justice. Capacity building is the watchword of these plans: they aim at enabling the protagonists of collective effort to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighbourhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches.

195.12At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. Animating the Bahá’í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá’u’lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. Just as the appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through the complex association of countless cells, whose organization in tissues and organs allows for the realization of distinctive capacities, so can

civilization be seen as the outcome of a set of interactions among closely integrated, diverse components which have transcended the narrow purpose of tending to their own existence. And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race. In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.

195.13If the web of relationships alluded to above is to take shape and give rise to a pattern of life distinguished by adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind, certain foundational concepts must be carefully examined. Most notable among them is the conception of power. Clearly the concept of power as a means of domination, with the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, must be left behind. This is not to deny the operation of power; after all, even in cases where institutions of society have received their mandates through the consent of the people, power is involved in the exercise of authority. But political processes, like other processes of life, should not remain unaffected by the powers of the human spirit that the Bahá'í Faith—for that matter, every great religious tradition that has appeared throughout the ages—hopes to tap: the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds. Associated with power in this sense are words such as "release", "encourage", "channel", "guide" and "enable". Power is not a finite entity which is to be "seized" and "jealously guarded"; it constitutes a limitless capacity to transform that resides in the human race as a body.

195.14The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that it has a considerable distance to traverse before its growing experience yields the necessary insights into the workings of the desired set of interactions. It makes no claims to perfection. To uphold high ideals and to have become their embodiment are not one and the same. Myriad are the challenges that lie ahead, and much remains to be learned. The casual observer may well choose to label the community's attempts to surmount these challenges "idealistic". Yet it certainly would not be justified to portray Bahá'ís as uninterested in the affairs of their own countries, much less as unpatriotic. However idealistic the Bahá'í endeavour may appear to some, its deep-seated concern for the good of humankind cannot be ignored. And given that no current arrangement in the world seems capable of lifting humanity from the quagmire of conflict and contention and securing its felicity, why would any government object to the efforts of one group of people to deepen its understanding of the nature of those essential relationships inherent to the common future towards which the human race is being inexorably drawn? What harm is there in this?

195.15Within the framework traced out by the above ideas, then, it is possible

to consider the second dimension of the Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization: its involvement in society at large. Clearly what Bahá'ís see as one aspect of their contribution cannot contradict the other. They cannot be seeking to establish patterns of thought and action that give expression to the principle of oneness within their community, yet engage in activities in another context which, to whatever extent, reinforce an entirely different set of assumptions about social existence. To avoid such a duality, the Bahá'í community has progressively refined over time, on the basis of the teachings of the Faith, the main features of its participation in the life of society. First and foremost, Bahá'ís endeavour, whether as individuals or as a community, to put into practice the command of Bahá'u'lláh: "They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations." It is through "association and meeting", 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained further, that "we find happiness and development, individual and collective." "That which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men", He has written in this connection, "is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind." Even in the case of religion, He has made it clear that it "must be the cause of love and fellowship. Should religion become the cause of contention and enmity, its absence is preferable." So it is that Bahá'ís do their utmost at all times to heed the counsel of Bahá'u'lláh, "Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity." "That one indeed is a man", He exhorts His followers, "who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race." "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," is His admonition, "and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." "The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated. "The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity." "So powerful is the light of unity", Bahá'u'lláh declares, "that it can illuminate the whole earth."

195.16It is with such thoughts in mind that Bahá'ís enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity. Indeed, the standard set by passages such as the above inspires the Bahá'í community to become actively engaged in as many aspects of contemporary life as feasible. In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an

inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. It should be noted here that, despite the limitations imposed by adherence to this principle, the community has not experienced a shortage of opportunities for collaboration; so many people in the world today are working intensely towards one or another aim which Bahá'ís share. In this respect, they also take care not to overstep certain bounds with their colleagues and associates. They are not to regard any joint undertaking as an occasion to impose religious convictions. Self-righteousness and other unfortunate manifestations of religious zeal are to be utterly avoided. Bahá'ís do, however, readily offer to their collaborators the lessons they have learned through their own experience, just as they are happy to incorporate into their community-building efforts insights gained through such association.

195.17This brings us, at last, to the specific question of political activity. The conviction of the Bahá'í community that humanity, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, stands at the threshold of its collective maturity; its belief that the principle of the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity, implies a change in the very structure of society; its dedication to a learning process that, animated by this principle, explores the workings of a new set of relationships among the individual, the community and the institutions of society, the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization; its confidence that a revised conception of power, freed from the notion of dominance with the accompanying ideas of contest, contention, division and superiority, underlies the desired set of relationships; its commitment to a vision of a world that, benefitting from humanity's rich cultural diversity, abides no lines of separation—these all constitute essential elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics set out in brief below.

195.18Bahá'ís do not seek political power. They will not accept political posts in their respective governments, whatever the particular system in place, though they will take up positions which they deem to be purely administrative in nature. They will not affiliate themselves with political parties, become entangled in partisan issues, or participate in programmes tied to the divisive agendas of any group or faction. At the same time, Bahá'ís respect those who, out of a sincere desire to serve their countries, choose to pursue political aspirations or to engage in political activity. The approach adopted by the Bahá'í community of non-involvement in such activity is not intended as a statement expressing some fundamental objection to politics in its true sense; indeed, humanity organizes itself through its political affairs. Bahá'ís vote in civil elections, as long as they do not have to identify themselves with any party in order to do so. In this connection, they view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of a society, and they undertake, one and all, to observe the laws of the land in which they reside, without allowing their inner religious beliefs to be violated. Bahá'ís will not be party to any instigation to overthrow a government. Nor will they interfere in political relations between the governments of different nations. This does not mean that they are naive about political processes in the world today and make no distinction between just

and tyrannical rule. The rulers of the earth have sacred obligations to fulfil towards their people, who should be seen as the most precious treasure of any nation. Wherever they reside, Bahá'ís endeavour to uphold the standard of justice, addressing inequities directed towards themselves or towards others, but only through lawful means available to them, eschewing all forms of violent protest. Moreover, in no way does the love they hold in their hearts for humanity run counter to the sense of duty they feel to expend their energies in service to their respective countries.

195.19The approach, or strategy if you will, with the simple set of parameters outlined in the foregoing paragraph enables the community, in a world where nations and tribes are pitted one against the other and people are divided and separated by social structures, to maintain its cohesion and integrity as a global entity and to ensure that the activities of the Bahá'ís in one country do not jeopardize the existence of those elsewhere. Guarded against competing interests of nations and political parties, the Bahá'í community is thus able to build its capacity to contribute to processes that promote peace and unity.

195.20Dear Friends: We recognize that treading this path, which you have done so ably for decades, is not without its challenges. It asks for an integrity that cannot be shaken, for a rectitude of conduct that cannot be undermined, for a clarity of thought that cannot be obscured, for a love of one's country that cannot be manipulated. Now that your fellow citizens understand your plight, and possibilities will no doubt open for you to participate even further in the life of society, we pray that you will be assisted from on High in explaining to your friends and compatriots the framework articulated in these pages so that, in collaboration with them, you will find increasing opportunities to labour for the good of your people without compromising, in any way, your identity as followers of One Who summoned humanity, more than a century ago, to a new World Order.

The Universal House of Justice

196

Passing of Mas‘úd Khamsí, Former Memberof the International Teaching Centre

7 March 2013

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

196.1Our hearts were grieved to learn of the passing of dearly loved, stalwart promoter of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, Mas‘úd Khamsí, whose long record of distinguished service we recall with such admiration. In 1957, in response to the goals of the Guardian's Ten Year Crusade, he left Iran as a pioneer to South America, participating in some of the earliest efforts to reach its highly receptive indigenous populations. Following his return to Iran, he was appointed to the first contingent of Continental Counsellors in 1968 as a member of the Board for Western Asia. He departed once again for South America within months and, for the next fourteen years, served as a Counsellor in that continent. In 1983 he was appointed as a member of the International Teaching Centre, in which capacity he laboured for a decade. His endeavours thereafter continued unabated, even at an advanced age. In every service he rendered—in the treks he undertook on foot from village

to village across vast mountain ranges; in his efforts to encourage young people; in the travels he pursued, bringing his zeal for teaching to some of the remotest parts of the globe—he displayed a generosity of spirit, a warmth of heart, and a determination and courage that were borne of utter consecration and complete loyalty to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

196.2We extend our deepest sympathy to his dear wife, Jane, his children, and other members of his family and assure them of our fervent supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his devoted soul in the realms of God. We advise the holding of befitting memorial gatherings in his honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá'í communities throughout the world.

The Universal House of Justice

197

Adhering to Bahá'í Standards of Morality

19 April 2013

To three Bahá'ís

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

197.1Your email letter …, regarding the difficulties experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in Western countries in adhering to certain of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, was received…. Your thoughtful questions were carefully considered by the Universal House of Justice, which has instructed us to write to you as follows.

197.2You state that the disparity between the sexual mores of contemporary Western society and the standards of the Bahá'í teachings, which, you indicate, are "in accordance with the moral code of the East," poses a considerable challenge to the current generation of young believers. In this connection you explain that, since, historically, a great deal of shame was associated with sexuality in European society, and so much energy was directed towards hiding and suppressing it, to abstain from sexual relations before marriage is now negatively viewed as pietism. You add that today marriage is delayed into the thirties after young people have completed their education and saved money for a home, that married life is more complex than in the past since both spouses usually work, and that those who profess ideals of chastity, as in the priesthood, often fall prey to illicit behaviour. Further, you suggest that many young Bahá'ís struggle to meet the standard of purity set forth in the teachings and that other young people may be reticent to join the Faith out of a reluctance to uphold it. The House of Justice appreciates the sincerity with which you have expressed your thoughts and acknowledges the very real sense of concern you feel, as the gulf between the principles laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and the generally accepted practices of society continues to widen.

197.3Young Bahá'ís in Europe face a particular challenge in this respect. Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture, the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others. Yet, reflect upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trenchant analysis of the limitations of European civilization in His treatise The Secret of Divine Civilization. Weigh carefully, next, His many exhortations to the individual in that same

volume to “become a source of social good” and to “lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race.” Far from allowing themselves to be acculturated to the standards of society, then, Bahá’ís are called upon to be the vanguard and champions of a new civilization. The important issues you raise, therefore, need to be considered not only in the context of the current condition of society but also in light of the nature of Bahá’u’lláh’s laws and teachings and the responsibilities shouldered by every one of His followers, as well as by the community and the institutions of the Faith—this, if the potential to achieve His purpose for humanity is to be realized.

197.4We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.

197.5Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. Yet, the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon the opposite: cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality. Divine teachings shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. “Man should know his own self”, Bahá’u’lláh states, “and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.”

197.6“The object of every Revelation”, Bahá’u’lláh declares, is “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.” His appearance signals the emergence of “a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God”, a race that will be purified “from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires” and that will manifest “the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth.” The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh provide “such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth”. Thus, enshrined in His Revelation is a pattern for future society, radically different from any established in the past, and the promotion of His laws and exhortations constitutes an inseparable part of the effort to lay the foundations of such a society.

197.7It is evident that, if the body and mind are to maintain good health, the laws that govern physical existence cannot be ignored. So, too, for any nation to function properly, there are certain social conventions and laws that, everyone accepts, must be followed. In the same way, there are laws and principles that govern our spiritual lives, and attention to them is of vital importance if the individual and society as a whole are to develop in a sound and harmonious manner. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress. His teachings serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness, whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behaviour, leads to true freedom. “Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation,” Bahá’u’lláh states, “they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things.” “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,” He declares further, “Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”
197.8Throughout the world, in diverse cultures, Bahá’ís encounter values and practices that stand in sharp contrast to the teachings of the Faith. Some are embedded in social structures, for instance, racial prejudice and gender discrimination, economic exploitation and political corruption. Others pertain to personal conduct, especially with respect to the use of alcohol and drugs, to sexual behaviour, and to self-indulgence in general. If Bahá’ís simply surrender to the mores of society, how will conditions change? How will the people of the world distinguish today’s moribund order from the civilization to which Bahá’u’lláh is summoning humanity? “Humanity”, the Ridván 2012 message of the House of Justice explained, “is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire.” “A single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself,” the message noted. Young Bahá’ís especially need to take care, lest they imagine they can live according to the norms of contemporary society while adhering to Bahá’í ideals at some minimum level to assuage their conscience or to satisfy the community, for they will soon find themselves consumed in a struggle to obey even the most basic of the Faith’s moral teachings and powerless to take up the challenges of their generation. “Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar,” Bahá’u’lláh warns. The inner joy that every individual seeks, unlike a passing emotion, is not contingent on outside influences; it is a condition, born of certitude and conscious knowledge, fostered by a pure heart, which is able to distinguish between that which has permanence and that which is superficial. “Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven,” are Bahá’u’lláh’s words, “yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face.”
197.9The duty to obey the laws brought by Bahá’u’lláh for a new age,

then, rests primarily on the individual believer. It lies at the heart of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved; “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation. Yet what is expected in this connection is effort sustained by earnest desire, not instantaneous perfection. The qualities and habits of thought and action that characterize Bahá’í life are developed through daily exertion. “Bring thyself to account each day”, writes Bahá’u’lláh. “Let each morn be better than its eve”, He advises, “and each morrow richer than its yesterday.” The friends should not lose heart in their personal struggles to attain to the Divine standard, nor be seduced by the argument that, since mistakes will inevitably be made and perfection is impossible, it is futile to exert an effort. They are to steer clear of the pitfalls of hypocrisy, on the one hand—that is, saying one thing yet doing another—and heedlessness, on the other—that is, disregard for the laws, ignoring or explaining away the need to follow them. So too is paralysis engendered by guilt to be avoided; indeed, preoccupation with a particular moral failing can, at times, make it more challenging for it to be overcome.

197.10What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá’í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community’s efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

197.11In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá’í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental, eager

to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

197.12Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the licence that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will.

197.13The Universal House of Justice wishes us to assure you of its supplications on your behalf, that the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty may attend all your efforts undertaken in His path.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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Ridván Message 2013

Ridván 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

198.1"The Book of God is wide open, and His Word is summoning mankind unto Him." In such exhilarating terms does the Supreme Pen describe the advent of the day of union and ingathering. Bahá'u'lláh continues: "Incline your ears, O friends of God, to the voice of Him Whom the world hath wronged, and hold fast unto whatsoever will exalt His Cause." He further exhorts His followers: "With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your lives to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all."

198.2Beloved co-workers: This stirring pronouncement comes to mind unbidden when we see your consecrated efforts around the world in answer to the call of Bahá'u'lláh. The splendid response to His summons can be witnessed on every side. To those who pause to reflect on the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, it becomes impossible to ignore how the power possessed by the Word of God is ascendant in the hearts of women and men, children and youth, in country after country, in cluster after cluster.

198.3A worldwide community is refining its ability to read its immediate reality, analyse its possibilities, and apply judiciously the methods and instruments of the Five Year Plan. As anticipated, experience is most rapidly accumulating in clusters where the frontiers of learning are being consciously advanced. In such places, the means for enabling an ever-rising number of individuals to strengthen their capacity for service are well understood. A vibrant training institute functions as the mainstay of the community's efforts to advance the Plan and, as early

as possible, skills and abilities developed through participation in institute courses are deployed in the field. Some, through their everyday social interactions, encounter souls who are open to the exploration of spiritual matters carried out in a variety of settings; some are in a position to respond to receptivity in a village or neighbourhood, perhaps by having relocated to the area. Growing numbers arise to shoulder responsibility, swelling the ranks of those who serve as tutors, animators, and teachers of children; who administer and coordinate; or who otherwise labour in support of the work. The friends' commitment to learning finds expression through constancy in their own endeavours and a willingness to accompany others in theirs. Further, they are able to keep two complementary perspectives on the pattern of action developing in the cluster firmly in view: one, the three-month cycles of activity—the rhythmic pulse of the programme of growth—and the other, the distinct stages of a process of education for children, for junior youth, and for youth and adults. While understanding clearly the relationship that connects these three stages, the friends are aware that each has its own dynamics, its own requirements, and its own inherent merit. Above all, they are conscious of the operation of powerful spiritual forces, whose workings can be discerned as much in the quantitative data that reflect the community's progress as in the array of accounts that narrate its accomplishments. What is especially promising is that so many of these distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development.

198.4As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavours. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives. Equally, they have come to recognize that when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time, but that this in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavours. For they understand that if learning is to be their mode of operation, they must be alert to the potential offered by any instrument of the Plan that proves to be especially suited to a particular point in time and, where called for, invest greater energy in its development; it does not follow, however, that every person must be occupied with the same aspect of the Plan. The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a programme of growth to be directed towards the same end. Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals or collectively; in

another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.
198.5Furthermore, the friends are conscious that the work of the Cause proceeds at different speeds in different places and for good reason—it is, after all, an organic phenomenon—and they take joy and encouragement from every instance of progress they see. Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all. Gatherings for reflection are increasingly seen as occasions where the community's efforts, in their entirety, are the subject of earnest and uplifting deliberation. Participants learn what has been accomplished overall, understand their own labours in that light, and enhance their knowledge about the process of growth by absorbing the counsels of the institutions and drawing on the experience of their fellow believers. Such experience is also shared in numerous other spaces that are emerging for consultation amongst friends intensely engaged in specific endeavours, whether they are pursuing a common line of action or serving in a particular part of the cluster. All these insights are located in a wider appreciation that progress is most easily achieved in an environment imbued with love—one in which shortcomings are overlooked with forbearance, obstacles are overcome with patience, and tested approaches are embraced with enthusiasm. And so it is that, through the wise direction of institutions and agencies of the Faith functioning at every level, the friends' exertions, however modest individually, coalesce into a collective effort to ensure that receptivity to the call of the Blessed Beauty is identified quickly and nurtured effectively. A cluster in this condition is clearly one where the relationships among the individual, the institutions, and the community—the Plan's three protagonists—are evolving soundly.
198.6From this landscape of thriving activity, one prospect deserves particular mention. In the message addressed to you three years ago, we expressed the hope that, in clusters with an intensive programme of growth in operation, the friends would endeavour to learn more about the ways of community building by developing centres of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages. Our hopes have been exceeded, for even in clusters where the programme of growth has not yet achieved intensity, efforts by a few to initiate core activities among the residents of small areas have demonstrated their efficacy time and again. In essence, this approach centres on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline

cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.

198.7While expansion and consolidation have steadily progressed over the past year, other important areas of activity have also moved forward, often in close parallel. As a prime example, the advances at the level of culture being witnessed in some villages and neighbourhoods are due in no small part to what is being learned from Bahá'í involvement in social action. Our Office of Social and Economic Development recently prepared a document which distils thirty years of experience that has accumulated in this field since that Office was established at the Bahá'í World Centre. Among the observations it makes is that efforts to engage in social action are lent vital impetus by the training institute. This is not simply through the rise in human resources it fosters. The spiritual insights, qualities, and abilities that are cultivated by the institute process have proven to be as crucial for participation in social action as they are for contributing to the process of growth. Further, it is explained how the Bahá'í community's distinct spheres of endeavour are governed by a common, evolving, conceptual framework composed of mutually reinforcing elements, albeit these assume varied expressions in different domains of action. The document we have described was lately shared with National Spiritual Assemblies, and we invite them, in consultation with the Counsellors, to consider how the concepts it explores can help to enhance existing efforts of social action pursued under their auspices and raise consciousness of this significant dimension of Bahá'í endeavour. This should not be interpreted as a general call for widespread activity in this area—the emergence of social action happens naturally, as a growing community gathers strength—but it is timely that the friends reflect more deeply on the implications of their exertions for the transformation of society. The surge in learning that is occurring in this field places increased demands upon the Office of Social and Economic Development, and steps are being taken to ensure that its functioning evolves commensurately.

198.8An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have

expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations. These expressions of appreciation and support have also come from some previously unexpected quarters. For example, even in the Cradle of the Faith, despite formidable obstacles placed by the oppressor in their path, the Bahá'ís are increasingly recognized for the profound implications their message holds for the state of their nation and respected for their unbending determination to contribute to the progress of their homeland.

198.9The suffering borne by the faithful in Iran, particularly in the decades since the most recent wave of persecutions began, has spurred their brothers and sisters in other countries to come to their defence. From among the invaluable endowments which, as a consequence of that endurance, the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired, we mention one in this connection: an impressive network of specialized agencies at the national level that has proven capable of systematically developing relations with governments and organizations of civil society. Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. At the grassroots, involvement in this kind of endeavour builds naturally, through the same organic approach that characterizes the steady increase of the friends' engagement in social action, and no special attempt to stimulate it is necessary. At the national level, however, it is more often becoming the focus of attention for these same dedicated agencies already functioning in dozens of national communities, and it is proceeding according to the familiar and fruitful pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.

198.10Encouraging progress is occurring in other areas as well. In Santiago, Chile, where the Mother Temple of South America is being erected, the building work continues apace. The concrete construction of the foundations, basement, and service tunnel is complete, as are the columns that will bear the superstructure. The anticipation associated with this project is growing, and a similar sense of expectation is stirring in the seven countries where national or local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up. In each one, preparations have commenced, and the contributions the believers are making to the Temples Fund have begun to be used; however, practical considerations, such as location, design, and resources, represent only one aspect of the work being undertaken by the friends. Fundamentally, theirs is a spiritual endeavour, one in which the whole community participates. The Master refers to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as "the lodestone of divine confirmations", "the mighty foundation of the Lord", and "the firm pillar of the Faith of God". Wherever it is established, it will naturally be an integral component

of the process of community building that surrounds it. Already, in those places where a House of Worship is to appear, awareness of this reality is deepening among the rank and file of the believers, who recognize that their collective life must more and more reflect that union of worship and service which the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár embodies.

198.11On each front, then, we see the Bahá'í community moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks when resources make it possible, agile in its response to fresh imperatives, conscious of the need to ensure coherence among the various areas of activity in which it is engaged, wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission. Its enthusiasm and devotion are apparent in the tremendous fervour generated by the announcement some two months ago of the convocation of 95 youth conferences throughout the world. We are gratified not only by the reaction of the youth themselves but also by the expressions of support voiced by their fellow believers, who appreciate how the younger followers of Bahá'u'lláh act as a vital stimulus to the entire body of the Cause.

198.12We are filled with hope by the successive evidences we see of the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's message, the reach of its influence, and the growing awareness of the ideals it enshrines. In this season of anniversaries, we call to remembrance that "Day of supreme felicity", separated from this Ridván by a century and a half, when the Abhá Beauty first proclaimed His Mission to His companions in the Najíbíyyih Garden. From that sanctified spot, the Word of God has gone forth to every city and every shore, summoning humanity to an encounter with its Lord. And from that initial retinue of God-intoxicated lovers, a diverse community of purpose has blossomed, variegated flowers in the garden He has reared. With each passing day, rising numbers of newly awakened souls turn in supplication towards His Shrine, the place where we, in honour of that blessed Day and in gratitude for every bounty bestowed upon the community of the Greatest Name, bow our heads in prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

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Upholding Bahá'í Moral Standards

23 April 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Denmark

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

199.1… The challenge you face in helping the friends in your community to understand the Bahá'í teachings and to apply them in their lives, as the forces of materialism continue to grow in strength, is appreciated by the Universal House of Justice. Enclosed for your reference is a letter recently written on its behalf to three believers in a neighbouring country who shared similar concerns about the struggles experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in their efforts to uphold the standards of the Faith, particularly those related to chastity and marriage. It is hoped that the points set out in the letter will assist you in your deliberations on the subject. As the letter makes clear, the issues involved can best be considered in light of the

relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavours, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

199.2In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them.

199.3One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with "the feet of detachment". The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through "active, whole-hearted and continued participation" in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: "Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe from the Teachings." "By becoming a real part of that living organism", the letter went on, "you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá'í Teachings." Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet, when the desire to uphold the Bahá'í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unfailing love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to

private deeds.

199.4Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá'ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring to achieve the Bahá'í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá'í community; nor do judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness.

199.5What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: "A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society." The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.

199.6Apart from the measures noted above, which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá'í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behaviour contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

199.7Should the conduct of a believer become so blatant as to attract the

attention of the Assembly, it would want, after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues, to offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved. In most cases it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards. Dispassionate counselling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law is generally required. So, too, is patience needed, and he or she should be given sufficient time to bring about a change. The Assembly, often aided by the Counsellors or the members of the Auxiliary Boards, may have to help the individual reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options. In deciding on what approach to take, the Assembly should be guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá'í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards. When a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation, continued patience and loving guidance are in order. All throughout, of course, care is taken to ensure that an individual's struggles do not become a source of backbiting or disunity in the community. In this the members of the community need to remember that they should each focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.

199.8Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection. What is at stake is the participation of the individual in those aspects of community life internal to the body of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, not his or her civil rights. In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community. Restricting the believer from other forms of service—for instance, acting as a tutor of a study circle or as a children's class teacher—may also be considered. Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, "although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline," this prerogative of the National Assembly "should be used only in extreme

cases.” If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, “it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá’ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Bahá’u’lláh,” which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, “create an impossible and ridiculous situation.”

199.9One final point deserves mention: There may be times when an individual who shows complete indifference to the counsels of the institutions and firm resolution in his or her desire to maintain the status quo has no apparent interest in engaging in the life of the Bahá’í community. In such a case, provided that his or her conduct has no significant bearing on the good name of the Faith, the Assembly may decide to leave the individual to go his or her own way, neither insisting on continued contact nor feeling obliged to impose sanctions. Equally, however, the Assembly need not be anxious about quickly removing the name of the individual from its rolls, given that circumstances change and a person may, over time, decide to mend his or her ways and return to participate in the life of the community.

199.10In considering matters such as those outlined above, both in handling particular cases and in addressing the broader question of cultivating an attitude of love and respect towards Bahá’í laws and standards, you will no doubt find ongoing consultation with the Counsellors both essential and illuminating.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

200

Message to the Delegates Attending the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention

25 April 2013

To the Delegates to the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

200.1At this joyful season, it brings us great happiness to extend to you a loving welcome upon your arrival in the Holy Land to attend the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention. Those of you gathered here in person—representing an anticipated 156 countries or territories—are joined in spirit by delegates from a number of other countries, whose circumstances allow them to participate only by sending their ballots. We are delighted that your ranks are now fortified by members of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Afghanistan, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Korea, Lesotho and Vietnam—Assemblies that were able to re-form in the past five years, some after the lapse of decades.

200.2Soon after your arrival, you will have the bounty of visiting those holy precincts to which the hearts of Bahá’ís worldwide turn each day. In those blessed surroundings, with your thoughts fixed steadfastly on the Abhá Beauty and with your faces set towards the wonders of His Kingdom, your souls will be refreshed through the outpourings of His benevolence and grace. With sanctified spirits and in a rarefied atmosphere of purity and detachment, you will then gather on the first morning of the Convention to discharge, in a manner far, far removed from the prevailing standards of elections in the world, your

sacred responsibility of electing the Universal House of Justice.
200.3The consultative sessions provide you, as the chosen representatives of the Bahá'í world, with the precious opportunity to consider together the vital issues facing the Cause at this time and to share experience from the field. The present stage of the Divine Plan will be at the heart of these deliberations, with separate topics designated for each of the various sessions. You may, however, after due reflection, bring forward additional matters that you feel are essential to the progress and well-being of the Faith.
200.4An audio-visual presentation Frontiers of Learning, which will be shown on the second day of the Convention, provides glimpses of the dynamic spirit animating the endeavours of the friends and the experience being gained in four clusters across the world. In addition, a document entitled Insights from the Frontiers of Learning, which we hope you will be able to peruse in the days preceding the Convention, has been provided as part of your registration package to assist you in your contributions to the consultations.
200.5As you visit the Holy Places during your brief stay here, you will witness what the Bahá'í world has achieved at its World Centre over the past five years. Crowning these accomplishments is the restoration of the Shrine of the Báb, whose golden dome once again shines out in full splendour. Other developments include the renovation of the House of the Master and the International Archives Building; restoration and conservation of the Ridván Garden, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as "Our Verdant Isle"; and completion of the perimeter path surrounding the Most Holy Shrine.
200.6May your supplications in the Holy Shrines inspire your souls and prepare you for the sacred responsibility with which you are entrusted. And following these few days, which will swiftly pass, may you arise with renewed strength and clarity of vision to offer your share to the spiritual enterprise in which the worldwide Bahá'í community is so devotedly engaged.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice

201
Election of the Universal House of Justice
30 April 2013
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
201.1The newly elected members of the Universal House of Justice are Paul Lample, Firaydoun Javaheri, Payman Mohajer, Gustavo Correa, Shahriar Razavi, Stephen Birkland, Stephen Hall, Chuungu Malitonga, Ayman Rouhani.
The Universal House of Justice

202
Release of Frontiers of Learning
30 April 2013
To National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
202.1The Universal House of Justice commissioned the production of a film entitled Frontiers of Learning for presentation at the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention. It conveys some of the experiences and insights gained

at the frontiers of learning by the friends as they strive to contribute to the spiritual and material transformation of society. Each segment focuses on a particular aspect of community development, reflecting the profound change that occurs through perseverance along the path defined by the Plan. It is with great pleasure that the House of Justice presents eleven DVD copies of this film to every National Spiritual Assembly, including one for each member of your institution.

202.2You are encouraged to give thought to showing the film early in the proceedings of your forthcoming National Convention, in anticipation that it will inform the deliberations of the delegates and bring joy to their hearts as they reflect on the remarkable progress that has been achieved. In addition, the House of Justice wishes it to be widely distributed among the friends, who will no doubt benefit from sharing and discussing the film with others. In that regard, you may wish to distribute copies of the DVD to Regional Bahá'í Councils, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and smaller communities; Auxiliary Board members will receive their copies through the Continental Boards of Counsellors. Furthermore, the film will be available to download or view online at www.bahai.org/frontiers….

202.3It is hoped that the film will serve as a source of learning and encouragement to those who, inspired by the call of their Beloved, are arising throughout the world to join with their fellow citizens in carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

203

Convening of an Additional 19 Youth Conferences

1 May 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

203.1So overwhelming has been the response of the Bahá'í youth and their friends—indeed, of Bahá'í communities worldwide—to the announcement of 95 conferences to be convened around the world between July and October, that existing arrangements now seem unlikely to accommodate the number of youth wishing to attend, and it is apparent that a further complement of gatherings is therefore required. With great joy, we take this opportunity, when the members of National Spiritual Assemblies are gathered in consultation at the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention, to announce today our decision to convene an additional 19 conferences in the following locations: Bertoua, Bidor, Biratnagar, Brisbane, Cagayan de Oro, Georgetown (Guyana), Houston, Kampong Thom, Kigoma, Los Angeles, Mahikeng, Milne Bay, Minneapolis, Montreal, Nuku'alofa, Nundu (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Seattle, Vientiane, and Washington, D.C.

203.2This welcome development is indicative of the magnitude of the reservoirs of energy and devotion that the youth possess. Every effort must be made to assist them to continue to act on their responsibilities, and we look to them to expand the horizons of what the Bahá'í community can accomplish. We offer thanks to the Blessed Beauty for endowing His youthful followers with an

immense collective capacity for service, and we beseech Him that it might be realized in benefit to humankind.

The Universal House of Justice

204

Appointment of the Members of the International Teaching Centre

15 May 2013

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

204.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre for the five-year term beginning 23 May 2013: Uransaikhan Baatar, Ramchand Coonjul, Antonella Demonte, Andrej Donoval, Praveen Mallik, Alison Milston, Juan Mora, Rachel Ndegwa and Mehranguiz Farid Tehrani. We are profoundly grateful to Joan Lincoln, Zenaida Ramirez and Penelope Walker for their distinguished unremitting labours on this vital institution.

The Universal House of Justice

205

Sacred Responsibilities of Delegates to National Conventions

16 May 2013

To the delegates gathered at Bahá'í National Conventions

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

205.1The Eleventh International Convention, recently concluded, offered all who were present a glimpse of the promise of Bahá'u'lláh to unite the peoples of the world. More than a thousand members of one hundred and fifty-seven National Spiritual Assemblies attended, and nearly five hundred more, including those from an additional fourteen countries, participated in the election by mail. This diverse group of women and men, a veritable cross section of humanity, evinced, in their participation in the electoral process and subsequent contributions to the Convention consultations, a spirit of sanctity and love, a unity of thought and purpose, and a consecration to the collective enterprise of applying the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh that earned our deep admiration. No doubt, the members of your National Assembly, or the Counsellors, will share with you the joyous fellowship they experienced and the insights they gained during the productive days spent in the Holy Land.

205.2You now gather in National Conventions to carry out your own sacred responsibilities in the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Foremost is the election of the members of your National Assembly, when you will choose individuals who can meet the pressing requirements of the progress of the Cause at the present stage of its development. Our letter dated 25 March 2007 was intended to strengthen the Bahá'í electoral process, and we urge you to give renewed consideration to its salient points. In the features and outcomes of this electoral process that distinguish it from contemporary practices we find not limitations, but dawning points of profound implication. The delegates, as well as the generality of the believers, uphold the purity of Bahá'í elections, scrupulously avoiding electioneering or discussion of who should or should not be a member, even when specific names are not mentioned; for not only does the Guardian prohibit reference to particular personalities, but he also states that "we should refrain from influencing the opinions of

others.” Collectively, the friends strive to purge themselves of every trace of worldly tendencies—pursuit of personal ambitions, promotion of individuals, contest, and partisanship—which can corrupt and distort an election’s spiritual character. Delegates are obliged to become “intelligent, well-informed and responsible” electors so as to “be able to make a wise choice at the election time”. They enjoy the unfettered right to choose from among all those eligible, whether it be to retain members or to select new ones. The community wholeheartedly embraces the result of the election, confident that the delegates have cast their ballots for those for whom prayer and reflection have inspired them to vote.

205.3Within the administrative arrangements of the Bahá’í community there are a number of spaces that allow for the exchange of views, including cluster reflection gatherings, institutional meetings, and the Nineteen-Day Feast. The National Convention is another such occasion, but unique in that it brings together the National Assembly and elected representatives from all parts of the country. The conduct of this consultative dimension of the Convention calls for thoughtful attention.

205.4Shoghi Effendi stated that the National Convention should “fulfil the functions of an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly.” Although delegates are to offer their views in a full, frank, and unhampered manner, he advised that time not be spent on problems of secondary importance and that disruptive forces, “which are but the outcome of human passion and selfishness,” should be resisted. Instead, the Guardian expected those assembled to “approach their task with absolute detachment” and “concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues” in order to obtain a “deeper and broader vision of the Cause through an increase in the spirit of unity and of whole-hearted co-operation.” “The unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” he explained, “and the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.”

205.5Throughout the community, as the processes of the Divine Plan have become more and more complex, the nature of discussions on matters pertaining to growth and development of the Faith has evolved. A distinctive conversation is carried out, sometimes formally and often informally, at various levels and in different configurations. In every setting, each participant, whatever the nature of his or her service, provides a particular contribution and takes away fresh insight. From this rich set of interactions about experience unfolding within the Plan’s framework for action, consensus on strategies and plans emerges naturally. Among institutions, discussions flourish in an atmosphere of love and genuine respect, and unity of thought is readily achieved. And in settings such as cluster reflection meetings and gatherings of tutors, children’s class teachers, or animators of junior youth groups arranged by the training institute, aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation are taken up by the body of the believers, enabling planning and

implementation to become more responsive to local circumstances. This conversation of the Bahá'í world, grounded in allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh and safeguarded by firmness in His Covenant, increasingly transcends the habits of speech characteristic of an age preoccupied with trivial or misdirected interests. With time, accrued experience, and continued guidance, this ongoing conversation comes to be distinguished by a more worthy etiquette of expression and gradually clarifies ambiguities, expands participation, airs concerns, strengthens bonds of love and association, refocuses endeavour, reconciles differences, resolves problems, and contributes to happiness and well-being.

205.6Your consultations with the National Assembly at the Convention take place within the context of the larger set of relationships that bind the Plan's three protagonists and must increasingly reflect the features of this distinctive conversation. Each year the Ridván message sets the stage for the discussions at Convention by conveying a sense of the current progress of the Bahá'í world and the work that lies ahead. Your contribution, though free and frank, is not characterized by insistence on personal opinion. While there may be a wide range of important topics, attention to the progress of the Five Year Plan and the requirements of its remaining years cannot be neglected. You bring to the Convention insights gleaned from the conversation unfolding within your region. In this way, you enrich the perspective of the National Assembly and become informed of its hopes, challenges, and aims. You enhance your own understanding of the affairs of the Cause from a national perspective and rededicate yourself to the community's common enterprise.

205.7We are pleased to witness the promising advances in the deliberations at National Conventions in recent years, and it is our ardent prayer that you may arise to achieve the high aims set forth by the Guardian for this vital institution of the Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

206

Release of Insights from the Frontiers of Learning

16 May 2013

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

206.1Enclosed is a copy of the document entitled Insights from the Frontiers of Learning, prepared by the International Teaching Centre at the request of the Universal House of Justice for distribution at the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention. It represents the latest in a series of documents that have been issued, beginning in 1998, to provide a broad overview of the progress being made across the globe in advancing the process of entry by troops. The House of Justice is most grateful to the International Teaching Centre for the vital role it continues to play in the prosecution of the global Plans of the Faith and for its diligent efforts to capture, in documents such as this one, the richness of the experience of the believers and institutions on every continent. It is confident that this material will lend impetus to the endeavours of the friends who, in diverse circumstances, are tirelessly engaged in building vibrant communities, and commends it to their study.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
207
Appointment of Six Continental Counsellors
14 June 2013
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
207.1We joyfully announce the appointment of the following Continental Counsellors to fill the vacancies created by the recent appointments to the International Teaching Centre: in Africa Mrs. Iharinirina Rakotomavo, in the Americas Mrs. Sonlla Heern, in Asia Dr. Nibras Sarmad Moqbel, and in Europe Mrs. Raffaella Capozzi Gubinelli and Miss Yevgeniya Poluektova.
207.2We are also happy to announce the appointment of Mrs. Musonda Emily Kapusa-Linsel to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa, filling a vacancy that was created by the relocation of Mrs. Kini Musalo Geoghegan to Europe. Mrs. Geoghegan has earned our warm gratitude for the contribution she has made to the work of the Faith as a Counsellor, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround her as she continues her valuable labours in other fields of service to the Cause.
The Universal House of Justice
208
Destruction of the House of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad
27 June 2013
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
208.1With shattered hearts, we have received news of the destruction of the Most Great House—the House of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad. While the precise circumstances attending this outrageous violation are as yet unclear, its immediate consequence is without doubt, and must be emphatically stated: The peoples of the world have been robbed of a sanctuary of incalculable sacredness.
208.2So deplorable an act, coming on the eve of the unprecedented worldwide convocation of Bahá’u’lláh’s young followers and their friends, calls to mind that mysterious interplay of crisis and victory through which His indestructible, irrepressible, inexorable purpose will finally be consummated.
208.3We supplicate the Blessed Beauty to confer upon His faithful followers throughout the world fortitude and resolve in the face of this grievous blow. More information will be provided as it becomes available.
The Universal House of Justice
209
Message to the 114 Youth Conferences throughout the World
1 July 2013
To the participants in the forthcoming 114 youth conferences throughout the world
Dearly loved Friends,
209.1When the exalted figure of the Báb, aged just twenty-five, arose to deliver His revolutionizing message to the world, many among those who accepted and spread His teachings were young, even younger than the Báb Himself. Their heroism, immortalized in all its dazzling intensity in The Dawn-Breakers,

will illumine the annals of human history for centuries to come. Thus began a pattern in which every generation of youth, drawing inspiration from the same divine impulse to cast the world anew, has seized the opportunity to contribute to the latest stage in the unfolding process that is to transform the life of humankind. It is a pattern that has suffered no interruption from the time of the Báb to this present hour.

209.2The lifelong exertion and sacrifice of your spiritual forebears did much to establish the Faith in diverse lands and to hasten the appearance of a global community of purpose. Though the tasks that lie before you are not the same as theirs, the responsibilities with which you are entrusted are no less vital. After many a decade, the world-embracing labours of this far-flung community to obtain a more adequate understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to apply the principles it enshrines have culminated in the emergence of a potent framework for action, refined through experience. You are fortunate to be familiar with its methods and approaches now so well established. Through perseverance in their implementation, many of you will already have seen for yourselves signs of the society-building power of the divine teachings. At the conference you attend, you are being invited to consider the contribution that can be made by any young person who wishes to answer Bahá'u'lláh's summons and help to release that power. To assist you, a number of themes have been identified for you to explore, beginning with looking at your current time of life.

209.3Across the world are to be gathered, in scores of youth conferences sharing the same aim, tens of thousands who have much in common. Although your realities are shaped by a broad diversity of circumstances, yet a desire to bring about constructive change and a capacity for meaningful service, both characteristic of your stage of life, are neither limited to any race or nationality, nor dependent upon material means. This bright period of youth you share is experienced by all—but it is brief, and buffeted by numerous social forces. How important it is, then, to strive to be among those who, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "plucked the fruit of life".

209.4With this in mind, we are delighted that so many of you are already engaged in service by conducting community-building activities, as well as by organizing, coordinating, or otherwise administering the efforts of others; in all of these endeavours you are taking an increasing level of responsibility upon your shoulders. Not surprisingly, it is your age group that is gaining the most experience at aiding junior youth, and children too, with their moral and spiritual development, fostering in them capacity for collective service and true friendship. After all, aware of the world which these young souls will need to navigate, with its pitfalls and also its opportunities, you readily appreciate the importance of spiritual strengthening and preparation. Conscious, as you are, that Bahá'u'lláh came to transform both the inner life and external conditions of humanity, you are assisting those younger than yourselves to refine their characters and prepare to assume responsibility for the well-being of their communities. As they enter adolescence, you are helping them to enhance their power of expression, as well as enabling a strong moral sensibility to take root within them. In so doing, your own sense of purpose is

becoming more clearly defined as you heed Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction: “Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.”

209.5To follow a path of service, whatever form one’s activity assumes, requires faith and tenacity. In this connection, the benefit of walking that path in the company of others is immense. Loving fellowship, mutual encouragement, and willingness to learn together are natural properties of any group of youth sincerely striving for the same ends, and should also characterize those essential relationships that bind together the components of society. Given this, we hope the bonds you develop through association with other conference participants will prove abiding. Indeed, long after the gatherings close, may these ties of friendship and common calling help keep your feet firm.

209.6The possibilities presented by collective action are especially evident in the work of community building, a process that is gaining momentum in many a cluster and in neighbourhoods and villages throughout the world that have become centres of intense activity. Youth are often at the forefront of the work in these settings—not only Bahá’í youth, but those of like mind who can see the positive effects of what the Bahá’ís have initiated and grasp the underlying vision of unity and spiritual transformation. In such places, the imperative to share the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh with receptive hearts and explore the implications of His message for today’s world is keenly felt. When so much of society invites passivity and apathy or, worse still, encourages behaviour harmful to oneself and others, a conspicuous contrast is offered by those who are enhancing the capacity of a population to cultivate and sustain a spiritually enriching pattern of community life.

209.7Yet, although many admire your dynamism and ideals, the true significance of these endeavours is less apparent to the world at large. You, however, are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual’s spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one’s energies are being channelled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal.

209.8All these thoughts are openings to an inclusive and ever-expanding conversation that will extend through the conferences and well beyond them as you engage many others in earnest discussions that lift the heart and awaken the mind to the possibilities of what could be. Drawing upon your collective experience will further enrich your deliberations. At this propitious time, our hearts will be with you, and as each conference concludes, we will eagerly look to see what will follow. For every gathering we will entreat the Almighty to bestow upon its participants a measure of His boundless grace, knowing, as you do, that divine assistance is

promised to all those who arise to serve humankind in response to the galvanizing call of Bahá'u'lláh.
The Universal House of Justice
210
History of the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad
17 July 2013
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
210.1A century and a half ago, Bahá'u'lláh departed His House in Baghdad for the Najíbíyyih Garden, where He would, for the first time, openly disclose His prophetic mission. He left behind Him an edifice of surpassing sacredness that had sheltered Him for seven years. This sanctified residence, to which the Blessed Beauty would never return, was styled by Him the "Most Great House"; designated, along with the House of the Báb in Shiraz, as the place of Bahá'í pilgrimage; and addressed, by the Supreme Pen, in these stirring words:
I testify that thou art the scene of His transcendent glory, His most holy habitation. Out of thee hath gone forth the Breath of the All-Glorious, a Breath that hath breathed over all created things, and filled with joy the breasts of the devout that dwell in the mansions of Paradise.
210.2Yet, in His own lifetime, the House in Baghdad was subjected to mistreatment, and ownership of the building was temporarily wrested from His followers. Bahá'u'lláh foretold, in poignant terms, the further degradation that would befall His House.
This is not the first humiliation inflicted upon My House. In days gone by the hand of the oppressor hath heaped indignities upon it. Verily, it shall be so abased in the days to come as to cause tears to flow from every discerning eye. Thus have We unfolded to thee things hidden beyond the veil, inscrutable to all save God, the Almighty, the All-Praised.
210.3Events over the last one hundred and fifty years have borne out that to which Bahá'u'lláh had thus alluded. The House in Baghdad was acquired for His use about twenty-five years after its construction, which is thought to have occurred in 1830. By the early 1900s, it had fallen into total disrepair. When conditions were propitious, 'Abdu'l-Bahá arranged for it to be fully rebuilt, from the foundation upwards. As this work was nearing completion, efforts to seize the building by those opposing the Faith intensified, culminating in a wholly spurious claim to ownership that was unjustly endorsed by the courts. Again, the Most Great House was taken from the Bahá'ís.
210.4Over the years that followed, successive attempts were made by the believers, under the direction of Shoghi Effendi, to regain control of the property. The case was eventually taken up by the League of Nations, which plainly condemned the injustice done to the Bahá'í community, but even this brought about no redress. However, the confiscation of the Blessed House and the
response of the friends did lead to another significant development, as Shoghi Effendi recounts in God Passes By:
Suffice it to say that, despite these interminable delays, protests and

evasions, and the manifest failure of the Authorities concerned to implement the recommendations made by both the Council of the League and the Permanent Mandates Commission, the publicity achieved for the Faith by this memorable litigation, and the defence of its cause—the cause of truth and justice—by the world's highest tribunal, have been such as to excite the wonder of its friends and to fill with consternation its enemies.

Now is not the occasion to delve into the details of this "memorable litigation", but an extensive description has been set down by the Guardian in his peerless account of the first Bahá'í century. We add only that, since that time, the Most Great House has not been in the possession of the Bahá'ís, having been turned into a Shí'ah religious endowment instead.

210.5Owing to the highly delicate situation in Iraq over the last tumultuous decade, it was not possible for the friends to press their claim to this sacred property. Nevertheless, the institutions of the Faith in that country and individual believers remained vigilant regarding any developments bearing on the security of the Most Great House and took whatever measures were open to them to promote its protection and preservation. Iraqis themselves, although not generally aware of the special significance with which the property had been invested by Bahá'u'lláh, were not oblivious to its historical and architectural value. Only a year ago, the Department of Antiquities had published, in the official gazette of the government, a decree intended to guarantee the building against any action that might damage it, a decree that carried with it the force of the law. Indeed, as far back as the early 1980s the authorities had recognized the House to be a fine example of period architecture in Iraq, still in good condition, and had designated it as a heritage site.

210.6Thus, it was with utter shock and desolating grief that the Bahá'ís in Baghdad discovered on 26 June that the "most holy habitation" of Bahá'u'lláh had been razed almost to the ground to make way for the construction of a mosque. It has now been confirmed that the work was undertaken without a legal permit. The destruction of the property, it emerges, had been planned for some time, but the largest part of the operation was carried out over just three days and nights, from 24 to 26 June, using heavy machinery. We understand that the Department of Antiquities, which had previously been preparing to renovate the property, is already taking steps to establish precisely what led to the demolition, to attempt to halt any construction on the same spot, and to bring to account those responsible.

210.7In the world at large, it has become all too familiar for a blow of this severity, dealt to a hallowed site, to provoke an aggressive response. The Bahá'ís of Iraq, trained by the hand of the Abhá Beauty, will of course remain the embodiments of kindness and forbearance, hopeful of a just outcome. They are under no illusion as to the magnitude of the loss which they, on behalf of the worldwide Bahá'í community and beyond, are being forced to bear. But their eagerness to render service to their society will not be diminished by this calamity, nor will they be any less conscious of the pressing need for the whole of humanity to be acquainted with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. On the contrary. To gain insight into what the

Most Great House truly stands for—indeed, to understand better the transcendent meaning of pilgrimage to that holy edifice—one need only observe the response of Bahá'u'lláh's followers throughout the world to its destruction: high-mindedness, serenity, trust in God. Their primary focus is on opening the hearts to the implications of the message of the Blessed Beauty; events in Baghdad will only serve to heighten the sense of urgency with which this work is undertaken. At this time when the series of youth conferences, now commencing, is about to propel forward the current stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, we beseech the Almighty to graciously bestow upon the friends everywhere fortified resolve.

210.8Bahá'u'lláh foresaw that the Most Great House would be subjected to terrible indignities, but He also stated that, no matter what adversities might arise, the Cause was divinely protected. Let every believer take heart. In a moving apostrophe addressed to that House, the Ancient Beauty asserted: "God hath, in the world of creation, adorned thee with the jewel of His remembrance. Such an ornament no man can, at any time, profane." He gave a promise, too, that, notwithstanding all that would befall the Blessed House, the future glory of that sanctified place was assured: "In the fullness of time, the Lord shall, by the power of truth, exalt it in the eyes of all men. He shall cause it to become the Standard of His Kingdom, the Shrine round which will circle the concourse of the faithful."

The Universal House of Justice

211

Collection and Utilization of Statistics

23 July 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

211.1The Universal House of Justice has been pleased to note over the past several years that, in cluster after cluster in India, ever-greater numbers of believers and their friends are participating in community-building endeavours as they strive to advance the processes of the Five Year Plan. This, of course, requires that the institutions of the Faith arise with commensurate strength in order to support these activities and ensure that the necessary resources are made available as and when they are needed. One area where institutional capacity will need to be greatly enhanced is the collection and utilization of statistical data, and in this regard, we have been asked to convey the following comments.

211.2As the process of expansion and consolidation progresses within a cluster, the gathering of numerical data is a natural part of the everyday activities that take place as the friends carry out their work and make plans for the next steps they will take. For instance, it is only reasonable to expect that coordinators who accompany children's class teachers would be aware of the number of such classes and the approximate number of children attending each one. So too would be the case with other coordinators of the training institute and the members, especially the secretary, of the Area Teaching Committee. In this connection, instruments such as the Statistical Report Program (SRP) and the Statistical Report Program for the Training Institute (SRP Institute) have

proven to be of notable help in maintaining a record of this information. At certain times during the three-month cycle of activity, institutions and agencies serving at the cluster level would pool statistical information, by generating reports from the Statistical Report Program, thus facilitating analysis of the overall progress made and planning for the next cycle of activities. In light of the above, it is apparent that the collection of data is the result of the organic process of growth in each cluster and constitutes only one means, albeit a critical one, for assessing the progress of the Cause and the community-building process under way. Although the data thus collected is used primarily for the benefit of agencies at the cluster level, the Statistical Report Program allows for it to be easily forwarded to the Regional Bahá'í Council and eventually to the National Spiritual Assembly, which may require it for its own analyses.

211.3The Regional Bahá'í Councils play a vital role in facilitating the flow of information by extending the necessary assistance and resources to agencies serving at the cluster level and by raising the capacity of those involved in the collection and utilization of statistical data. Through such endeavours, they will also ensure that their own need for information can be readily met in a timely fashion, without having to issue urgent requests or frequent reminders.

211.4The House of Justice has noted with pleasure the close and increasing collaboration of your Assembly with the Counsellors in several areas that need the attention of both institutions. Paramount among these is helping Regional Councils attain higher levels of functioning in various aspects of their work. You are asked to analyse, together with the Counsellors, what is being learned in the field regarding the flow of information and the efficacy of the systems and mechanisms in place at the regional and cluster levels and determine what lines of action need to be pursued by each of your institutions. As you are aware, the administrative aides of the Counsellors have been interacting closely with institutions and agencies at the regional and cluster levels with regard to the gathering of information, and they could potentially make an important contribution to the efforts to raise capacity in this area of endeavour.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

212

The Association for Bahá'í Studies

24 July 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

212.1The Universal House of Justice has recently completed a series of consultations on the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society. It has asked that we convey to you the following reply, further to your enquiry dated 3 March 2010 regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

212.2Since its establishment in North America in 1975, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has made a valued contribution to the development of the

Bahá'í community, and gradually, a network of chapters or related structures devoted to promoting scholarly activity emerged in different parts of the world. Although the approach varied according to resources and circumstances in particular countries, the Associations addressed a range of similar issues. Among these were fostering appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, defending the Cause, encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits, attracting the interest and involvement of non-Bahá'í academics to the extent possible, and providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to collaborate with one another, thereby helping to raise capacity among those who participate within a wide range of disciplines and, particularly, in specific fields associated more directly with the study of the Faith, such as history, the study of religion, and translation.

212.3In 1996, the Bahá'í world began to focus on a prodigious effort to better understand and systematize its work of expansion and consolidation, of growth and community building. Much has been learned that has profoundly influenced the pattern of activity in which the community is engaged. The Association for Bahá'í Studies, meanwhile, continued to address certain areas that are complementary to the activities unfolding within the recent series of Plans. "There are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed," the House of Justice wrote in a message dated 27 December 2005. It is timely, then, to reflect upon the many years of experience of the Association, the coherence of its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís are engaged, and the possibilities for the most productive avenues of endeavour in the future.

212.4The House of Justice has observed that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society within clusters where the process of growth rises in intensity and at the national level, on topics selected by the National Assembly. At the same time, it noted that there are "a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations". Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

212.5Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. In this respect, it may be useful to give consideration to insights that have contributed to the community's progress:

the relationship between study and action, the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity, the challenge of fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service, the dynamics of organic development, the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity, the coherence required among all areas of endeavour, and sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions. Perhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.

212.6One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. The principle of the harmony of science and religion, faithfully upheld, will ensure that religious belief does not succumb to superstition and that scientific findings are not appropriated by materialism. The friends who seek to excel in scholarly activity will, of course, strive to live up to the high expectations set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whatever the extent of their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; they are not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect.

212.7As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer. For example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts. Special interest groups, such as philosophy or religious studies, could have gatherings to intensify their efforts. Periodic communications or follow-up meetings could be arranged to increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the

hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined. Of course, continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books.

212.8One additional point will be central to these reflections. The training institute is pivotal in the development of the capacity of veteran and new believers for active involvement in the work of expansion and consolidation. Beyond this, the institute provides the structure for an educational process with three distinct stages that will increasingly serve cohorts of individuals from age six into adulthood. In the experience offered by the institute, participants are not merely presented with information, but through study of the courses and involvement in the community-building activities in which their lessons find practical expression, they acquire knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights that enable them to effectively foster personal and social change. Yet, whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge. The upcoming youth conferences, which will draw tens of thousands of young people, are representative of swelling numbers who, shaped by the institute process at the dawning of their maturity, will set their footsteps firmly in the path of learning and action that will extend throughout their academic studies and beyond. The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

213

Passing of Amin Banani

31 July 2013

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United States

213.1It was with great sorrow that we received news of the passing of dearly loved Amin Banani, whose steadfast loyalty and dedication to the Faith will be long remembered. Whether in the pioneering or administrative fields, he served with distinction—a service that was ever characterized by humility and self-effacement. In the earliest stages of the Ten Year Crusade, he and his wife were honored by the Guardian with the title Knights of Bahá'u'lláh for pioneering in Greece. Among his many other endeavors carried out for the progress of the Cause, we recall with heartfelt admiration and gratitude his staunch and effective defense of the Faith, the signal contributions he made to the advancement of both Bahá'í and Iranian studies, and his twenty-six years of service to the institution of Huqúqu'lláh. In all respects, his was a life that exemplified unwavering devotion to the Cause and abiding

commitment to its high ideals.
213.2Our deepest condolences are extended to the members of his dear family, including his wife, Sheila, and his children. In our supplications in the Holy Shrines, we will offer prayers for the progress of his noble soul throughout the eternal realms.
The Universal House of Justice
214
Passing of Hushmand Fatheazam, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice
14 August 2013
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
214.1We have learned, with profound sadness, of the passing of our dearly cherished, greatly esteemed former colleague Hushmand Fatheazam. Tenderness of spirit, profound knowledge, noble humility, and tireless endeavour characterized his highly valued services rendered over the course of many decades, whether as a member of the Universal House of Justice for forty years beginning in 1963, as Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of India, or as an enkindled pioneer, avid proponent of teaching among the masses, and inspired author. His wholehearted and resolute defence of the community of the Greatest Name was unwavering, and his determination in the face of adversity unyielding. Gifted with a unique eloquence in Persian prose and verse, he leaves a remarkable legacy of deploying the power of that language in service to the Cause. Beyond a distinguished record of consecrated exertion in the path of the Blessed Beauty, he will also be remembered for his manifold outstanding personal qualities, for his delightful humour, and for his kindly and radiant heart that exuded an all-embracing love.
214.2We extend our deep condolences to his dear wife, Shafiqih, and to his bereaved sons and other family members and assure them of our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold that his illumined soul may reap a rich reward in the Abhá Kingdom. The friends throughout the world are called upon to hold memorial meetings in his honour, including befitting commemorative gatherings in all Houses of Worship.
The Universal House of Justice
215
Martyrdom of ‘Atá’u’lláh Ridvání
27 August 2013
Selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
215.1With deep sorrow, the Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the following information related to the martyrdom of ‘Atá’u’lláh Ridvání (Ataollah Rezvani) of Bandar Abbas, Iran, on Saturday, 24 August 2013, and to request your attention and immediate action, as outlined below.
215.2The details concerning the circumstances surrounding Mr. Ridvání’s murder are as yet relatively limited, but at this time it is understood that he was shot in the back of his head and that his body was found in his car near the railway station on the outskirts of Bandar Abbas, the city where he resided with his family. Information received thus far points to the possibility that

his assailants had forced him to drive to that location. His body was discovered following a search when he failed to return home.

215.3Mr. Ridvání's murder was clearly religiously motivated. He was well known as a Bahá'í and was loved and respected by the people of Bandar Abbas for his honesty and helpfulness. As a young man, he was expelled from his engineering studies at university because he was a Bahá'í. He nonetheless came to be regarded as an expert in water purification, and his work took him to other cities. Recently, owing to pressure and threats from agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, he was dismissed from his work and had to resort to selling water purification equipment. These agents had also been bringing pressure to bear on him to leave the city. More recently, he had begun receiving menacing telephone calls from unknown persons. It should be noted that on several occasions in the past few years, senior local clerics have attempted to incite the population through highly inflammatory sermons against the Bahá'ís of the city, who have, since the days of the Islamic Revolution, been subjected to the various forms of persecution that continue to this day to be inflicted upon the believers throughout Iran….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

216

Progress on the Construction of the Continental House of Worship for South America

26 November 2013

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

216.1We are delighted to share news of the progress on the construction of the continental House of Worship for South America rising in the foothills of the Andes in Chile. With the completion of the complex three-storey structure and underground service tunnel, for which more than 2,000 cubic metres of concrete and 190 tonnes of reinforced steel were required and which itself marked the passing of a significant milestone, the next major phase has now opened: the erection of the Temple's distinctive superstructure. Its precisely designed components—including the multitude of connecting steel parts forming the structural frame to be anchored into the mezzanine floor, the exterior envelope made of cast-glass pieces to be mounted on some 3,200 aluminium frames, and the over 8,000 robotically milled flat and curved panels of translucent stone that are to clad the Temple's interior—are being fashioned in several facilities and shipped in successive waves to Chile for assembly and installation by a small team of engineers now working on-site together with local contractors, staff, and volunteers. Discernible on the horizon from the city of Santiago is the structure's central scaffolding tower, upon which has been hoisted into prominent position the steel oculus ring that will unite eighteen arched tubular columns at the uppermost point of the edifice—this in anticipation of the day when beneath it, drawing the eye of every visitor gathered for worship, will appear the familiar contours of the Greatest Name.

216.2The continued prayers and outpouring of financial contributions from

friends everywhere labouring in service to the Cause will undoubtedly ensure the sustained momentum of this collective enterprise.

The Universal House of Justice

217

Centenary of ‘Abdu’lBahá’s Return to the Holy Land

5 December 2013

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

217.1When He arrived in the Holy Land, exactly one hundred years ago today, at the conclusion of His “epochmaking journeys” to Egypt and the West, ‘Abdu’lBahá eschewed any ceremony or fanfare just as He had at His departure. But between His going and His return, a defining period in Bahá’í history had unfolded—a “glorious chapter”, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, during which “seeds of undreamtof potentialities” had been sown, “with the hand of the Centre of the Covenant Himself”, in the “fertile fields” to the west.

217.2The accounts of ‘Abdu’lBahá’s travels and of the effect He had on those who met Him are legion. Some went to extraordinary lengths to enter His presence—going by boat, by foot, or even under railway trains—and, by the urgency of their desire to see Him, imprinted themselves on the consciousness of future generations of adults and children. The testimonies of those who were transformed by even a brief, sometimes near wordless encounter with their beloved Master remain deeply stirring. In the wide array of visitors He received—rich and poor, black and white, indigenous and émigré—the universal embrace of His Father’s Faith was unmistakably in evidence. It is impossible to adequately gauge the full scope of what ‘Abdu’lBahá accomplished within this period. Many of the seeds He planted, and which He nurtured towards maturity through an extensive correspondence that He maintained until the end of His life, would blossom into a steadfast community capable of bearing the great weight of work in the years to come, supporting the first structures of national Bahá’í administration and beginning to act on the Master’s longing that the divine teachings be brought to every city and shore.

217.3The friends have, of course, called these points to mind during this centenary period, and they have done much more besides. As we hoped, they have given their attention to the tasks before them, drawing inspiration from the Master’s potent example and timeless counsels. We have been pleased to see how, in particular, efforts to bring spiritual education to children and young people have flourished. Work to establish the institution of the Mashriqu’lAdhkár, the singular significance of which ‘Abdu’lBahá stressed so pointedly during His visit to the United States, is making progress in eight countries, whilst in every land, devotional meetings—a communal aspect of the godly life—are thriving. The Bahá’í community’s increasing engagement with the life of society, which is enabling it to offer a fresh perspective to formal and informal conversations of all kinds, carries distinct echoes of ‘Abdu’lBahá’s deep concern for the needs of the age.

In clusters where the demands created by the scale and intensity of activity

are most acutely felt, more complex schemes of coordination are emerging through a gradual and patient process of learning. In certain regions of the world where the institutions are overseeing special initiatives, an influx of eager pioneers is helping to strengthen the foundations of sustained growth and broaden the scope of what can be achieved by a community. The work of expansion and consolidation is advancing through the unflagging labours of countless devoted souls who have, in numerous ways, followed ‘Abdu’lBahá in treading the plane of sacrifice. The heightened capacity of a worldwide community to assist populations to move towards the vision conceived by Bahá’u’lláh was conspicuously evident at the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention. That same capacity was vividly illustrated in the film Frontiers of Learning and explored in detail in the document Insights from the Frontiers of Learning, which have stimulated profound reflection not only on the dynamics of growth but also on the means to treat the roots of many a social malady. And in the closing months of this threeyear period came the most spectacular demonstration of how the present generation has responded to the call of service to humankind singularly embodied in the Person of the Master: the gathering of more than eighty thousand youth in a fourmonth series of conferences held in well over a hundred farstrewn locations across the globe.
217.4Although each possessed its own unique features, all conferences shared essential attributes in common—the meticulous care that characterized the preparations, the oneness of mind that was palpable at each gathering, the energy that has surged therefrom. In the strenuous efforts they made to attend can be glimpsed the depth of commitment felt by the participants. Some laboured with great sacrifice to raise the necessary funds from meagre resources; in other cases, by explaining the noble purpose and wholesome nature of the events, the friends obtained special permission from the authorities for the arrangements. Shipping lines were persuaded to change course to collect participants, while some youth walked for days to reach a venue. Reports of the insights generated, the creativity released, the moving testimonies delivered on each occasion and, most of all, the impetus lent to acts of service are evidence that those present were touched by spiritual forces more enduring, more deeply rooted than anything that could be elicited by the thrill of fellowship and large numbers alone. It is most heartening that tens of thousands of youth, unwilling to succumb to triviality or to settle for easy conformity, have now been brought within the widening embrace of a conversation and pattern of action of farreaching consequence regarding how to live a coherent life and be an agent of spiritual and social transformation. The new levels of collaboration these conferences demanded of the institutions to mobilize and guide such large numbers and prepare the host of facilitators to assist them; the wholehearted collective effort required of the community as it threw wide open the circle of participation and witnessed the profound effect of doing so; the serious commitment evinced by the individual who, drawing on the concepts explored in the conference materials, is joining the tens of thousands occupied with reaching out to hundreds of thousands of others—these, together, have contributed to a marked rise in capacity in the three protagonists upon whom the success of the Five Year Plan depends. And

while we acknowledge that the youth are at the forefront of this advance, its distinguishing feature is that the community rose as one to support, encourage, and champion this phenomenon, and now rejoices to see itself progress as an interdependent, organic whole, readier to meet the imperatives of this day.

217.5Given all this, we have no hesitation in recognizing that what these developments reveal is an advance in the process of entry by troops of a kind not experienced heretofore.

217.6We call upon all to reflect upon the significance of the endeavour in which the community of the Greatest Name is engaged, the purpose of which the Master strove to underline so often in the course of His travels, and to rededicate themselves to contribute their share to its outcome. “Try with all your hearts”, He urged one audience, “to be willing channels for God’s Bounty. For I say unto you that He has chosen you to be His messengers of love throughout the world, to be His bearers of spiritual gifts to man, to be the means of spreading unity and concord on the earth.” “Perchance,” He remarked on another occasion, “God willing, this terrestrial world may become as a celestial mirror upon which we may behold the imprint of the traces of Divinity, and the fundamental qualities of a new creation may be reflected from the reality of love shining in human hearts.” To this end do all your efforts tend. During the second half of the Five Year Plan, the societybuilding power of the Faith must be released within thousands of clusters where programmes of growth need to be initiated, reinforced, or extended. The challenge for Bahá’í institutions and their agencies will be to furnish the means to accompany all those who cherish a pure and earnest desire for a better world, whatever their degree of involvement in the process of spiritual education so far, and help them translate that desire into the practical steps that day by day and week by week accrete to build vibrant, flourishing communities. How fitting that, at this hour, a generation of youth has come into its own, ready to assume growing responsibility, since its contribution to the work at hand will prove decisive in the months and years ahead. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we will entreat the Almighty to sustain all those who would be a part of this immense undertaking, who prefer the true prosperity of others over their own ease and leisure, and whose eyes are fixed upon ‘Abdu’lBahá for a flawless pattern of how to be; all this, that “those who walk in darkness should come into the light” and “those who are excluded should join the inner circle of the Kingdom”.

The Universal House of Justice

218

Women and Membership of the Universal House of Justice

22 December 2013

To an individual Bahá’í

Dear Bahá’í Friend,

218.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 1 August 2013, asking how to respond to a question that arose in an online forum … and that concerns the ineligibility of women for membership on the House of Justice in relation to the Bahá’í principle of the equality of men

and women. We have been directed to say that, while no one answer will satisfy every individual, the following principles should be considered.

218.2Only God, the Creator of mankind and of each human soul, knows the purpose of His creation and exactly what, at each stage of its development, is required for its fulfillment. This purpose, through His great love, is conveyed to mankind by the Divine Manifestation. As Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." The Manifestation "doeth as He willeth" in establishing His laws and ordinances in accordance with human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. To recognize Bahá'u'lláh is to have faith in His authority to make the judgments necessary to guide the progress of humanity through the course of the Dispensation.

218.3As you are aware, among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for this age is the equality of men and women—a revolutionary step forward in religious history that has set the stage for the advancement of women in every field of human endeavor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained:

Know thou, O handmaid, that in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favored, whether man or woman. How many a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 38.3)

218.4Just as this principle of equality has issued from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh, so too, the instruction that the membership of the House of Justice is confined to men is set forth in His Writings, as confirmed in the authoritative statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. While there is no explanation of the reason for this provision of the Sacred Text, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will erelong be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 38.4)

218.5Thus, Bahá'ís are presented with an apparent paradox. We do not possess an explanation that would fully satisfy a critical observer. Yet, having acknowledged Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, and having accepted the principle that "He doeth whatsoever He willeth" according to His understanding of the condition of the world and the problems facing humanity, we accept His instruction and remain assured by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise that clarity of understanding will be achieved in due course. At the same time, we cannot rest upon the explicit statements in the Bahá'í writings about the equality of men and women as being sufficient assurance to others about our allegiance to this principle. Rather, we are obligated to demonstrate our commitment through our actions and accomplishments, working to

establish equality between men and women within the Bahá'í community and in the wider society. In this regard, fair-minded individuals will find an abundance of evidence in the number of women serving in Bahá'í administrative institutions, in projects of social and economic development, and in all aspects of community life.

218.6An important point to remember is that in the face of the categorical pronouncements in Bahá'í Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership on the Universal House of Justice cannot be interpreted as evidence of the superiority of men over women. It must also be borne in mind that women are not excluded from any other institution of the Faith. They have been among the ranks of the Hands of the Cause, they serve as members of the International Teaching Centre, as Continental Counsellors, and as elected members of both National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, discharging vital responsibilities worldwide in stimulating the expansion of the Bahá'í community and fostering its spiritual life. Indeed the percentage of women serving on Bahá'í institutions often significantly exceeds their representation on institutions in the society around them.

218.7You are free to share a copy of this letter with the members of the forum. Should further questions arise, you are encouraged to turn to your National Spiritual Assembly.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

219

Promotion of the Equality of Men and Women in Society

21 January 2014

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

219.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter … in which you pose thoughtful and probing questions about the application of the principles of the oneness of mankind and the equality of men and women, as well as the promotion of the Bahá'í teachings in the wider society…. We have been asked to convey the following.

219.2Among your questions is how the roles of men and women should be defined and reinforced when applying Bahá'í principles in current and future society. In its Ridván 2012 message, the House of Justice indicated that it is not possible today to glimpse "anything but an intimation, distant and indistinct, of the future society to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is destined to give rise", and it observed that none should "suppose that the civilization towards which the divine teachings impel humankind will follow merely from adjustments to the present order." Rather, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "'among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form'". It is impossible at present to foresee how the principles of the Faith will be applied as the process of organic change unfolds under the influence of the Divine Plan. However, we may, through personal daily study and through acts of service to the Faith and to one's fellow man and by resolving questions

through prayerful reflection and sincere consultation, come to a better understanding of how to apply the teachings in our daily lives and contribute to the advancement of society—including matters pertaining to gender equality.

219.3As to your question of how the Bahá'í approach to promoting the equality of men and women differs from that taken by others, the distinction is reflected in our principles and approach. The main concern and contribution of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh is the spiritual transformation of human society, with full confidence that by this means they are making a most valuable and most fundamental contribution to the betterment of the world and the rectification of its many problems. Not only is the Bahá'í perspective unique, so too are the methods used by the believers to achieve their objectives. Unity and cooperation are important values that should be the watchwords for activities in which the believers engage. The injunction to avoid participation in political controversies, identification with political pursuits, or involvement in partisan political affairs leaves a wide range of possible activities open to Bahá'ís for participation with other groups in an effort to promote measures in accord with Bahá'í principles. The Bahá'í Faith directs its attention principally to the promotion of attitudinal change consequent to acceptance of the claim of Bahá'u'lláh, and the friends may be confident that the transformation of attitudes and values will, in due course, yield its fruit in measures that will resolve the problems with which humanity is now burdened.

219.4The Bahá'í approach to the questions you have raised is one which will be worked out over time through patient and persistent effort and by the process of learning in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. This process will be augmented by research and discussion and by attempts to correlate the teachings with modern thought, including the identification of similarities and distinctions between the teachings and contemporary social constructs. Involvement in the discourses of society by believers in various social spaces will sharpen the insights gained. Ongoing study of the teachings and systematic endeavour to translate Bahá'í principles into action by engaging in the processes of community building, education of children and youth, and social action will assist in refining our grasp of Bahá'u'lláh's intention for humanity in all areas of life. In the years ahead, the ability of the Bahá'í community to contribute to thought-shaping social change will increase, and answers to questions that appear to be unsolvable today will become apparent through a process of organic change, rather than as a result of imposing particular perspectives.

219.5In this regard, it may be helpful to reflect upon the extent and complex nature of the work that lies ahead. A particular characteristic of the modern world is the wide divergence of thoughts and extreme positions on almost any subject—a characteristic which regrettably sometimes leads to contention and even conflict. Moreover, the search for solutions can be blocked by intractable ideological positions. Discussion of the subject of the equality of men and women in the wider society is, alas, not immune from these general conditions. While this should not in itself deter Bahá'ís from entering a given

discourse, it does demand from them a greater level of detachment and a keener awareness so as not to take on the attitudes of contention that the adoption of extreme positions necessarily entails. Humility, too, is required since, for the most part, the work of correlating the Bahá'í teachings with perspectives found in the wider society has not yet been carried out in a detailed way and is still in its early stages. Thus, points of agreement and points of distinction with various strands of thought on any given theme are not yet fully explored. As Bahá'ís continue to engage in this effort, deeper levels of insight will undoubtedly emerge. And in this particular area of enquiry—the equality of men and women—as in any other area where the believers hope to participate in a discourse with other individuals and agencies that are earnestly seeking answers to the challenges facing humanity, systematic effort, patience and encouragement in allowing the expression of diverse views as a contribution to the search for truth, fair-minded and dispassionate consultation, as well as reflection on experience will be required over time so that Bahá'ís can learn and gradually become ever more effective in contributing to understanding and progress in the wider society. In this process, mistakes will inevitably be made, and the bonds of love and unity among the believers will be essential in enabling them to persevere until Bahá'u'lláh's intended aim for humanity is realized in the centuries ahead.

219.6With respect to your question about the involvement of Bahá'ís in social action and the discourses of society, it is hoped that you have had an opportunity to study the letter dated 2 March 2013 from the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran. The letter was sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies and discusses, within the context of the needs and conditions of contemporary society, the Bahá'í perspective on participation in social change while avoiding involvement in partisan political activity. If you have specific questions about your participation in public forums and engagement in social action, you are encouraged to turn to your National Assembly, as circumstances vary from country to country and place to place, and that body is in the best position to offer you guidance and advice.

219.7Passages from the compilation titled "Women", prepared by the Research Department, shed light on many of the questions you have raised. We have enclosed for your study the English translation of a letter dated 20 June 2008 written by the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran on the topic of the equality of men and women….

219.8Your desire to understand more deeply the principle of the equality of men and women and its implications is commendable, and it is hoped that your discerning reflections on the guidance offered above will enable you to contribute to the relevant public discourse both within and outside the Bahá'í community. May you be blessed and confirmed in your efforts to advance the exploration of these issues and to serve the Cause and humanity.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

220

Message to Bahá'í Youth in Iran

29 January 2014

To the Bahá’í youth in the Cradle of the Faith

220.1Almost a year has passed since we called the Bahá’í youth throughout the world to a higher recognition of the significant contribution they are to make to the regeneration of the world and the unity of its peoples, and invited them to join those in the vanguard of service to humankind. In doing so they were asked to recognize that countless other young people aspire to the same vision of unity, justice, and prosperity by which they themselves have been galvanized. To consider this critical responsibility, we encouraged them to participate together with their close friends in an unprecedented series of 114 conferences spanning the globe.

220.2The conferences were an occasion for the participants to reflect on the astonishing powers and unique capacities associated with the period of youth and to consider deeply those societal forces that exert themselves on the youth—forces that aim to distract them from significant social change, weaken their commitment to service, ensnare them in consumerism, and dissuade them from belief in their own God-given capacity and that of others. The participants considered, too, practical ways in which to counter those effects, build bonds of friendship and profound connection, promote unity, and equip themselves with the concepts needed to succeed in constructing a new world through collective endeavour.

220.3The admirable response of the Bahá’í youth and thousands of their friends offered another glimpse of the fulfilment of Bahá’u’lláh’s hope that in the heyday of life and their prime of youth souls would arise in service. By any measure—the strenuous and at times heroic efforts they made to attend, the depth of understanding and insight they attained, or the enthusiasm and determination they demonstrated to transform their world and serve their society—the initial outcome of these gatherings was extraordinary.

220.4You have certainly heard the news of these conferences and may indeed have seen the beautiful images and films from the gatherings; you may even have had the chance to study with others the concepts and themes that were the central feature of the gatherings. Undoubtedly you will derive a fresh measure of energy and zeal as you reflect on these concepts and consider the implications they hold for your lives and for your circumstances.

220.5As the valiant youth in the Cradle of the Faith, you are well aware of your mission to be a source of hope to those around you, to be channels of love and affection, to be symbols of forgiveness and patience, of serenity and strength to your compatriots, and above all, to be in the front ranks of that process by which the worldwide community has learned to build capacity for service, heighten unity, deepen understanding, and hone abilities so that purposeful action for the benefit of mankind may ensue. Through the spiritual and social transformation thus promoted, the Bahá’í world has come to realize that what is being cultivated is a process that enhances orientation to service and commitment to the application of the divine precepts—a process that holds far-reaching implications for the life of the individual and for the betterment of the world.

220.6We know, of course, the privations and limitations under which you labour. Whether in pursuing your education, earning a livelihood, working towards your legitimate aspirations, or practicing your faith, your freedoms are curtailed by many an injustice. From the very beginning the compatriots of Bahá'u'lláh have shared in the suffering He sustained. You are the embodiments of these words of the Master: "Thou didst follow in the footsteps of the Blessed Beauty and didst drink a cup from the ocean of His tribulations." But you know, too, that it is precisely your staunchness that lends such lustre to the qualities your community exhibits. You may be sure that it is not only history that tells of the courage and steadfastness of your community, but that the significance of a community that under severe and sustained oppression has remained forward looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serve its society, is not lost on those who dispassionately view your present situation. Perhaps the most compelling and clear example of your constructive resilience is evident currently in your earnest striving for knowledge, in your commitment to the loftiest values of faith and reason which the Cause inculcates, and in your perseverance in pursuit of higher education. The world can see a community that has rejected the label of victim and chosen instead to draw on the highest reservoirs of solidarity and collaboration in its resolve to advance as a living entity—that its youth might progress and attain the heights of learning and that society itself benefit therefrom.
220.7"The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day." With these words did the Ancient Beauty warn humankind about its immediate future. "Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly." You surely see how throughout the world the light of true religion is fading. Yet, you are the very examples of what illumination this light can bring. You are living proofs that religion promotes upright character, instils forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, magnanimity, high-mindedness. It prohibits harm to others and invites souls to the plane of sacrifice, that they may give of themselves for the good of others. It imparts a world-embracing vision and cleanses the heart from self-centredness and prejudice. It inspires souls to build unity, to endeavour for material and spiritual betterment for all, to see their own happiness in that of others, to advance learning and science, to be an instrument of true joy, and to revive the body of humankind. It burnishes the mirror of the soul until it reflects the qualities of the spirit with which it has been endowed. And then the power of the divine attributes is manifested in the individual and collective lives of humanity and aids the emergence of a new social order. Such is the true conception of religion set forth in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Praised be God that you are ever striving to model your lives after the sublime pattern enshrined in His Teachings.
220.8We offer supplications at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf.
The Universal House of Justice

221

Release of To Serve Humanity

8 February 2014

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

221.1One year ago, the Universal House of Justice called for the convening of conferences across the globe to give an opportunity to Bahá’í youth and their friends “to reflect, to commit, to steel themselves for a life of service”. The effect of the deliberations of the over 80,000 young people participating in those auspicious gatherings was profound and far reaching. The impressive scope and depth of the conversations greatly enhanced the commitment of these youth to bearing the responsibility of contributing to the betterment of the world and led them to identify specific ways in which they would lend their share. If the participants in the conferences are to continue to feel the impact of “earnest discussions that lift the heart and awaken the mind to the possibilities of what could be” and extend their dynamic influence to others, they must sustain their “inclusive and ever-expanding” conversations within the particular contexts of their own communities, concurrent with their continued endeavours to serve society.

221.2To assist the youth in this process, the House of Justice commissioned the production of a series of short films collectively entitled To Serve Humanity. Utilizing, in part, footage showing highlights from the conferences, the films capture the insights of participants and illustrate the unfoldment of their efforts following those gatherings. The friends may make use of To Serve Humanity in a variety of ways. Groups of youth working together could choose to view it in whole or in part, consult on the central themes presented, and discuss how they themselves are applying the concepts in their efforts to serve society. They may invite friends who were not present at the conferences, but who, like them, have the desire to contribute to the development of their communities, to join them on such occasions, which could also involve the study of selected conference materials. The institutions of the Faith may wish to organize similar gatherings as a means of supporting the youth. Of course, viewings of the films should not be limited to a certain age range, but may include members of institutions in general and those adults who continue to play a significant role in fostering an environment in which younger generations can flourish. Indeed, institute campaigns and reflection meetings would be opportune times at which the films can be shown and their content discussed in the context of current developments within a cluster.

221.3The DVD copies of this production are being sent to every National Spiritual Assembly, including one for each member of your institution. You may wish to distribute copies to Regional Bahá’í Councils, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and smaller communities; Auxiliary Board members will receive their copies through the Continental Boards of Counsellors. The films will also be available to download or view online at www.bahai.org/toserve….

221.4This series of films complements other endeavours to support the youth, foremost among which are assisting them to advance in their study of the sequence of courses of the training institute and building their capacity to offer acts of service to their community. The House of Justice hopes that the efforts initiated before the conferences to strengthen the training institute and the means for accompanying the younger generations may continue to progress with the required vitality.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
222
Universal House of Justice Website
30 March 2014
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
222.1As part of ongoing endeavours to enhance the presence of the Faith on the Web, a website with the address universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org has recently been created to act as the official source of information regarding the Universal House of Justice and to make available selected messages, such as the Ridván message, as well as other documents. The House of Justice has asked us to convey its request that you inform your community about this new site and, if you have a national website, link to it as soon as possible. In addition, links to this new site may be placed on other websites by Bahá’ís, just as they are for Bahai.org.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
223
Ridván Message 2014
Ridván 2014
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
223.1A full three years have passed since the inception of the current stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, an undertaking that binds together the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in one united spiritual endeavour. Just two years separate the friends of God from its fixed conclusion. The two essential movements which continue to propel the process of growth—the steady flow of participants through the sequence of training institute courses and the movement of clusters along a continuum of development—have both been immensely reinforced by the outpouring of energy released at the youth conferences held last year. The expanded capacity the Bahá’í world has acquired for mobilizing large numbers of young people in the field of service can now yield further fruit. For in the time that remains, the critical tasks of strengthening existing programmes of growth and beginning new ones urgently beckon. The community of the Greatest Name is well positioned, before the expiration of this period, to add to the clusters where such programmes have already emerged the two thousand that remain of the goal.
223.2How glad we are to see that this endeavour is being vigorously advanced across the far-flung regions of the globe, and in a diversity of circumstances and settings, in clusters already numbering some three thousand. Many clusters are at a point where momentum is being generated through the implementation of a few simple lines of action. In others, after successive cycles of activity, the number of individuals taking initiative within the framework of the Plan has increased and the pitch of activity intensified; as the quality of the process of spiritual education is enhanced through experience, souls are more readily attracted to participate in it. From time to time, there may be a lull

in activity or an obstacle to the way forward; searching consultation on the reasons for the impasse, combined with patience, courage, and perseverance, enables momentum to be regained. In more and more clusters, the programme of growth is increasing in scope and complexity, commensurate with the rising capacity of the Plan's three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—to create a mutually supportive environment. And we are delighted that, as anticipated, there are a growing number of clusters where a hundred or more individuals are now facilitating the engagement of a thousand or more in weaving a pattern of life, spiritual, dynamic, transformative. Underlying the process even from the start is, of course, a collective movement towards the vision of material and spiritual prosperity set forth by Him Who is the Lifegiver of the World. But when such large numbers are involved, the movement of an entire population becomes discernible.

223.3This movement is especially in evidence in those clusters where a local Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is to be established. One such, by way of example, is in Vanuatu. The friends who reside on the island of Tanna have made a supreme effort to raise consciousness of the planned House of Worship, and have already engaged no less than a third of the island's 30,000 inhabitants in an expanding conversation about its significance in a variety of ways.

The ability to sustain an elevated conversation among so many people has been refined through years of experience sharing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and extending the reach of a vibrant training institute. Junior youth groups on the island are particularly thriving, urged on by the support of village chiefs who see how the participants are spiritually empowered. Encouraged by the unity and dedication that exist among them, these young people have not only dispelled the languor of passivity in themselves but have, through various practical projects, found means to work for the betterment of their community, and as a result, those of all ages, not least their own parents, have been galvanized into constructive action. Among the believers and the wider society, the bounty of being able to turn to a Local Spiritual Assembly for guidance and for the resolution of difficult situations is being recognized, and in turn, the decisions of the Spiritual Assemblies are increasingly characterized by wisdom and sensitivity. There is much here to indicate that, when the elements of the Plan's framework for action are combined into a coherent whole, the impact on a population can be profound. And it is against the background of ongoing expansion and consolidation—the thirtieth cycle of the intensive programme of growth has recently concluded—that the friends are actively exploring, with the rest of the island's inhabitants, what it means for a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, a "collective centre for men's souls", to be raised up in their midst. With the active support of traditional leaders, Tanna islanders have offered no less than a hundred design ideas for the Temple, demonstrating the extent to which the House of Worship has captured imaginations, and opening up enthralling prospects for the influence it is set to exert on the lives lived beneath its shade.

223.4This heartening account has its counterpart in numerous advanced clusters where the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are being brought to

bear on the conditions of life in neighbourhoods and villages. In each, a people, increasingly aware of the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, is learning, through reflection on experience, consultation, and study, how to act on the truths enshrined in His Revelation, such that the widening circle of spiritual kindred is ever more closely bound together by ties of collective worship and service.

223.5In many ways, the communities that have progressed furthest are tracing an inviting path for others to follow. Yet whatever the level of activity in a cluster, it is the capacity for learning among the local friends, within a common framework, that fosters progress along the path of development. Everyone has a share in this enterprise; the contribution of each serves to enrich the whole. The most dynamic clusters are those in which, irrespective of the resources the community possesses or the number of activities being undertaken, the friends appreciate that their task is to identify what is required for progress to occur—the nascent capacity that must be nurtured, the new skill that must be acquired, the initiators of a fledgling effort who must be accompanied, the space for reflection that must be cultivated, the collective endeavour that must be coordinated—and then find creative ways in which the necessary time and resources can be made available to achieve it. The very fact that each set of circumstances presents its own challenges is enabling every community not simply to benefit from what is being learned in the rest of the Bahá'í world but also to add to that body of knowledge. Awareness of this reality frees one from the fruitless search for a rigid formula for action while still allowing the insights gleaned in diverse settings to inform the process of growth as it takes a particular shape in one's own surroundings. This entire approach is completely at odds with narrow conceptions of "success" and "failure" that breed freneticism or paralyse volition. Detachment is needed. When effort is expended wholly for the sake of God then all that occurs belongs to Him and every victory won in His Name is an occasion to celebrate His praise.

223.6So much in the Writings of our Faith describes the relationship between effort exerted and the heavenly aid vouchsafed in response: "If only ye exert the effort," is the Master's reassurance in one of His Tablets, "it is certain that these splendours will shine out, these clouds of mercy will shed down their rain, these life-giving winds will rise and blow, this sweet-smelling musk will be scattered far and wide." In our frequent visits to the Holy Shrines, we earnestly entreat the Almighty on your behalf that He may sustain and strengthen you, that your endeavours to reach out to those yet unacquainted with the divine teachings and confirm them in His Cause may be richly blessed, and that your reliance on His limitless favours may be unwavering. Never are you absent from our prayers, and never will we cease remembering in our supplications your consecrated acts of faithfulness. As we contemplate the imperatives that lie before the followers of the Blessed Beauty over the next two years, the Master's emphatic call to action is a spur to the spirit: "Tear asunder the veils, remove the obstacles, proffer the life-giving waters, and point out the path of salvation."

The Universal House of Justice

224
Restoration of the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt
Ridván 2014
To the Bahá'ís of Egypt
Dearly loved Friends,
224.1With immense happiness we extend our loving greetings to you on this long-awaited occasion: the restoration of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt after the lapse of more than a half-century. As recent events unfolded in your country, it became increasingly apparent that the informal arrangements in place over the last few decades would no longer be adequate for managing your affairs and channelling your energies towards the betterment of society. It is fitting then that a more formal structure emerge, notwithstanding that official registration cannot be contemplated. Every follower of the Greatest Name will rejoice at this re-emergence of administrative institutions in one of the most venerable Bahá'í communities in the world. We are confident that many of your compatriots who have shown their commitment to a diverse and tolerant society will share your gladness at this historic juncture.
224.2Established during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh, your community owes its origin to the arrival of two pioneers, who took up their residence in Egypt in 1868. That same year, your country was honoured beyond measure by the presence of the Ancient Beauty at its shores, when His steamer docked in Alexandria for two days before He and His company of exiles changed ship and set sail for Port Said en route to 'Akká. In your precious land, some of the Faith's earliest Arab adherents and admirers were raised and many notable believers contributed to its rapid growth. The establishment of new centres, as well as the creation of the Bahá'í agency in Alexandria founded for the purpose of the dispatch and distribution of Bahá'u'lláh's correspondence, was yet another feat of your spiritual forebears.
224.3Four decades after its inception, your community was blessed by the visits of 'Abdu'lBahá, which occurred between 1910 and 1913 and are a highlight of your brilliant legacy. During these monumental visits, the Master conversed with Egyptians from all walks of life, infusing souls with the warmth of His love and enlightening minds with values and principles essential, as much now as they were then, for the building of a peaceful and progressive society. Inspired by the example of 'Abdu'lBahá, the Egyptian Bahá'ís from their earliest days courageously upheld the divine teachings in their individual and collective lives, forming their National Spiritual Assembly in 1924, the first on the African continent and in the Arab region, at a time when there were only three other such institutions in the world. It was in your country that a verdict of a religious court, subsequently upheld by the highest ecclesiastical authorities in Cairo, declared the Faith as a new and independent religion, a declaration hailed by Shoghi Effendi as "the first historic step … on the road leading to its ultimate and world-wide recognition".
224.4Despite a history marked by periods of persecution, the valiant Egyptian

believers have withstood their manifold trials with fortitude and kept the flame of faith burning bright. We are moved to express our deep admiration for your heroism and steadfastness in the face of adversity, a testimony to the love you hold in your hearts for the Abhá Beauty. Our profound gratitude is also offered to those many friends who guided and supported your activities in the course of many critical years, and whose endeavours were fortified by the institution of the Counsellors.

224.5Notwithstanding the obstacles in your path, you continue to contribute to the betterment of modern Egyptian society, and you offer your share to the discourse concerning its future out of love for and loyalty to your homeland. These qualities were greatly in evidence in the determined dissemination of the open letter addressed to your fellow Egyptians and the profound conversations in many social spaces to which it gave rise. It is clear that your wellwishers and many like-minded souls amongst your fellow citizens have recognized the sincerity of your desire to serve humankind and that you seek nothing but advancement for your country and its true prosperity. Indeed, the people of Egypt, heirs to a great civilization, are sure to appreciate the society-building power inherent in the Teachings and the lofty spiritual values they enshrine.

224.6At this auspicious time, your priority will be to pursue those endeavours aimed at nurturing capacity for service and fostering strong and vibrant communities. May you include more and more souls in the fold of those activities at the heart of a flourishing and meaningful pattern of collective life, infused with the spirit of the Creative Word. May you seek every opportunity to involve those, particularly from the younger generations, who are longing to shed the lethargy induced by negative social forces and contribute to processes that promote the material and spiritual well-being of their people. No more beneficial service than this can be imagined.

224.7How befitting then that at this significant period in the evolution of your society and after decades spent in the absence of elected institutions, you once again have all the instruments that can aid you to fulfil your highest aspiration of service and make a constructive contribution to the development of your nation. It behooves the members of these Assemblies to approach their sacred tasks with extreme humility and self-effacement; sacrifice their own likes and dislikes as well as their personal interests; banish from their deliberations any form of prejudice; consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends; attend to the needs of young and old, families and individuals, veteran and new believers; and adopt such measures as are conducive to the progress and welfare of the community. For their part, the believers should demonstrate their love for these precious institutions, pray for their success, cooperate wholeheartedly with them, support their plans, and embrace in unity their decisions.

224.8Beloved friends: you will now have the bounty of turning to your local and national bodies for their sustaining support. Recall these words of the Master: These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is ‘Abdu’lBahá. Over them He spreadeth His wings. What bounty is there greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly

gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.

224.9Our ardent supplications at the Holy Threshold are offered on your behalf, that you may be confirmed in your noble endeavours by the invigorating breezes of the All-Merciful wafting from the Abhá Kingdom.

The Universal House of Justice

225

Destruction of the Old Bahá'í Cemetery in Shiraz

1 May 2014

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

225.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to convey to you the following information related to recent disturbing developments in the Cradle of the Faith and to request your assistance on an urgent basis as outlined below.

225.2It has been brought to the attention of the House of Justice that in the past few days excavation work has begun in the old Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, where approximately 950 Bahá'ís are buried. Among those buried in this cemetery are the ten women who were martyred in 1983. Between forty and fifty trucks have been brought on the site to accelerate the removal of the earth. It is understood that the intention is to change the usage of the land, under a law permitting this where a cemetery is more than thirty years old, and to construct a building with garden space.

225.3The 10,000 square-metre piece of land on which this Bahá'í cemetery is situated had been in the ownership of the Bahá'í community of that city since the 1920s. In 1983, the cemetery was confiscated by the authorities, and its ownership changed on several occasions until three years ago, when the Islamic Revolutionary Guards in the Province of Fárs announced itself to be the official owner. No development took place on the land until the beginning of April 2014. Since the excavation work began a few days ago, the local Bahá'ís have been requesting that, if it is absolutely necessary to change the use of the land, any construction be in the areas of the cemetery where there are no graves, and those parts where the graves are situated be turned into parkland. Numerous appeals have been made, either through the submission of letters or repeated visits, to the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, the municipality of Shiraz, the Friday-prayer Imám, the governor of the city, Iran's prosecutor general, and the head of the judiciary. All appeals, however, have gone unheeded, and to date all agencies approached have denied any responsibility for the destruction of the cemetery. In the submissions and representations made, the attention of those in authority has been drawn to the teachings in Islám pertaining to the prohibition against the destruction of graves and dishonouring the dead and to the country's Islamic Penal Code which forbids the exhumation of the body of the deceased….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

226
Regarding the Restoration of the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt
4 May 2014
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
226.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to inform you that the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt has been restored, after a lapse of more than a half-century, at a National Convention held on 2 and 3 May 2014….
226.2As you may know, the Bahá'í community in Egypt, which was established during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, which was blessed by the visits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and whose members were praised by Shoghi Effendi as "heroes on the field of servitude", first formed its National Spiritual Assembly in 1924 at a time when there were only three other such institutions in the world. As a result of restrictions and government policies, the National Assembly was dissolved in 1960 following which the community of the Greatest Name in Egypt faced periods of severe persecution that lasted for decades. Owing to the recent developments in Egypt, the situation in the country has allowed for heightened participation of the Bahá'ís in the life of their society and for greater religious freedom, which made it possible for the formation of Local Spiritual Assemblies to occur at Ridván this year. Finally, this process culminated in the joyous occasion of the election of the National Spiritual Assembly. It is a source of joy to the House of Justice to witness the re-emergence of administrative institutions in one of the most venerable Bahá'í communities in the world, notwithstanding that official registration cannot be contemplated.
226.3It is the hope of the House of Justice that the dear friends in that land will be able to contribute their full share to the spiritual revitalization of their nation.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
227
Homosexuality
9 May 2014
To an individual Bahá'í
Dear Bahá'í Friend,
227.1Your email letter dated 11 January 2014 has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey to you the following.
227.2You express concern about the challenge Bahá'ís encounter in understanding and upholding the Teachings in the face of powerful social forces influencing public attitudes towards homosexuality. In this connection, you observe that some Bahá'ís are susceptible to the argument that the Faith must change to keep up with what are perceived to be progressive social values, while some others, despite their firm adherence to the Teachings, are unable to resolve the incongruity between the Bahá'í perspective and attitudes prevailing in the wider society. Your thoughtful analysis of the issues you raise is warmly appreciated.

227.3The contemporary discussion surrounding homosexuality, which began in the West and is increasingly promoted in other parts of the world, generally takes the form of a false dichotomy, which compels one to choose between a position that is either affirming or rejecting. It is understandable that Bahá'ís would be sensitive to acts of prejudice or oppression in any form and to the needs of those who suffer as a result. But to align with either side in the public debate is to accept the premises on which it is based. Moreover, this debate occurs within the context of a rising tide of materialism and consequent reorientation of society, over more than a century, which has among its outcomes a destructive emphasis on sexuality. Various philosophies and theories have eroded precepts of right and wrong that govern personal behavior. For some, relativism reigns and individuals are to determine their own moral preferences; others dismiss the very conception of personal morality, maintaining that any standard that restrains what is considered a natural impulse is harmful to the individual and ultimately to society. Selfindulgence, in the guise of expressing one's true nature, becomes the norm, even the touchstone of healthy living. Consequently, sexuality has become a preoccupation, pervading commerce, media, the arts, and popular culture, influencing disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and education and reducing the human being to an object. It is no longer merely a part of life, but becomes the defining element of a person's identity. At its most extreme, the doctrine aggressively propagated in some societies is that it is abnormal for adolescents to restrain their sexual impulses, unreasonable for young adults to marry without first having had sexual relations, and impossible for a married couple to remain monogamous. The unbounded expression of sexuality in almost any form is thought to be natural and is accepted as a matter of course, the only limitation being to cause no harm to others, while any notion to the contrary is deemed narrow-minded or retrogressive. The question of same-sex marriage arises not simply as an appeal for fairness within a framework of existing values but as another step, presumed to be inevitable, in clearing away the vestiges of what is regarded to be a repressive traditional morality.
227.4The perspective presented in the Bahá'í writings departs sharply from the pattern of thought achieving ascendancy in many societies.
Bahá'u'lláh states that the knowledge of God is revealed through His Manifestation, Who has an innate awareness of the human condition and the social order, and Whose purpose is to set forth such precepts as will effect a profound transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humankind. "No man, however acute his perception," He affirms, "can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the human being has two natures, the spiritual or higher nature and the material or lower nature, and that the purpose of life is to gain mastery over the limitations and promptings of one's material nature and to cultivate spiritual qualities and virtues—the attributes of the soul which constitute one's true and abiding identity. Worldly desire is not the essence of a human being, but a veil that obscures it. Adherence to the Teachings of the Divine Educator refines the character and develops the potentialities with which each person is endowed; it

liberates the individual and society from lower inclinations that give rise to the ills that afflict humanity.

227.5‘Abdu’l-Bahá highlights the distinction between the two worldviews outlined above by contrasting “the political freedom of Europeans, which leaves the individual free to do whatsoever he desires as long as his action does not harm his neighbor” with the freedom “born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty.” “In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes. “Man may not transgress this law, even though no harm is inflicted on one’s neighbor. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all—others as well as oneself—and, in the sight of God, the harm done to one individual or to his neighbor is the same and is reprehensible in both cases.” Thus, for Bahá’ís, just as the development of a strong and healthy body requires adherence to sound physical practices and disciplines, so too, the refinement of character requires effort to act within the framework of moral principles delineated by the Manifestation of God.

227.6While Bahá’ís hold specific beliefs about human identity, sexuality, personal morality, and individual and social transformation, they also believe that individuals must be free to investigate truth and should not be coerced. They are, therefore, enjoined to be tolerant of those whose views differ from their own, not to judge others according to their own standards, and not to attempt to impose these standards on society. To regard a person who has a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain is entirely against the spirit of the Faith. And where occasion demands, it would be appropriate to speak out or act against unjust or oppressive measures directed towards homosexuals.

227.7The House of Justice feels it would be ill-advised to engage in discussions intended to convince those who do not accept the station of Bahá’u’lláh that their views are erroneous; such an effort would ultimately prove fruitless. Shoghi Effendi counseled the friends “to have neither concern for, nor involvement in, the controversies of politicians, the wranglings of theologians or any of the ailing social theories current amongst men.” The response of the Bahá’í community to the challenges facing humanity lies not in combating specific issues one by one but rather in making efforts to uplift the vision of their compatriots and to work with them for the betterment of the world. In their involvement in society at all levels, the friends should distinguish between those discourses associated with forces of disintegration, such as those which overemphasize sexuality, where involvement would be unproductive, and those associated with forces of integration, whose aim is unity and the collaborative resolution of social ills, to which they can constructively contribute. They should be mindful that the divisive issues of the day, diametrically opposed to the Teachings but often presented in the guise of truth or progress, exert themselves upon the Bahá’í community and can at times result in those “severe mental tests” that the writings state would “inevitably sweep over His loved ones of the West—tests that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life.”

227.8Just as Bahá’ís do not impose their views on others, they cannot relinquish their principles because of changing trends in popular thought. The

pattern of life to which they aspire, Shoghi Effendi writes, “can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age.” Bahá’u’lláh counsels not to weigh “the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men,” and “in this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed.…” To accept Bahá’u’lláh is to accept His Teachings, including those that pertain to personal morality, even if one must struggle to live up to His standard. It would be a profound contradiction for someone to profess to be a Bahá’í, yet reject, disregard, or contend with aspects of belief or practice He ordained. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh describes the twin duties “prescribed by God for His servants” to be recognition of the Manifestation and acceptance of all His ordinances. “These twin duties are inseparable,” He asserts. “Neither is acceptable without the other.” Bahá’ís consciously choose to abide by Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortations out of love for Him and assurance in the efficacy of His guidance, not out of blind obedience. “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,” Bahá’u’lláh states. “Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.” His Teachings are a safeguard for one’s true nature and purpose. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “It is essential that children be reared in the Bahá’í way, that they may find happiness both in this world and the next. If not, they shall be beset by sorrows and troubles, for human happiness is founded upon spiritual behavior.”

227.9You are, of course, well aware of the explicit Bahá’í standard. Marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and sexual relations are only permissible between husband and wife. These points are laid down in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi and are not subject to change by the Universal House of Justice. Bahá’u’lláh also prohibits certain sexual acts, including homosexual relations; if such statements are considered by some to be unclear, the unambiguous interpretations provided by Shoghi Effendi constitute a binding exposition of His intent. The Guardian’s interpretations, made in his role as the authoritative expounder, clarify the true meaning of the Text and are not derived from the scientific knowledge of the time.

227.10Bahá’ís must also be on their guard lest condemnatory attitudes stemming from the public debate take root in their communities. Backbiting and gossip, prejudice and estrangement, have no place. All recognize the need to transform themselves in accordance with Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings, all struggle in different ways to live a Bahá’í life, and there is no reason that the challenge of being attracted to persons of the same sex should be singled out and treated differently from other challenges. The Guardian made it clear that Bahá’ís with a homosexual orientation should not withdraw from the community and should receive its support and encouragement. The House of Justice sympathizes deeply with those individuals, and their families, who strive in this respect to understand and hold fast to the Teachings while buffeted by the controversy unfolding within their societies.

227.11Enclosed for your study are copies of two letters that touch on related themes. Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that you may be guided and confirmed by the blessings of the Almighty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

228

Greetings on the Occasion of the World Cup

6 June 2014

Her Excellency Ms. Dilma Rousseff, President of the Federative Republic of Brazil

Your Excellency,

228.1In response to your kind invitation, we take pleasure in sending the following message on the occasion of the opening of the 2014 World Cup.

We extend our heartfelt greetings to the people of Brazil as they welcome the representatives of so many countries to their homeland for a celebration of sporting prowess. Few occasions can claim to embrace so wide a cross-section of humanity, comprising peoples of varied ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. It is clear to every observer that the sport that has brought these nations to Brazil is only strengthened by the marvellous diversity of the participants. To rejoice in this fact is to reject prejudice in all its forms.

Truly, nothing is more striking about this extraordinary footballing spectacle than its capacity to reflect the global culture that has emerged in this age. And in summoning together the nations in friendship, it powerfully suggests that collaboration and common endeavour are possible in all things.

Humanity today is bound together in a global civilization. As the world advances in its organic evolution, let it reflect at this moment on the many qualities that the Brazilian people so admirably embody. For the path to peace will require expansive hearts, a passion for progress, unbounded creative energy, great resilience, a strength forged from diversity, and minds enlightened by the spirit of the age and inspired by the quest for justice.

The peoples of the world are as variegated flowers in one splendid garden. Is any nation more fit to demonstrate this simple but essential truth than Brazil? In the vibrant, interwoven colours of this land the world can imagine its own dazzling future possibilities.

A sporting contest, even one on such a scale as this, cannot obscure the severity of the challenges that confront humankind. But in the weeks to come, we hope that observers everywhere—especially the youth of the world—will take heart from the many examples of teamwork, fair play, valour, and earnest striving that are sure to surface in the tournament. God willing, they will aspire to show those same qualities in their lives, in service to their communities, and in the promotion of peace. Whether labouring for the elimination of every trace of racism and discrimination, championing the equality of women and men, or seeking to advance justice, the efforts of every member of the human family are necessary. Constructive change is possible everywhere. Man, woman, youth, and child—all have an essential contribution to make.

We anticipate a time when competition among the nations may be a phenomenon chiefly witnessed in the sporting arena, whereas interactions on the global stage will be dominated by cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual support. We pray that this present occasion will redound to the honour of the great nation of Brazil as hosts and that the event will inspire not only passing fellowship but lasting solidarity among all who participate and the countless millions who spectate.

The Universal House of Justice

229

Implementation of the Badí‘ Calendar

10 July 2014

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

229.1The setting of the sun on 20 March 2015 will signalize the end of the year 171, the close of the ninth Váhid of the first Kull-i-Shay’ of the Bahá’í Era. We call upon the Bahá’ís of the East and West to adopt, on that auspicious occasion, the provisions that will unite them in the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar.

229.2In keeping with the principle governing the gradual unfoldment and progressive application of the Teachings, the provisions of the Badí‘ calendar have been set forth over time. The Báb introduced the calendar and its broad pattern of periods and cycles, months and days. Bahá’u’lláh provided essential clarifications and additions. Aspects were elucidated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and arrangements for its adoption in the West were put in place at the direction of Shoghi Effendi, as described in the volumes of The Bahá’í World. Still, ambiguities surrounding some Islamic and Gregorian dates, as well as difficulties in the correlation of historical observances and astronomical events with explicit statements in the Text, left certain issues unresolved. When responding to questions concerning the calendar, both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi left these matters to the Universal House of Justice. Of its many features, three require clarification for the calendar’s uniform application: the means for the determination of Naw-Rúz, the accommodation of the lunar character of the Twin Holy Birthdays within the solar year, and the fixing of the dates of the Holy Days within the Badí‘ calendar.

229.3“The Festival of Naw-Rúz falleth on the day that the sun entereth the sign of Aries,” Bahá’u’lláh explains in His Most Holy Book, “even should this occur no more than one minute before sunset.” However, details have, until now, been left undefined. We have decided that Tihrán, the birthplace of the Abhá Beauty, will be the spot on the earth that will serve as the standard for determining, by means of astronomical computations from reliable sources, the moment of the vernal equinox in the northern hemisphere and thereby the day of Naw-Rúz for the Bahá’í world.

229.4The Festivals of the Twin Birthdays, the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh, have, in the East, been traditionally observed according to their correspondence to the first and second days of Muharram in the Islamic calendar. “These two days are accounted as one in the sight of

God", Bahá'u'lláh affirms. Yet, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states, "In the future, no doubt all of the Holy Days will follow the Solar calendar, and provisions be made as to how the Twin Festivals will be celebrated universally." How to satisfy the intrinsic lunar character of these blessed Days within the context of a solar calendar has hitherto been unanswered. We have decided that they will now be observed on the first and the second day following the occurrence of the eighth new moon after Naw-Rúz, as determined in advance by astronomical tables using Tihrán as the point of reference. This will result in the observance of the Twin Birthdays moving, year to year, within the months of Mashíyyat, 'Ilm, and Qudrat of the Badí' calendar, or from mid-October to mid-November according to the Gregorian calendar. Next year, the Birth of the Báb will occur on 10 Qudrat and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh on 11 Qudrat. With joy and eager anticipation, we look to the upcoming bicentennial anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb, in 174 and 176 B.E., respectively, which the entire Bahá'í world will celebrate according to a common calendar.

229.5The dates of the remaining Holy Days will be fixed within the solar calendar in accordance with explicit statements of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi; we have decided to set aside certain discrepancies in the historical record. The dates are: Naw-Rúz, 1 Bahá; the Festival of Ridván, 13 Jalál to 5 Jamál; the Declaration of the Báb, 8 'Azamat; the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, 13 'Azamat; the Martyrdom of the Báb, 17 Rahmat; the Day of the Covenant, 4 Qawl; and the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 6 Qawl.

229.6Unless specifically abrogated by these new provisions, previous guidance and clarifications pertaining to the calendar and the observance of the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Days remain binding, such as the beginning of the day at sunset, the suspension of work, and the hours at which certain Holy Days are commemorated. In future, a change in circumstances may well require additional measures.

229.7It will be evident from the decisions delineated that Bahá'ís of both East and West will find some elements of the calendar to be different from those to which they have been accustomed. The alignment of the dates of the Badí' calendar with other calendars will shift depending on the occurrence of Naw-Rúz. The number of days of Ayyám-i-Há will vary according to the timing of the vernal equinox in successive years; the year commencing on Naw-Rúz 172 B.E. will include four such days. A table prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre that sets out the dates for Naw-Rúz and the Twin Holy Birthdays covering half a century will be provided to all National Spiritual Assemblies in due course.

229.8The adoption of a new calendar in each dispensation is a symbol of the power of Divine Revelation to reshape human perception of material, social, and spiritual reality. Through it, sacred moments are distinguished, humanity's place in time and space reimagined, and the rhythm of life recast. Next Naw-Rúz will mark yet another historic step in the manifestation of the unity of the people of Bahá and the unfoldment of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order.

The Universal House of Justice
230
Progress in Raising Up National and Local Houses of Worship
1 August 2014
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
230.1Over two years have elapsed since our announcement at Ridván 2012 of projects to raise two national and five local Houses of Worship, to be pursued in conjunction with the construction in Santiago, Chile, of the last of the continental Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs. These undertakings, inextricably linked to the development of community life now being fostered everywhere through acts of devotion and service, are further steps in the sublime task entrusted to humanity by Bahá’u’lláh to build Houses of Worship “throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions”—centres in which souls may gather “harmoniously attuned one to another” to hear the divine verses and to offer supplications, and from which “the voices of praise may rise to the Kingdom” and the “fragrance of God” be diffused.
230.2We are deeply moved by the response in every part of the world to our call. Particularly in the nations and localities recently designated for the construction of a House of Worship, we have witnessed the friends’ spontaneous expressions of joy; their immediate and heartfelt commitment to lend their share in carrying out the critical work at hand and to increase the dynamism of those activities integral to the emergence of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár within a population; their sacrificial contributions of time, energy, and material resources, in a variety of forms; and their sustained efforts to awaken growing contingents to the vision of those edifices dedicated wholly to the remembrance of God that will be founded in their midst. Indeed, the ready response of the community of the Greatest Name augurs well for its ability to further these collective undertakings.
230.3The National Spiritual Assemblies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea as well as those of Cambodia, Colombia, India, Kenya, and Vanuatu, with the close support of the Office of Temples and Sites created at the Bahá’í World Centre in 2012, promptly moved forward with the initial preparations. A committee was formed in each country, entrusted with identifying, together with institutions and agencies at all levels of the community, means to promote widespread participation and to channel the enthusiasm engendered among the friends following the announcement of the projects. Another practical step in these national and local projects has been the selection of a suitable piece of land, one which is modest in size, strategically located, and easily accessible. Four of the seven properties are now in hand. A construction office for each project is being established to assist with the management of technical, financial, and legal issues. The work involved in the opening stage has advanced through generous contributions from the friends all over the world to the Temples Fund. Universal and sacrificial support for this Fund will ensure the steady progress of the next phases.
230.4In four countries, the projects have reached the stage of preparing a

design for the Temple edifice. This begins with the selection of potential architects and the formulation of an architectural brief defining the requirements for the structure, and it ultimately results in a contract for the final design. Architects are presented with the singular challenge of designing Temples “as perfect as is possible in the world of being” that harmonize naturally with the local culture and the daily lives of those who will gather to pray and meditate therein. The task calls for creativity and skill to combine beauty, grace, and dignity with modesty, functionality, and economy. A number of architects from near and far have gladly offered their services, and while such contributions are of course welcomed, National Assemblies are giving due regard to the value of engaging architects who are well acquainted with the area where the edifice will be built.

230.5The erection of the continental House of Worship for South America is moving towards its completion in Chile. The steel-frame superstructure has been almost entirely installed, the placement of the interior translucent stone panels is under way, and the landscaping and the construction of auxiliary facilities are progressing according to schedule. The friends in Santiago, supported by others from throughout the Americas, have been diligently striving to prepare the surrounding population for the emergence of the House of Worship; increasing numbers are participating in the community-building endeavours, and a stream of visitors are being welcomed to the Temple site for prayer and discussion on the practical and spiritual dimensions of the enterprise. Measures are currently being put in place in that country in anticipation of the many demands that are sure to arise once the Temple is inaugurated in 2016.

230.6As the friends worldwide rejoice in these heartening advances, their energies remain focused on the processes gaining strength in cluster after cluster. In this, they have not failed to appreciate the dynamic interaction between worship and endeavours to uplift the spiritual, social, and material conditions of society. May all those who are thus labouring in towns and cities, neighbourhoods and villages, derive insights from the exertions made to raise up the first two Houses of Worship at the turn of the twentieth century, in the East and then in the West.

230.7In the city of ‘Ishqábád, a devoted band of believers who settled from Persia, and who, for a time, found peace and tranquillity in Turkistán, bent their energies towards the creation of a pattern of life that would reflect the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. In a span of a few decades, this group, originally consisting of a handful of families, was joined there by others and grew to a few thousand believers. This community, fortified by ties of camaraderie and animated by unity of purpose and a spirit of faithfulness, was enabled to reach a high degree of cohesiveness and development, for which it gained renown throughout the Bahá’í world. These friends, guided by their understanding of the divine Teachings, and within the bounds of the religious freedom they were accorded, toiled to create the conditions that would lead to the founding of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, that “crowning institution in every Bahá’í community”. On a befitting tract of land in the centre of the city that had

been obtained some years before with the consent of the Blessed Beauty Himself, facilities were built for communal well-being—a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others. A sign of the notable achievements of the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád, who in those productive years became distinguished for their prosperity, magnanimity, and intellectual and cultural attainments, was their attention to ensuring that all Bahá'í children and youth were literate in a society with rampant illiteracy, especially among girls. Within such an environment of unified endeavour and progress, and fostered at every stage of development by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a magnificent House of Worship emerged—the most prominent edifice in the area. For over twenty years, the friends experienced the heavenly joy of having realized their lofty aim: the establishment of a focal point of worship, a nerve centre of community life, a place where souls gathered at daybreak for humble invocation and communion before flowing out of its doors to engage in their daily pursuits. While the forces of irreligion eventually swept through the region and thwarted hopes, the brief appearance of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád is an enduring testament to the volition and effort of a body of believers who established a rich pattern of life deriving its impetus from the power of the Creative Word.

230.8In the Western Hemisphere, shortly after work commenced on the House of Worship in 'Ishqábád, the members of the nascent Bahá'í community in North America were galvanized to demonstrate their faith and devotion by constructing a Temple of their own, and they wrote in 1903 to seek the Master's consent. From that moment, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár became inseparably intertwined with the fate of those dedicated servants of Bahá'u'lláh. While progress on this complex project was obstructed over decades by the effects of two world wars and a widespread economic depression, each stage in its development was intimately tied to the expansion of the community and the unfoldment of its administration. On the same day as the interment of the sacred remains of the Báb on Mount Carmel in March 1909, delegates gathered to establish the Bahá'í Temple Unity, a national organization whose elected Board became the nucleus of the far-flung local communities of the continent. This development soon gave rise to the formation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself laid the cornerstone of the building during His travels to North America, endowing the Mother Temple of the West with tremendous spiritual potentialities. And contributions for this historic enterprise flowed from Bahá'í centres in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific—a demonstration of the solidarity and sacrifice of the Bahá'ís of the East and West.

230.9As the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in every land centre their thoughts on God and occupy themselves each day with His remembrance, ceaselessly exerting effort in His Name, let them draw inspiration from these stirring words addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a believer who was devoted to building the first House of Worship, raised under His close and loving direction:

Hasten now to 'Ishqábád, in the utmost detachment and aflame with the fire of attraction, and convey to the friends of God ardent greetings from

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Kiss thou each one’s face and express this servant’s deep and sincere affection to all. Do thou on behalf of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá move the earth, carry the mortar, and haul the stones for the building of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár so that the rapture of this service may bring joy and gladness to the Centre of Servitude. That Mashriqu’l-Adhkár is the first visible and manifest establishment of the Lord. Therefore, it is this servant’s hope that each and every virtuous and righteous soul will sacrifice his all, evince great happiness and exultation, and rejoice in carrying the earth and mortar so that this Divine Edifice may be raised, the Cause of God may spread, and in every corner of the world the friends may arise with the utmost resolve to accomplish this great task. Were ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not imprisoned and were there not obstacles in his path, he himself would assuredly hasten to ‘Ishqábád and carry the earth for the building of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár with the utmost joy and gladness. It behoveth the friends now to arise with this intention in mind and serve in my place so that in a short time this Edifice may be revealed to all eyes, the loved ones of God may engage in making mention of the Abhá Beauty, the melodies of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár may rise at dawntide to the Concourse on high, and the songs of the nightingales of God may bring joy and ecstasy to the denizens of the All-Glorious Realm. Thus will the hearts rejoice, the souls delight in joyful tidings, and the minds be illumined. This is the highest hope of the sincere ones; this is the dearest wish of them that are nigh unto God.

The Universal House of Justice

231

Appointment of Two Continental Counsellors

22 August 2014

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

231.1For compelling personal reasons, Mr. Khumukcham Satish Meetei and Mr. Garth Pollock have asked to be relieved of their responsibilities as members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in Asia and in the Americas, respectively. We have, with much regret, assented to their requests.

Mr. Khumukcham and Mr. Pollock have earned our warm gratitude for the contributions they have made to the work of the Faith as Counsellors, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround them as they continue their valuable labours in other fields of service to the Cause.

231.2To fill the vacancies thus created, we announce the appointment of Mr. Dregpal Singh of India to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Asia and Mrs. Nwandi Ngozi Lawson of the United States to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas for the remainder of the present term.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

232

Adversaries’ Efforts to Suppress the Cause

1 October 2014

To the Bahá’ís of Iran

232.1Papua New Guinea comprises a group of islands in the vast expanse of the waters of the Pacific, far, far away from the Cradle of the Faith. We recently learned that your sacrifices have so inspired the believers in that vibrant Bahá’í community in their highly energetic response to the exigencies of the Five Year Plan that a group of them are working to make a television programme to bring to the attention of their compatriots the suffering that their deeply cherished fellow believers in Iran endure because of their adherence to the Cause. In so many ways that extraordinary region, Australasia—where, before long, four Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs will shine out as beacons of the light of divine guidance and as testaments to the magnificent response of its population to Bahá’u’lláh’s call for unity and peace—is the embodiment of this emphatic promise by the Abhá Beauty regarding His Cause: “Should they attempt to conceal its light on the continent, it will assuredly rear its head in the midmost heart of the ocean, and, raising its voice, proclaim: ‘I am the life-giver of the world!’”

232.2To be sure, there are those who wish to conceal this light—indeed to snuff it out—in the land where it was first kindled and shrink at nothing to this end. In recent months, there has been a marked increase in calumnies and lies, misinformation and untruths about the Cause. How utterly futile are their efforts! For the expenditure of energy and fortune on systematic campaigns to propagate falsehoods about your beliefs has, as you know, led to an upsurge in interest to study the Bahá’í teachings and its history.

232.3Consider for a moment the reason for the rise in this interest. It is, of course, a well-known fact that when searching for the truth of a matter, one cannot limit oneself to the study of the statements of its detractors; for an unbiased judgement, the original source must be investigated. Consider what lies and calumnies have for 1,400 years been propagated by the enemies of Islam. Is the truth of the Faith of the Prophet Muhammad to be judged by the protestations of His enemies or by immersion in and reflection on the ocean of the sacred Word revealed to Him by God?

232.4Regrettably, in your land, truth has become a flexible plaything in the hands of those who are drunk on worldly power. So institutionalized has lying become in official circles that statements made by the authorities increasingly lack any credibility. This is in sharp contrast to the way in which your compatriots are able, with growing clarity, to see and understand your posture. For the sake of upholding the truth and not uttering a simple false statement about your belief that would open up to you every social and economic opportunity, you maintain your integrity and refuse to deny or dissimulate your faith. Among your fellow citizens and on the international stage, this commitment to truthfulness has won for you high standing and immeasurable praise. Little wonder, then, that some of those who attack the Faith in the virtual space now pretend to speak in the voice of the Bahá’ís. Knowing that the words of your avowed adversaries are devoid of any credibility, these hapless antagonists attempt to sow dissension in your midst by commandeering your voice so as to use its moral authority, won by your honesty, to undermine your unity. This effort is so transparent that none take it seriously, but it

is an indication of the desperation and frustration of those who oppose you.
232.5This same deceitful attitude is in evidence in the manner in which Bahá’í youth are denied higher education. Every year a new ruse is used to deceive; this year was no exception. But the diligence with which the Bahá’í youth in Iran, despite every obstacle, continue to pursue justice and seek knowledge has again won the admiration of the people of the world and their governments. Whether in the determination and integrity of the young student who, having passed the entrance exam, demands evidence to know why she is being denied her right to higher education; whether in the heart-rending lines written by a child in defence of her sister against manifest injustice; whether in the fearless audacity and resolve evinced by the concerned father who travels hundreds of miles to set forth the truth to those in seats of power; or whether in the gestures of support and solidarity from your compatriots—in all your countless other unmarked acts of fidelity and steadfastness, as well as in acts of nobility and valour on the part of the people of Iran, a unique and instructive account is being written in deeds.
232.6Yet your actions are not confined to efforts to seek justice. Your unrelenting pursuit of knowledge is perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of constructive resilience in the modern age. In a world where education is not immune from the forces that promote a materialistic conception of human life, and where, for some, university degrees have become commoditized, your admirable pursuit of learning for its own sake, for the sake of the powers of the human mind that it enhances and the capacities for service that it develops, stands in sharp contrast. But what is all the more remarkable is that this attitude, this understanding, this value you rightfully attach to learning is not confined to a certain small section of your community. The imperative to educate is a central concern for your young and old alike; for the students, certainly, but also for those who risk their all to teach and impart knowledge, for those who organize educational endeavours, for those parents who sacrificially ensure their children are able to continue their education, for those who generously offer hospitality, for those who pray for this effort and wish it well, and for countless others who in a myriad other ways make this collective act possible. This resolute spirit and these selfless deeds deserve the highest praise.
232.7Reflect upon the destructive forces at work that are destabilizing equilibrium across the face of the globe, including the situation that prevails in your own land. Power is seized and exercised in a manner that twists or obscures the truth to serve the special interests of the few at the expense of the many. Fanaticism is unleashed in the name of religion, such that it distorts human behaviour and promotes social strife in a manner that stands in stark contrast to the spiritual qualities and social well-being which the Messengers of God sacrificed themselves to foster. Materialism dulls the human spirit, trapping that bird, which should soar in the heavens, in the mire of self-indulgence and animalistic tendencies. As human beings are buffeted by these forces, they long for truth and that which is right and become impelled to discover a way out of this morass. Inspired by the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, you stand against such negative forces, you respond to this

search for truth, and together with others of like mind you serve the process of the construction of a just and peaceful world. Praised be God that you are engaged in carrying out the admonitions of your Beloved. Continue then with confidence on your path. Challenged by self-serving power, pursue the acquisition of knowledge; in the face of fanaticism, build unity, and combat prejudices of all kinds; in response to enmity and hatred, offer love and show mercy and compassion; rather than surrendering to consumerism, live a selfless life of service and use your resources for the betterment of the world. Consort in fellowship and work with all who strive for these noble aims.

232.8This prayer of the Master describes well your state and expresses the sentiments of our hearts:

O Divine Providence! This assemblage is composed of Thy friends who are attracted to Thy beauty and are set ablaze by the fire of Thy love. Turn these souls into heavenly angels, resuscitate them through the breath of Thy Holy Spirit, grant them eloquent tongues and resolute hearts, bestow upon them heavenly power and merciful susceptibilities, cause them to become the promulgators of the oneness of mankind and the cause of love and concord in the world of humanity, so that the perilous darkness of ignorant prejudice may vanish through the light of the Sun of Truth, this dreary world may become illumined, this material realm may absorb the rays of the world of spirit, these different colours may merge into one colour and the melody of praise may rise to the kingdom of Thy sanctity.

Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent and the Almighty!

The Universal House of Justice

233

In Vitro Fertilization

28 October 2014

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

233.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 17 September 2014 in which you and your husband, …, seek guidance regarding the disposition of embryos and has asked that we reply as follows.

233.2The Bahá'í view of matters pertaining to infertility is balanced. While it appreciates the value of medical techniques that enable previously childless couples to enjoy the blessings of a family, the teachings define such limits as are necessary to preserve the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of marriage.

233.3The House of Justice does not wish to legislate at this time on the disposition of any embryos following the in vitro fertilization process. Hence, for the time being, it is left to the Bahá'í couple to decide what to do with the unused embryos.

233.4In your letter you mention the possibility of donating the embryos to another couple seeking fertility treatment. Statements made by the beloved Guardian establish the principle that, for Bahá'ís, the process of reproduction pertains to a husband and wife. Furthermore, the option you have suggested, which involves the adoption by one couple of an embryo derived from the sperm and ovum of another couple and implanted in the womb of the adoptive

mother, is very closely related to the concept of surrogacy and raises additional complex issues. As you know, the House of Justice has determined that the spiritual and social implications involved in surrogacy are too far-reaching for such procedures to be permissible for Bahá'ís. In light of this, the option of your donating the remaining embryos to another couple would not be acceptable.

233.5As you consider this matter, you may find it helpful to take into account that while the Bahá'í Writings affirm that the human soul comes into being at the time of conception, they do not clearly define the exact biological moment and nature of the event described as "conception", and this may, indeed, be a question that is insoluble by human thought or investigation since it relates to mysteries of the spiritual world and the nature of the soul itself.

233.6Be assured of the supplications of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that you may be guided and assisted by the Blessed Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

234

Posting the Bahá'í Writings on Personal Websites and Blogs

6 November 2014

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

234.1Your email letter of 9 November 2009, requesting electronic files of Bahá'í texts for use in sharing the writings online, was received by the Office of Public Information at the Bahá'í World Centre. At the time your letter was received, work had begun to introduce a significantly revised presentation of the Bahá'í Reference Library website, and consequently a reply was held in abeyance. The work has reached a point where the new site is available for viewing, and it is now timely to draw the site to your attention and to convey to you the following comments.

234.2The Universal House of Justice has been pleased to note the steady strengthening of the Bahá'í presence on the World Wide Web in recent years, and it looks forward to the continued unfoldment of this process. Whether through personal websites, blogs, public sites, or social networks, an increasing number of believers have found ways to present the Faith and its teachings and to share with others their understanding of its perspectives on a wide variety of issues, thereby enhancing the Faith's online presence.

234.3The Bahá'í Reference Library is the authoritative online source for the Bahá'í writings, and the friends may use the texts it contains in ways they feel are appropriate, bearing in mind the terms of use set forth on the site. With respect to individuals making the writings available on the Internet, this can, in itself, be a worthy endeavor, but certain cautions must be observed. First, making available a comprehensive presentation of the writings is generally the responsibility of Bahá'í institutions on official websites; whilst individuals may present some of these writings on their own sites, it would be preferable if for a complete presentation users are directed to official Bahá'í websites, including the site of the Bahá'í

Reference Library….
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
235
Purchase of Property Adjacent to the Main Terrace of the Shrine of the Báb
12 November 2014
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
235.1We are pleased to announce the news of the purchase of a major property adjacent to the main terrace of the Shrine of the Báb. The building, a three-storey stone structure just west of the Shrine, stands on over 2,600 square metres of land. Inquiries were made almost sixty years ago at the direction of the beloved Guardian regarding its purchase, but owing to limited resources the matter could not be pursued. The property was acquired at that time by the city of Haifa and served as a school until it ceased operations a few years ago. The Bahá’í world will rejoice to know that this property, so close to the sacred precincts, which the Guardian had hoped to acquire, is now in the Faith’s possession.
The Universal House of Justice
236
Table of Dates for 172–221 B.E.
11 December 2014
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
236.1Further to the message of the Universal House of Justice dated 10 July 2014 to the Bahá’ís of the world announcing the implementation of the Badí‘ calendar at Naw-Rúz 172 B.E. and the letter of the same date addressed to you on its behalf, we are pleased to send to you the enclosed document, which contains two tables prepared by an ad hoc committee at the Bahá’í World Centre. Table A sets out the Bahá’í dates for Naw-Rúz, the Twin Holy Birthdays, and Ayyám-i-Há, together with their Gregorian calendar equivalents, for the next fifty years. Table B contains the dates for other Holy Days, Feast Days, and the month of fasting. Note that during this period the Gregorian equivalent dates for Naw-Rúz are either 20 or 21 March.
236.2In its 10 July message the House of Justice indicated that the dates for Naw-Rúz and the Twin Holy Birthdays are to be determined by means of astronomical computations from reliable sources. The dates in the enclosed tables are derived from data provided by Her Majesty’s Nautical Almanac Office in the United Kingdom. The point of reference for Tihrán is taken from the World Geodetic System 1984, a recognized standard for global mapping and navigation.
236.3You may draw from this letter and its enclosure to provide information to those who prepare calendars and to respond to questions from members of your community.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

Bahá’í Dates 172 to 221 B.E.

236.4Prepared by an ad hoc committee at the Bahá’í World Centre using data provided by Her Majesty’s Nautical Almanac Office in the United Kingdom. The point of reference for Tihrán is taken from the World Geodetic System 1984.

Dates of Naw-Rúz, the Twin Holy Birthdays, and Ayyám-i-Há

Naw-Rúz
The Birth of the Báband The Birth of Bahá’u’lláh
Ayyám-i-Há
Bahá’íDates
Gregorian Equivalent
Bahá’íDates
GregorianEquivalent
Bahá’íDates
GregorianEquivalent
1 Bahá 172
21 Mar 2015
10, 11 Qudrat
13, 14 Nov 2015
1–4
26–29 Feb 2016
1 Bahá 173
20 Mar 2016
18, 19 ‘Ilm
1, 2 Nov 2016
1–4
25–28 Feb 2017
1 Bahá 174
20 Mar 2017
7, 8 ‘Ilm
21, 22 Oct 2017
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2018
1 Bahá 175
21 Mar 2018
6, 7 Qudrat
9, 10 Nov 2018
1–4
26 Feb–1 Mar 2019
1 Bahá 176
21 Mar 2019
14, 15 ‘Ilm
29, 30 Oct 2019
1–4
26–29 Feb 2020
1 Bahá 177

20 Mar 2020
4, 5 ‘Ilm
18, 19 Oct 2020
1–4
25–28 Feb 2021
1 Bahá 178
20 Mar 2021
4, 5 Qudrat
6, 7 Nov 2021
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2022
1 Bahá 179
21 Mar 2022
11, 12 ‘Ilm
26, 27 Oct 2022
1–4
26 Feb–1 Mar 2023
1 Bahá 180
21 Mar 2023
1, 2 ‘Ilm
16, 17 Oct 2023
1–4
26–29 Feb 2024
1 Bahá 181
20 Mar 2024
19 ‘Ilm, 1 Qudrat
2, 3 Nov 2024
1–4
25–28 Feb 2025
1 Bahá 182
20 Mar 2025
8, 9 ‘Ilm
22, 23 Oct 2025
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2026
1 Bahá 183
21 Mar 2026
7, 8 Qudrat
10, 11 Nov 2026
1–4
26 Feb–1 Mar 2027
1 Bahá 184
21 Mar 2027
15, 16 ‘Ilm
30, 31 Oct 2027
1–4
26–29 Feb 2028

1 Bahá 185
20 Mar 2028
5, 6 ʻIlm
19, 20 Oct 2028
1–4
25–28 Feb 2029
1 Bahá 186
20 Mar 2029
5, 6 Qudrat
7, 8 Nov 2029
1–4
25–28 Feb 2030
1 Bahá 187
20 Mar 2030
14, 15 ʻIlm
28, 29 Oct 2030
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2031
1 Bahá 188
21 Mar 2031
2, 3 ʻIlm
17, 18 Oct 2031
1–4
26–29 Feb 2032
1 Bahá 189
20 Mar 2032
2, 3 Qudrat
4, 5 Nov 2032
1–4
25–28 Feb 2033
1 Bahá 190
20 Mar 2033
10, 11 ʻIlm
24, 25 Oct 2033
1–4
25–28 Feb 2034
1 Bahá 191
20 Mar 2034
10, 11 Qudrat
12, 13 Nov 2034
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2035
1 Bahá 192
21 Mar 2035
17, 18 ʻIlm
1, 2 Nov 2035
1–4

26–29 Feb 2036
1 Bahá 193
20 Mar 2036
6, 7 ‘Ilm
20, 21 Oct 2036
1–4
25–28 Feb 2037
1 Bahá 194
20 Mar 2037
6, 7 Qudrat
8, 9 Nov 2037
1–4
25–28 Feb 2038
1 Bahá 195
20 Mar 2038
15, 16 ‘Ilm
29, 30 Oct 2038
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2039
1 Bahá 196
21 Mar 2039
4, 5 ‘Ilm
19, 20 Oct 2039
1–4
26–29 Feb 2040
1 Bahá 197
20 Mar 2040
4, 5 Qudrat
6, 7 Nov 2040
1–4
25–28 Feb 2041
1 Bahá 198
20 Mar 2041
12, 13 ‘Ilm
26, 27 Oct 2041
1–4
25–28 Feb 2042
1 Bahá 199
20 Mar 2042
1, 2 ‘Ilm
15, 16 Oct 2042
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2043
1 Bahá 200
21 Mar 2043
19 ‘Ilm, 1 Qudrat
3, 4 Nov 2043

1–4
26–29 Feb 2044
1 Bahá 201
20 Mar 2044
8, 9 ʻIlm
22, 23 Oct 2044
1–4
25–28 Feb 2045
1 Bahá 202
20 Mar 2045
8, 9 Qudrat
10, 11 Nov 2045
1–4
25–28 Feb 2046
1 Bahá 203
20 Mar 2046
16, 17 ʻIlm
30, 31 Oct 2046
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2047
1 Bahá 204
21 Mar 2047
5, 6 ʻIlm
20, 21 Oct 2047
1–4
26–29 Feb 2048
1 Bahá 205
20 Mar 2048
5, 6 Qudrat
7, 8 Nov 2048
1–4
25–28 Feb 2049
1 Bahá 206
20 Mar 2049
14, 15 ʻIlm
28, 29 Oct 2049
1–4
25–28 Feb 2050
1 Bahá 207
20 Mar 2050
3, 4 ʻIlm
17, 18 Oct 2050
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2051
1 Bahá 208
21 Mar 2051
2, 3 Qudrat

5, 6 Nov 2051
1–4
26–29 Feb 2052
1 Bahá 209
20 Mar 2052
10, 11 ‘Ilm
24, 25 Oct 2052
1–4
25–28 Feb 2053
1 Bahá 210
20 Mar 2053
9, 10 Qudrat
11, 12 Nov 2053
1–4
25–28 Feb 2054
1 Bahá 211
20 Mar 2054
18, 19 ‘Ilm
1, 2 Nov 2054
1–5
25 Feb–1 Mar 2055
1 Bahá 212
21 Mar 2055
6, 7 ‘Ilm
21, 22 Oct 2055
1–4
26–29 Feb 2056
1 Bahá 213
20 Mar 2056
6, 7 Qudrat
8, 9 Nov 2056
1–4
25–28 Feb 2057
1 Bahá 214
20 Mar 2057
15, 16 ‘Ilm
29, 30 Oct 2057
1–4
25–28 Feb 2058
1 Bahá 215
20 Mar 2058
4, 5 ‘Ilm
18, 19 Oct 2058
1–4
25–28 Feb 2059
1 Bahá 216
20 Mar 2059

4, 5 Qudrat
6, 7 Nov 2059
1–5
25–29 Feb 2060
1 Bahá 217
20 Mar 2060
11, 12 ‘Ilm
25, 26 Oct 2060
1–4
25–28 Feb 2061
1 Bahá 218
20 Mar 2061
19 Mashíyyat, 1 ‘Ilm
14, 15 Oct 2061
1–4
25–28 Feb 2062
1 Bahá 219
20 Mar 2062
19 ‘Ilm, 1 Qudrat
2, 3 Nov 2062
1–4
25–28 Feb 2063
1 Bahá 220
20 Mar 2063
9, 10 ‘Ilm
23, 24 Oct 2063
1–5
25–29 Feb 2064
1 Bahá 221
20 Mar 2064
8, 9 Qudrat
10, 11 Nov 2064
1–4
25–28 Feb 2065

Other Significant Bahá’í Dates

Bahá’í Dates
Gregorian Equivalent
Other Holy Days
In a year when NawRúz is thesame as 20 March
In a year when NawRúz is thesame as 21 March
First Day of Ridván
13 Jalál
20 April
21 April
Ninth Day of Ridván
2 Jamál

28 April
29 April
Twelfth Day of Ridván
5 Jamál
1 May
2 May
Declaration of the Báb
8 ‘Azamat
23 May
24 May
Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh
13 ‘Azamat
28 May
29 May
Martyrdom of the Báb
17 Rahmat
9 July
10 July
Day of the Covenant
4 Qawl
25 November
26 November
Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
6 Qawl
27 November
28 November
Feast Days
Bahá (Splendour)
1 Bahá
20 March
21 March
Jalál (Glory)
1 Jalál
8 April
9 April
Jamál (Beauty)
1 Jamál
27 April
28 April
‘Azamat (Grandeur)
1 ‘Azamat
16 May
17 May
Núr (Light)
1 Núr
4 June
5 June

Rahmat (Mercy)
1 Rahmat
23 June
24 June
Kalimát (Words)
1 Kalimát
12 July
13 July
Kamál (Perfection)
1 Kamál
31 July
1 August
Asmá’ (Names)
1 Asmá’
19 August
20 August
‘Izzat (Might)
1 ‘Izzat
7 September
8 September
Mashíyyat (Will)
1 Mashíyyat
26 September
27 September
‘Ilm (Knowledge)
1 ‘Ilm
15 October
16 October
Qudrat (Power)
1 Qudrat
3 November
4 November
Qawl (Speech)
1 Qawl
22 November
23 November
Masá’il (Questions)
1 Masá’il
11 December
12 December
Sharaf (Honour)
1 Sharaf
30 December
31 December
Sultán (Sovereignty)
1 Sultán
18 January

19 January
Mulk (Dominion)
1 Mulk
6 February
7 February
‘Alá’ (Loftiness)
1 ‘Alá’
(see below)
(see below)
The Fast
The month of fasting begins when AyyámiHá ends. The dates for AyyámiHá are given in Table A.
The month of ‘Alá’
1–19 ‘Alá’
***
236.5Note: The Bahá’í day ends and a new one begins at sunset; consequently, the day on
which a Feast or Holy Day is observed begins at sunset of the day before theGregorian calendar dates given above.
237
Significance of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár
18 December 2014
To the Bahá’ís in Iran
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
237.1We hope that by now you have had occasion to study the message we addressed to the Bahá’ís of the World on 1 August 2014, in which the progress of the projects to establish Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs in eight locations throughout the world is described. In every case, these dawning places of His remembrance represent the rising influence of the Faith of God in society. The Bahá’ís of Iran are of course fully conversant with the concept of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár. From the earliest days following the revelation of this law, the friends in the Cradle of the Faith became aware of its significance and committed to its realization within the limited means that their circumstances allowed them. In time, not only did they become the principal force for the construction of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in ‘Ishqábád, but within Iran too the practice of regular dawn prayers took root and inspired service to humankind, with the vision that the seed they were planting would in time flower into tangible reality, yielding its fruit not only in the construction of these centres of worship, but in the creation of dependencies for humanitarian service which that worship would inspire.
237.2And so it was that, under the guiding hand of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a pattern of communal worship—the unity it engenders and the desire to be of service that it inspires—became an integral part of many a local Bahá’í community in Iran. In this regard, the Master’s vision provided for a variety of settings and circumstances in which the concept of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár could, in its embryonic form, be expressed. Consider His words in this regard: As to the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, it is of the utmost importance.… It may

assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become a sheltering paradise, an exalted bower, and a garden of delight. It shall become a centre wherein the spirits are gladdened and the hearts attracted to the Abhá Kingdom.

Indeed, as your own experience demonstrates, a broad range of possibilities for the expression of this law and its organic unfoldment in a particular locality can be imagined.

237.3In the Bahá'í writings, the term "Mashriqu'l-Adhkár" has variously been used to designate the gathering of the believers for prayers at dawn; a structure where the divine verses are recited; the entire institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and its dependencies; and the central edifice itself, often also referred to as a "Temple" or a "House of Worship".

All these can be regarded as aspects of the gradual implementation of the law set out for humankind by Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book.

237.4The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is a unique concept in the annals of religion and symbolizes the teachings of the new Day of God. A collective centre of society to promote cordial affection, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár stands as a universal place of worship open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religious affiliation, background, ethnicity, or gender and a haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the betterment of society. Men and women, children and youth, are held in its embrace as equals. This singular and integral universality is captured in the very structure of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, whose design as a nine-sided edifice conveys a sense of completeness and perfection symbolized by that number.

237.5As the place from which spiritual forces are to radiate, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the focal point for dependencies to be raised up for the well-being of humanity and is the expression of a common will and eagerness to serve. These dependencies—centres of education and scientific learning as well as cultural and humanitarian endeavour—embody the ideals of social and spiritual progress to be achieved through the application of knowledge, and demonstrate how, when religion and science are in harmony, they elevate the station of the human being and lead to the flourishing of civilization. As your lives amply demonstrate, worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation. This concept of worship—inseparable from service—is promulgated by the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. In this connection Shoghi Effendi states:

Divorced from the social, humanitarian, educational and scientific pursuits centring around the Dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, Bahá'í worship, however exalted in its conception, however passionate in fervour, can never hope to achieve beyond the meagre and often transitory results produced by the contemplations of the ascetic or the communion of the passive worshiper. It cannot afford lasting satisfaction and benefit to the worshiper himself, much less to humanity in general, unless and until translated and transfused into that dynamic and disinterested service to the cause of humanity which it is the supreme privilege of the Dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár to

facilitate and promote.

237.6The Twin Luminaries of this resplendent age have taught us this: Prayer is the essential spiritual conversation of the soul with its Maker, direct and without intermediation. It is the spiritual food that sustains the life of the spirit. Like the morning's dew, it brings freshness to the heart and cleanses it, purifying it from attachments of the insistent self. It is a fire that burns away the veils and a light that leads to the ocean of reunion with the Almighty. On its wings does the soul soar in the heavens of God and draw closer to the divine reality. Upon its quality depends the development of the limitless capacities of the soul and the attraction of the bounties of God, but the prolongation of prayer is not desirable. The powers latent in prayer are manifested when it is motivated by the love of God, beyond any fear or favour, and free from ostentation and superstition. It is to be expressed with a sincere and pure heart conducive to contemplation and meditation so that the rational faculty can be illumined by its effects. Such prayer will transcend the limitation of words and go well beyond mere sounds. The sweetness of its melodies must gladden and uplift the heart and reinforce the penetrating power of the Word, transmuting earthly inclinations into heavenly attributes and inspiring selfless service to humankind.

237.7Little wonder, then, that your community, whose members have from infancy been reared with the constant supplication to have "pure hearts like unto a pearl", go through life and endure every manner of hardship but will not let their hearts be defiled with hatred, rancour, or vengeance lest that gleaming pearl lose its lustre. Ultimately, prayers must be lived in purposeful lives.

237.8We have called upon the Bahá'ís to see in their endeavours of community building the creation of a new pattern of how society can be. Taken in its entirety, that pattern fosters capacity for service—for the education of young generations, for the empowerment of the youth, for the spiritual education of children, for the enhancement of the capacity to draw upon the influence of the Word of God in accompanying others into the field of service, and for the social and economic advancement of a people in the light of the divine teachings for the age. Essential to that pattern is the devotional meeting—a communal aspect of the godly life and a dimension of the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár—which represents a marvellous opportunity for your community not only to worship the Almighty and seek His benedictions in your own lives, but to extend to your fellow citizens the spiritual energies of prayer, to restore for them the purity of worship, to kindle in their hearts faith in the confirmations of God, and to strengthen in them, no less than in yourselves, eagerness to serve the nation and humanity and to show constructive resilience in the path of justice.

237.9Beloved friends: Gatherings dedicated to prayer throughout your blessed land, in every neighbourhood, town, village, and hamlet, and the increasing access that your compatriots are gaining to Bahá'í prayers are enabling your community to shine the light of unity in the assemblage of humanity, lending a share to the endeavours of your fellow believers throughout the world. Plant, then, the seeds of future Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs for the benefit of all, and ignite countless beacons of light against the gloom of hatred and

inequity.
The Universal House of Justice
238
New Bahai.org Website
20 January 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
238.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to write to you concerning the new version of the Bahai.org website. This site was available for preview while final adjustments were taking place. The preview stage has now ended and the site has been officially launched. As will be apparent when visiting the site, its content is organized into three parts—"What Bahá'ís Believe", "What Bahá'ís Do", and a significantly revised presentation of the Bahá'í Reference Library.
238.2You are welcome to share this information with the friends in your community.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
239
Revised Translation of Some Answered Questions
12 March 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
239.1The Universal House of Justice is pleased to announce the publication of the newly revised translation of Some Answered Questions and to present your National Spiritual Assembly with a complimentary copy.
239.2Over the years following the initial publication, in 1908, of this greatly treasured volume that records the explanations given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in response to questions posed by Laura Clifford Barney during her visits to the Holy Land in 1904–1906, it became evident that the English translation was in need of a thorough revision—one which would more adequately reflect the meaning and style of the original, convey clearly the subtleties of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations, and render consistently the philosophical terms used in the text. The present volume is the fruit of efforts to realize those aims.
239.3The publication of Some Answered Questions marks the beginning of an acceleration in the pace of the programme for the translation and publication of the Holy Writings at the Bahá'í World Centre. Work is already well advanced on a volume of extracts pertaining to Bahá'í Holy Days as well as a retranslation of the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, and it is anticipated that in the course of the next Plan further volumes will be produced….
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
240
Ridván Message 2015
Ridván 2015

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

240.1The resplendent season of Ridván is at hand, and from the heights to which the community of the Greatest Name has attained, bright prospects are visible on the horizon. A vast terrain has been traversed: new programmes of growth have appeared, and while hundreds more must still emerge in the next twelve months, efforts to set in motion the necessary pattern of activity have already begun in almost every one of the clusters required to reach the 5,000 called for in the Five Year Plan. Existing programmes are gaining in strength, many showing more clearly what it means for the Cause of God to extend further into the social landscape across a cluster and within a neighbourhood or village. The paths that lead to sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation are being followed with firmer footsteps, valiant youth often setting the pace. Ways in which the society-building power of the Faith can find release in various settings are becoming more apparent, and those defining features that must come to mark the further unfoldment of the growth process in a cluster are becoming gradually discernible.

240.2The call to carry out and support this work is directed to every follower of Bahá’u’lláh, and it will evoke a response in every heart that aches at the wretched condition of the world, the lamentable circumstances from which so many people are unable to gain relief. For, ultimately, it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan’s framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society. Over the last year, it has become clearer still that, in different nations in different ways, the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people is increasingly worn and spent. It can no longer offer a reliable defence against a variety of self-serving, intolerant, and toxic ideologies that feed upon discontent and resentment. With a conflicted world appearing every day less sure of itself, the proponents of these destructive doctrines grow bold and brazen. We recall the unequivocal verdict from the Supreme Pen: “They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light.” Well-meaning leaders of nations and people of goodwill are left struggling to repair the fractures evident in society and powerless to prevent their spread. The effects of all this are not only to be seen in outright conflict or a collapse in order. In the distrust that pits neighbour against neighbour and severs family ties, in the antagonism of so much of what passes for social discourse, in the casualness with which appeals to ignoble human motivations are used to win power and pile up riches—in all these lie unmistakable signs that the moral force which sustains society has become gravely depleted.

240.3Yet there is reassurance in the knowledge that, amidst the disintegration, a new kind of collective life is taking shape which gives practical expression to all that is heavenly in human beings. We have observed how, especially in those places where intensity in teaching and community-building activities has been maintained, the friends have been able to guard themselves against the forces of materialism that risk sapping their precious energies. Not only that, but in managing the various other calls upon their time, they never lose sight

of the sacred and pressing tasks before them. Such attentiveness to the needs of the Faith and to humanity's best interests is required in every community. Where a programme of growth has been established in a previously unopened cluster, we see how the initial stirrings of activity arise out of the love for Bahá'u'lláh held in the heart of a committed believer. Notwithstanding the orders of complexity that must eventually be accommodated as a community grows in size, all activity begins with this simple strand of love. It is the vital thread from which is woven a pattern of patient and concentrated effort, cycle after cycle, to introduce children, youth, and adults to spiritual ideas; to foster a feeling for worship through gatherings for prayer and devotion; to stimulate conversations that illuminate understanding; to start ever-growing numbers on a lifetime of study of the Creative Word and its translation into deeds; to develop, along with others, capacity for service; and to accompany one another in the exercise of what has been learned. Beloved friends, loved ones of the Abhá Beauty: We pray for you in earnest on every occasion we present ourselves at His Holy Threshold, that your love for Him may give you the strength to consecrate your lives to His Cause.

240.4The rich insights arising from clusters, and from centres of intense activity within them, where the dynamics of community life have embraced large numbers of people deserve special mention. We are gratified to see how a culture of mutual support, founded on fellowship and humble service, has quite naturally established itself in such quarters, enabling more and more souls to be systematically brought within the pale of the community's activities. Indeed, in an increasing number of settings the movement of a population towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision for a new society appears no longer merely as an enthralling prospect but as an emerging reality.

240.5We wish to address some additional words to those of you in whose surroundings marked progress is yet to occur and who long for change. Have hope. It will not always be so. Is not the history of our Faith filled with accounts of inauspicious beginnings but marvellous results? How many times have the deeds of a few believers—young or old—or of a single family, or even of a lone soul, when confirmed by the power of divine assistance, succeeded in cultivating vibrant communities in seemingly inhospitable climes? Do not imagine that your own case is inherently any different. Change in a cluster, be it swift or hard won, flows neither from a formulaic approach nor from random activity; it proceeds to the rhythm of action, reflection, and consultation, and is propelled by plans that are the fruit of experience. Beyond this, and whatever its immediate effects, service to the Beloved is, in itself, a source of abiding joy to the spirit. Take heart, too, from the example of your spiritual kin in the Cradle of the Faith, how their constructive outlook, their resilience as a community, and their steadfastness in promoting the Divine Word are bringing about change in their society at the level of thought and deed. God is with you, with each of you. In the twelve months that remain of the Plan, let every community advance from its present position to a stronger one.

240.6The all-important work of expansion and consolidation lays a solid foundation for the endeavours the Bahá'í world is being called to undertake in numerous other spheres. At the Bahá'í World Centre, efforts are

intensifying to methodically catalogue and index the content of the thousands of Tablets which constitute that infinitely precious bequest, the Holy Texts of our Faith, held in trust for the benefit of all humankind—this, so as to accelerate the publication of volumes of the Writings, both in their original languages and in English translation. Endeavours to establish eight Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, sacred Fanes raised up to the glory of God, continue apace. External affairs work at the national level has gained markedly in effectiveness and become increasingly systematic, further stimulated by the release of a document, sent to National Spiritual Assemblies six months ago, which draws on the considerable experience generated over the last two decades and provides an expanded framework for developing these endeavours in the future. Meanwhile, two new Offices of the Bahá'í International Community, sisters to its United Nations Office based in New York and Geneva and to its Office in Brussels, have been opened in Addis Ababa and Jakarta, broadening the opportunities for the perspectives of the Cause to be offered at the international level in Africa and Southeast Asia. Often prompted by the demands of growth, a range of National Assemblies are building up their administrative capacity, visible in their thoughtful stewardship of the resources available to them, their efforts to become intimately familiar with the conditions of their communities, and their vigilance in ensuring that the operations of their National Offices grow ever stronger; the need to systematize the impressive body of knowledge now accumulating in this area has led to the creation at the World Centre of the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems. Initiatives for social action of various kinds continue to multiply in many countries, enabling much to be learned about how the wisdom enshrined in the Teachings can be applied to improve social and economic circumstances; so promising is this field that we have established a seven-member International Advisory Board to the Office of Social and Economic Development, introducing the next stage in the evolution of that Office. Three members of the Board will also serve as the Office's coordinating team and be resident in the Holy Land.

240.7At this Ridván, then, while we see much to be done, we see many ready to do it. In thousands of clusters, neighbourhoods, and villages, fresh springs of faith and assurance are pouring forth, cheering the spirits of those touched by their reviving waters. In places, the flow is a steady stream, in some, already a river. Now is not the moment for any soul to linger upon the bank—let all lend themselves to the onward surge.

The Universal House of Justice

241

Dust from the Shrine of the Báb Placed in the Chile Temple

29 April 2015

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

241.1The swiftly advancing construction work of the last continental House of Worship paused today as the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile, together with a handful of believers, assembled to mark a moment of significant symbolism. Having been hand carried from the Holy Land to Santiago,

a small ornamental silver case containing dust lovingly collected decades earlier from the sacred space of the inner Shrine of the Báb by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum was ceremoniously set within a cavity at the heart of the wooden carving of the Greatest Name designed to adorn the apex of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. This bold yet graceful calligraphic piece, crafted by a local artisan from the timber of the roble pellín tree native to Chile, is now
raised into its permanent position twenty-nine metres above ground, framed against the sky, at the perfect centre of the Temple.
The Universal House of Justice
242
Translation of the Foreword to Some Answered Questions
3 July 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
242.1We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to inform you that in translations that are made, under your supervision, of the newly released edition of Some Answered Questions, the Foreword should be translated without any change to the wording and should be titled (in the language into which it is being translated) "Foreword to the English Edition". If it is necessary to include additional, specific information about the translation itself, such information should be placed in a brief, separate prefatory section. This guidance applies in general to all translations that are made of works released by the Bahá'í World Centre.
Department of the Secretariat
243
Three Tablets from Days of Remembrance
6 July 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
243.1This November will witness the first universal observance of the Twin Holy Birthdays of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh according to the
Badí' calendar. In anticipation of this special occasion, the Universal House of Justice is pleased to present you with three Tablets from the forthcoming volume Days of Remembrance, a collection of Writings from the Supreme Pen revealed specifically for, or which otherwise pertain to, nine Holy Days, to be published in English translation. As it is expected that the book will only be available after mid-2016, to assist the friends in their preparations for this year's historic commemoration of the Twin Birthdays the House of Justice has asked that one Tablet concerning the Birth of the Báb and two concerning the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh be sent to you in advance, so that arrangements can be made for their translation into various languages. French, Russian, and Spanish translations will be sent to the relevant National Spiritual Assemblies in due course.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
244
Department of Library and Archives

15 July 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
244.1We have been asked to inform you that the Archives Office, Audio-Visual Department, Conservation Office, and the Bahá’í World Centre Library have now been amalgamated into one department to be known as the Department of Library and Archives. While these entities have operated as separate departments for many years, they have a range of common processes, such as preservation, cataloguing, and storage, which have been consolidated to provide a more efficient and coherent approach to work in each of the respective areas. As such, matters that would formerly have been addressed from your National Assembly to these entities as separate departments may now be addressed to the single department.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
245
Passing of Suheil Bushrui
3 September 2015
To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States
245.1We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of dearly loved and highly esteemed Suheil Bushrui, whose many decades of tireless service to the Cause of God and to humanity evoke profound appreciation. His widely acclaimed scholarly contributions to Arabic and English literature were animated by a lifelong yearning—inspired by the Bahá’í ideals of the oneness of humanity and religious truth—to introduce the rich literary, cultural and spiritual heritage of East and West to each other and to disclose the universality of the human spirit underlying them. Above all else, what distinguished his extraordinary record of academic and other accomplishments was the radiance of a sterling character illumined by attributes of the soul that call to mind ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s depiction of the learned as those “versed in the secrets of divine wisdom and informed of the inner realities of the sacred Books; who wear in their hearts the jewel of the fear of God, and whose luminous faces shine with the lights of salvation”. Kindly convey our loving, heartfelt sympathy to his beloved Mary, their daughter Nadia and other family members and assure them of our ardent supplications for the progress of his soul throughout the worlds of God.
245.2In recognition of a life lived in utter consecration to unity and peace, we are calling for memorial gatherings to be held in his honor in the Arab region.
The Universal House of Justice
246
Observance of the Twin Holy Birthdays
8 September 2015
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
246.1Soon the entire Bahá’í world will, for the first time, commemorate the Birthdays of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb on two consecutive days—which

this year occur on 10 and 11 Qudrat 172, corresponding to 13 and 14 November 2015 in the Gregorian calendar—in accordance with the provisions for the implementation of the Badí‘ calendar. “These two days are accounted as one in the sight of God”, the Abhá Beauty states in the Most Holy Book. On each of these blessed Days nearly two centuries ago, the whole world was illumined with the light of a new Manifestation of God. The friends should regard the Twin Festivals as a sacred moment to gather and strengthen the devotional and social life of the community and as a priceless opportunity to reach out to friends, family, and the wider society and share with them the significance of the lives and missions of these two most precious Beings.

246.2In light of questions raised by some National Spiritual Assemblies and individual believers concerning how the Twin Holy Birthdays should be observed, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to inform you that the beloved Guardian, in a letter written on his behalf to a National Assembly, advised that refraining from work and gathering for observances are required on both days. Any additional questions that arise in this regard may be referred in the first instance to the Local Spiritual Assembly and, if necessary, to the National Assembly.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

247

Promoting the Faith on the Internet

9 October 2015

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

247.1… As you know, technological advancement is integral to the emergence of a global civilization. Indeed, the Internet is a manifestation of a development anticipated by the Guardian when, in describing the characteristics of a unified humanity, he foresaw that a “mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.” Yet, learning to utilize the Internet in a manner conducive to material and spiritual progress is an immense challenge.

247.2The Internet makes it possible for Bahá’í and Bahá’í-inspired content to become accessible to a wide audience. In this connection, the House of Justice has encouraged the strengthening of the official Bahá’í presence on the World Wide Web, and it has been pleased to see the many advances made, especially in recent years, and looks forward to the further unfoldment of this process. Beyond that, many believers around the world, each according to his or her circumstances and in coherence with other endeavours of the community, use the Internet as a medium for promoting Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order, and it is natural for the friends to explore different ways to do so. However, given that the Internet allows for the instantaneous dissemination of content among growing multitudes, wisdom and self-discipline are required lest the significance or dignity of the Teachings become compromised by an unbecoming, inaccurate, or trivialized presentation.

247.3A related consideration is that the institutions of the Faith are charged with the responsibility for creating and maintaining official sources of information about the Faith, such as national and international websites, regularly assessing the presentation of the Faith on the World Wide Web and providing the necessary guidance to individuals. The friends are generally free to determine what aspects of the Teachings they wish to touch upon in their contributions but in doing so should clearly distinguish their sites from those created by the institutions. This can be accomplished through a variety of means, including the name, description, or design of a site. While in the past the friends have at times been encouraged to refrain from using the word "Bahá'í", or forms of it, in the name of their websites, experience has demonstrated that this may not always be necessary if other aspects of the site unmistakably identify it as an individual initiative. In addition, individuals will no doubt wish to avoid a tone that could be perceived as authoritative or instructional. They will also want to steer away from areas that lie exclusively within the sphere of institutional responsibility, such as offering a comprehensive collection of the writings and of the messages of the House of Justice or an exhaustive calendar of Bahá'í events across many countries. This becomes particularly significant when the visibility of a website increases and it gains prominence. As the institutions guide the friends in adopting the proper posture, the aim is not to unduly restrict their efforts but to avoid confusion and misinformation.

247.4Notwithstanding that a site may, of course, be accessed from any part of the world, a Bahá'í who seeks to establish a personal site should determine what would be an appropriate audience to address and the scope of subjects to be covered. For example, while it may be beneficial to reflect on the nature and form of the core activities, especially in the context of the experience of a cluster or region, certain problems arise in attempting to create a site that aims to speak to Bahá'ís worldwide about the subject. Such an approach could lead to the cultural norms and values of a particular population being promoted to a universal audience—a pattern all too prevalent in the world today. There is also the danger of exerting an unintended influence on the process of learning unfolding at the grassroots, where individuals, communities, and institutions are acting as protagonists of their own growth and development. The perspectives offered in the following extract from the message dated 12 December 2011 from the House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies—although in the specific context of artistic endeavours and supplementary educational materials—are especially relevant to aspects of culture mentioned above:

Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from

every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works…. We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted.

247.5An overarching principle which should guide the efforts of the friends in their communications on the Internet pertains to the use of language. Bahá'u'lláh refers to human utterance as "an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation", and He enjoins His followers to "speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility." The House of Justice in its letter dated 29 December 1988 to the Bahá'ís in the United States observed: "Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences." With this in mind, Bahá'ís should embody moderation, courtesy, and humility in any discussion in which they take part—whether in person or online. They should recognize and transcend negative habits of thought and expression absorbed from society, often unconsciously, and be on their guard lest they acquire the tendency to reduce the Faith or the processes of the Divine Plan into a simplistic or prescriptive set of points or steps, often conveyed in an unjustifiably authoritative or irreverent tone, or presume to speak with a voice that appears more representative than it can ever be.

In this regard, those managing various sites will need to give thought to their own underlying attitudes that may be conveyed through content and manner of expression. In striving for such heightened consciousness, questions to be reflected upon may, for instance, include: How will they avoid the unthinking adoption of fads prevalent online that may undermine their purpose? Is the type of humour employed appropriate? How will the content be perceived by someone who is not familiar with the Faith? As they aspire to achieve the Bahá'í standard, the friends should endeavour to rise above, rather than emulate, widely employed techniques of persuasion and sensationalism, which are often reductive or crass, and must always remain conscious that they are striving for "an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race".

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

248

Appointment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

27 October 2015

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

248.1The Day of the Covenant, 26 November 2015, marks the opening of a new five-year term of service for the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection
and Propagation of the Faith. It is with great joy that we announce the names of the Counsellors appointed for the coming term, whose number remains at eighty-one.

AFRICA (18 Counsellors): Mélanie Bangala, Mariama Ousmane Djaouga, Alain Pierre Djoulde, Clément Thyrell Feizouré, Agatha Gaisie-Nketsiah, Maty Issoufou, Musonda Kapusa-Linsel (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Townshend Lihanda, Sehla Masunda, Maina Mkandawire, Judicaël Mokolé, Aggrey Zeyazi Munubi, Albert Nshisu Nsunga, Ahmad Parsa, Iharinirina Rakotomavo, Nancy Oloro Robarts, Christopher Kiprotich Songok, Djamila Tchakréo

THE AMERICAS (19 Counsellors): José Luis Almeida, Ronny Brenes (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Beatriz Carmona, Brígida Carrillo, Ingrid Umpierre Conter, Daniel Duhart, Farah Guchani-Rosenberg, Sonlla Heern, Nwandi Ngozi Lawson, Borna Noureddin, Arthur Powell, Carmen Elisa de Sadeghian, Pejman Samoori, Bernardino Sánchez, Navid Serrano, Mark Sisson, Raúl Taboada, Shabnam Tashakour, Holly Woodard

ASIA (22 Counsellors): Jamil Aliyev, Vugar Alizadeh, Walid Ayyash, Jabbar Eidelkhani, Shareen Farhad, Nadera Fikri, Kam Mui Sayers Fok, Gloria Javid, Lee Lee Loh Ludher, Tarrant Matthew Mahony, Nibras Sarmad Moqbel, Delafruz Nassimova, Myint Zaw Oo, Sokuntheary Reth, Foad Reyhani (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Hesham Saad, Rajan Sawant, Omid Seioshanseian, Dregpal Singh, Zebinisso Soliyeva, Ircham Sujadmiko, Fang Jung Tseng Chung

AUSTRALASIA (10 Counsellors): Ritia Kamauti Bakineti, Nadia Fifita, Kirk Johnson, Dinesh Kumar-Mills, Jalal Rodney Mills, Taraz Nadarajah, Daniel Pierce, Kessia Ruh, Tessa Scrine (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Henry Tamashiro

EUROPE (12 Counsellors): Naisan Azimi, Raffaella Capozzi Gubinelli, Olga Daradur, Aiste Elijio, Shirin Fozdar-Foroudi, Zoraida García Garro, Bernard Lo Cascio (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Sabà Mazza, Yevgeniya Poluektova, Mehdi Rezvan, Amir Saberin, Paul Verheij

248.2The following believers, who have earned our abiding gratitude for their self-sacrificing contributions to the progress of the Cause, are being relieved of the duties of membership on the Boards of Counsellors:

Selam Ahderom, Sohayla Asari, Enkhdelger Banzragch, Soheyla Bolouri, Uta von Both, Ann Boyles, Maziar Djoneidi, Bijan Farid, Amina Jaouane, Saba Khabirpour, Ana Hilda de Lemus, Katalayi Mbombo, Firouzeh Moghbel-Naderi, Zowé Tiba Nganyadé, Lori McLaughlin Noguchi, Helen Otia, U’ileiuluwehi Pimental, Khursheda Porsayeva, Ganesh Ramsahai, Leticia Iturburo Rivadeneira, Daniel Scott, George Soraya, Alan Wilcox, Anita Vandella Williams, Tiati à Zock

248.3We are confident that these dear friends will remain a source of inspiration and strength to the believers as they continue their dedicated efforts for the advancement of the Faith in the coming years. We shall offer supplications at the Sacred Threshold on their behalf, that divine blessings may surround their every endeavour in the path of service to Bahá’u’lláh.

248.4The series of Plans that have been launched since 1996 have focused the Bahá’í world on a single aim—advancing the process of entry by troops. The great strides that have been made during the current Five Year Plan have fully prepared the community of the Greatest Name for the final thrust in the span of years that will culminate in the centenary of the Formative Age. We are calling the Counsellors from all continents to the Bahá’í World Centre for a conference from 29 December 2015 to 2 January 2016, during which deliberations will be held on the exigencies of the next Five Year Plan—which will unfold during a period of time pregnant with rich possibilities—and on the decisive role the Counsellors are to play, together with their auxiliaries, in the critical months leading up to its launch and in the years that follow.

248.5We will offer fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that the consecrated exertions of these eighty-one souls may be guided and confirmed by the boundless grace and abundant favours of the Abhá Beauty.

The Universal House of Justice

249

Announcement of the Dedication of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in Chile

8 November 2015

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

249.1We joyfully announce the forthcoming dedication of the last of the continental Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs, to be held, in conjunction with a brief conference, in Santiago, Chile, from 13 to 16 October 2016. Ms. Alison Milston, member of the International Teaching Centre, will represent the Universal House of Justice on this occasion, joining the company of the friends from throughout Latin America and diverse regions of the world.

249.2Details concerning the inaugural events and the registration of participants will be provided by the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile.

The Universal House of Justice

250

The Five Year Plan, 2016–2021

29 December 2015

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

250.1The Plan upon which the Bahá’í world embarked nearly five years ago is in its closing stages; the final tally of its accomplishments grows still, but will soon be sealed. The collective effort it inspired has called for wholehearted reliance on those powers with which a benevolent Lord has endowed His loved ones. Gathered with you at this moment of reflection, we are conscious of a determination among the friends to bring the current Plan to a fitting conclusion, and of an eagerness to advance further along the path that experience has marked out.

250.2The considerable distance already travelled along that path is evident from the present Plan’s most striking outcomes. The ambitious goal of raising to 5,000 the number of clusters where a programme of growth, at whatever level of intensity, is under way looks set to be achieved in the months that remain before Ridván 2016. In many scores of clusters, there are over a thousand

inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—taking part in a well-established pattern of activity that embraces ever-larger numbers, raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Worldwide, half a million individuals have now been enabled to complete at least the first book in the sequence of courses, an extraordinary feat that has laid a sure foundation for the system of human resource development. A generation of youth is being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world. Marvelling at what they have seen, leaders of society in certain places are pressing the Bahá'ís to make their programmes for educating the young widely available. Faced with increasing complexity, Bahá'í institutions and their agencies are finding ways to organize the activities of rising numbers of friends by promoting collaboration and mutual support. And the capacity for learning, which represented such a priceless legacy of previous Plans, is being extended beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass other areas of Bahá'í endeavour, notably social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. We see a community fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unremitting effort focused on a common aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

250.3That this process must go much further, there can be no doubt; nevertheless, developments demonstrate that a significant advance has already occurred. It has prepared the friends of God for a more exacting test of their capabilities, one that will also make great demands of your institution as you rally them to meet its requirements. In this coming Plan, which will conclude at the threshold of the second century of the Formative Age of the Faith, we will call the believers everywhere to the immense exertion necessary to bring to fruition the seeds that have been so lovingly and assiduously sown and watered in the five Plans that preceded it.

The emergence of a programme of growth

250.4The unfoldment of the process of growth in a cluster, while naturally possessing unique features in every instance shaped by the receptivity of those who are exposed to the divine teachings, conforms to certain shared characteristics. Many of these were discussed in our message to your 2010 conference, in which reference was made to a series of milestones that mark progress along a path of development. A collective understanding of what is required for the friends in a cluster to pass the first of the milestones we described, and then the second, has grown over this period.

250.5In the Five Year Plan now ending, the task facing the believers has been to apply all that had been learned from previous Plans to the work of extending the process of growth to thousands of new clusters. What this has shown is that much depends on the ability of the institutions to draw on help from friends in other clusters, reinforcing the actions of an existing Bahá'í community by, for example, arranging the support of visiting teaching teams or tutors. In many places, the institute process begins with the assistance of believers from stronger neighbouring communities who find creative ways of reaching out to the local population, youth in particular, and supporting them as they start to

engage in service. Efforts to stimulate activity in a cluster, especially one that has not yet been opened to the Faith, are greatly enhanced if one or more individuals settle there as homefront pioneers, concentrating their attention on part of a village or even a single street where there is heightened receptivity. Well over 4,500 believers have already arisen to serve in this way during the present Plan, an astonishing accomplishment.

250.6Whatever the combination of strategies used, the chief aim is to initiate a process for building capacity within the cluster through which its inhabitants, prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, are enabled to begin offering acts of service. Once this fundamental requirement is met, a programme of growth has emerged. Essential, of course, is the support of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, whose close involvement from the first stirrings of activity helps the friends to maintain a clear and united vision of what is needed.

Strengthening the pattern of action

250.7Before long, there forms a nucleus of friends in a cluster who are working and consulting together and arranging activities. For the process of growth to advance further, the number of people sharing this commitment must rise, and their capacity for undertaking systematic action within the framework of the Plan must correspondingly increase. And similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place.

250.8Foremost among these conditions is an institute process gaining in strength, given its centrality to fostering the movement of populations. The friends who have begun studying institute materials, and are also investing their energies in organizing children’s classes, junior youth groups, gatherings for collective worship, or other related activities, are being assisted to proceed further through the sequence of courses, while the number of those starting their study continues to rise. With the flow of participants through institute courses and into the field of action being maintained, the company of those who are sustaining the growth process expands. Progress relies to a large extent on the quality of the efforts of those serving as tutors. At this early stage, most of them might still be drawn from other clusters, but at the same time, a few local friends are being raised up who, as their capacity for action increases, begin to help others study the materials of the institute. Efforts to usher in the first cadre of tutors from the cluster should steer a path between two undesirable outcomes. If individuals proceed through the courses of the institute too hastily, the capacity to serve is not sufficiently developed; conversely, if study is overly prolonged, the process is robbed of the dynamism essential to its advancement. In differing circumstances, creative solutions have been used to achieve the necessary balance, ensuring that, within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors.

250.9Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with some experience increases

consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time.
Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path.
250.10Where the institute is concerned, the flow of participants through its courses creates a growing need for them to be systematically supported as they begin serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors. Opportunities naturally arise for those among the core of believers who have already gained a measure of experience in the educational activities to assist those who are newer to them. An individual's readiness to help others move forward in their efforts to serve might lead to specific responsibilities being assigned to him or her. In this manner, coordinators of each of the three stages of the educational process gradually emerge as needs demand. Their actions are always motivated by a desire to see capacity develop in others and to foster friendships founded on cooperation and reciprocity.
250.11Clearly, the institute process raises capacity for a broad range of undertakings; from the earliest courses, participants are encouraged to visit their friends at their homes and study a prayer together or share with them a theme from the Bahá'í teachings. Arrangements for supporting the friends in these endeavours, which may have been largely informal, eventually prove inadequate, signalling the need for an Area Teaching Committee to appear. Its principal focus is the mobilization of individuals, often through the formation of teams, for the continued spread of the pattern of activity in a cluster. Its members come to see everyone as a potential collaborator in a collective enterprise, and they appreciate their own part in nurturing a spirit of common purpose in the community. With a Committee in place, the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for worship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably. You will need to encourage National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, as much as training institutes, to remain alert to when conditions in a cluster call for organizational arrangements to assume a definite shape—neither acting prematurely nor unduly delaying the appearance of formal structures.
250.12Just like individuals, the agencies emerging in a cluster need assistance as they take up their duties. The help that Auxiliary Board members provide in this regard is essential, but it is also an important responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils or, where no Council exists, of the National Spiritual Assembly itself, and it is a pressing concern for training institutes as well. The capacity to serve ably at the cluster level increases when spaces are created in which the believers involved can study guidance, reflect on their actions in its light and draw insights therefrom, and also become connected with the wider body of knowledge being generated in surrounding clusters and further afield. Instead of formulating plans in the abstract, consultations conducted in such spaces often aim at capturing the reality of the cluster at that particular moment and identifying the immediate next steps

to facilitate progress. Those serving at the regional or national level may do much to advise the friends and expand their vision of what can be accomplished, but they would not seek to impose their own expectations on the planning process; rather, they are helping the believers who are labouring in a cluster to gradually enhance their ability to devise and implement a course of action informed by the experience accumulating at the grassroots of the community and familiarity with actual conditions. In order to develop the capacity of cluster agencies to learn and to act systematically, regional and national institutions need to be conscientious and methodical in their own efforts to assist them. Your auxiliaries' support for this work will ensure that each element of the growth process attains the requisite characteristics and that the integrity and coherence of all the endeavours are maintained.

250.13 The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated.

250.14 Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. What is clear, then, is that as the institute process in a cluster gains momentum, the act of teaching comes to assume greater prominence in the lives of the friends.

250.15As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes. The actions undertaken during this phase allow abilities developed through studying the relevant institute materials to be exercised and refined. As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause. The approach of working in teams allows the friends to serve together, offer mutual support, and build confidence—but even when carrying out actions individually, they are coordinating their efforts to greater effect. Their focus and investment of time endow this short but decisive phase of the cycle with the intensity it demands. This spirit of high resolve serves to multiply the community's powers, and in each cycle the friends learn to depend more and more on the potent confirmations from the divine realm that their actions attract.

250.16Five years ago, most of the clusters where an intensive programme of growth had been established were those where a reasonable number of Bahá'ís already lived, often geographically spread out. Efforts on the part of those believers to advance the work by inviting the participation of friends, co-workers, extended family, and acquaintances did much to raise the level of activity throughout the cluster. Indeed, widening the circle of participation in this way has become a familiar aspect of Bahá'í life and remains essential. At the same time, experience indicates that, for growth to accelerate through a steady flow of new participants entering the institute process, more is required. The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible.

250.17Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured,

how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. Over time, the cluster as a whole and its centres of intense activity will infuse one another with the heightened understanding that comes from efforts to apply the teachings in different contexts.

250.18As the friends in a cluster continue to reinforce and expand the community-building activities taking shape around them, it becomes evident that distinctive progress has been made. All the elements of a system necessary for growth to be sustained are now in place. Reaching the second milestone along the continuum of development, which we described to you five years ago, is accompanied by advances qualitative, but also quantitative—such as a rise in the number of those involved in conversations that enable receptivity to be discovered and nurtured, in how many homes are being visited, in core activities and participation, in how many individuals are beginning the sequence of courses or supporting others as they gain the confidence to serve. Attendance at gatherings to mark the Nineteen Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Days is being fostered by Local Spiritual Assemblies. Such advances are the more visible signs of a much finer development: the gradual spread, within a population, of a pattern of community life based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And, naturally, the number of believers grows.

250.19In the last five years, the path that leads to the emergence of an intensive programme of growth has become more readily discernible. It must be earnestly pursued. In the Plan that will commence this Ridván, we are calling for growth to be accelerated in all clusters where it has begun. Notwithstanding the natural ebb and flow characteristic of an organic process, there should appear a clear arc of progress over the course of twenty cycles. This combined effort should seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Ridván 2021.

250.20We set this objective before the Bahá'í world conscious that it is truly formidable; that a herculean labour will be required; that many sacrifices will have to be made. But faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá'u'lláh's elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers. God willing, their exertions will prove worthy to crown a hundred years of toil and set the stage for exploits as yet unimagined that must adorn the second century of the Formative Age.

250.21In the coming months, you will be initiating consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies to assess with them the implications that this global goal holds for their respective communities, a process of consultation which has to be quickly extended until it reaches the grassroots. Action must then ensue. We anticipate that progress will be more swiftly achieved in regions where one or more intensive programmes of growth have been sustained for some time, as these offer a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources as efforts are made to strengthen surrounding areas. Pursuit of this goal will also result in the emergence of new programmes of growth, often in unopened clusters that neighbour those where a significant advance has occurred. Such a flow of assistance finds its origin in the imperatives laid out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

Embracing large numbers and managing complexity

250.22Whereas, when a programme of growth is nascent in a cluster, there might be a handful of individuals who are involved in its promotion and those who are participating might come from only several households, by the time a programme has become intensive, these figures, as one would expect, have grown: perhaps tens of individuals active in the work of expansion and consolidation, while those participating might well surpass a hundred. But being able to reach out to large numbers—mobilizing a hundred people or more, whose service connects them with many hundreds or even thousands—requires the capacity to adapt to a substantial increase in complexity.

250.23As the growth process continues to gain intensity, the friends' efforts to engage in meaningful conversations bring them into many social spaces, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the teachings and consider seriously the contribution they can make to the betterment of society. In addition, more and more homes are provided as venues for community-building activities, making each a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance. The institute process comes to be supported by a growing number of friends serving capably as tutors who, cycle after cycle, offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity. Thus, human resource development proceeds with minimal interruption and generates a constantly expanding pool of workers. While it continues to draw on a diverse range of the cluster's inhabitants, those taking its courses in the greatest numbers are often the youth. The transformative effect of studying the Word of God is experienced by the many whose lives are touched in some way by the community's activities. And as the flow of people beginning a path of service swells, considerable progress is made in all aspects of the community-building efforts of the friends. Animators of junior youth groups and teachers of children's classes multiply in number, fuelling an expansion of these two vital programmes. Children are enabled to move from one grade of the classes to another, while groups of junior youth progress from year to year and ground their learning in service to society. Cluster agencies, bolstered by the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies, encourage and foster the natural passage of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next. An educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers, is now firmly rooted within the cluster.

250.24This kind of progress requires the concerted efforts of the friends wherever in the cluster they reside. Nevertheless, experience in the present Plan demonstrates that a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages—places where the convergence of spiritual forces is effecting rapid change within a body of people—to the point where they can sustain intense activity. A core of individuals from within each is assuming responsibility for the process of building capacity in its inhabitants. A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. The friends in such locations help the cluster agencies extend the growth process to different parts of the cluster, for they are eager to introduce others to the vision of transformation they have themselves already glimpsed.

250.25In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics involved when a population of this kind embraces the Faith and is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

250.26As growth in the cluster advances further, greater demands are being placed on the organizational scheme of the training institute. Additional coordinators are now required, some of whom might focus their efforts on a particular part of the cluster. However, this need not result in another layer of administration. Much can be achieved through collaboration, as coordinators start to work together in teams, sometimes drawing on the help of other capable individuals. The ongoing interactions and exchange of experience within these teams constantly enriches understanding and increases the efficacy of their service. The coordinators are also discovering that their efforts can be much enhanced if the friends serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors who live in close proximity to one another are able to meet in small

groups, in the settings where they serve, and assist each other.
250.27Meanwhile, the Area Teaching Committee is rising to a new level of functioning. It is engaged in a more thorough reading of circumstances in the whole cluster: on the one hand, accurately assessing the capacities of the community and the effects being produced by sustained growth, and on the other, understanding the implications of various social realities for community building in the long term. In the plans it makes each cycle, the Committee relies heavily on those shouldering the greatest share of the work of expansion and consolidation, but given that the number of those connected in some way with the pattern of activity is now large, a variety of questions become more pressing: how to mobilize the entire company of believers in support of teaching goals; how to organize systematic home visits to the friends who would benefit from deepening and discussions that connect them with the community; how to strengthen spiritual bonds with the parents of children and junior youth; how to build on the interest of those who have shown goodwill towards the Faith but have yet to take part in its activities. Promoting the widespread holding of devotional meetings is another concern, so that hundreds of people, eventually thousands, are engaged in worship in the company of their households and their neighbours. Ultimately, of course, the Committee looks to continually extend the reach of the community's endeavours so that more and more souls become acquainted with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analysing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members. These complexities also require increasingly close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies.
250.28For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality. The Assembly is also attentive to the need for new believers to be nurtured sensitively, considering when and how various dimensions of community life are to be introduced to them. By encouraging their involvement in institute courses, it aims to ensure that from the very beginning they regard themselves as protagonists in a noble endeavour to build the world anew. It sees to it that gatherings for the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day commemorations, and Bahá'í elections become opportunities to reinforce the high ideals of the community, strengthen its shared sense of commitment, and fortify its spiritual character. As numbers in the community grow larger, the Assembly gives thought to when it could be beneficial to decentralize such meetings so as to facilitate ever-greater participation on these important occasions.

250.29A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity. The cluster-wide reflection meeting, at which so much of this learning is presented, is often complemented by meetings for smaller areas, which generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending. This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent from cycle to cycle—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their spiritual development over generations to come. And as they do so, the support they receive from regional and national Bahá'í institutions and their agencies is experienced as an unceasing flow of love.

250.30A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

250.31For the movement of a population to have come this far demonstrates that the process which brought it about is strong enough to achieve and sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed. This is another milestone for the friends to pass, the third in succession since the process of growth in a cluster was begun. It denotes the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation. This has already come about in around two hundred clusters, covering a range of socio-economic circumstances, and we anticipate that, by the conclusion of the coming Plan, it will be observable in several hundred more. It is a future to which the friends labouring in thousands of clusters

elsewhere can aspire.

250.32In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived. Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

250.33We recognize that developments like these are yet a distant prospect for many, even in clusters where the pattern of activity embraces large numbers. But in some places, this is the work of the moment. In such clusters, while the friends continue to be occupied with sustaining the process of growth, other dimensions of Bahá'í endeavour claim an increasing share of their attention. They are seeking to understand how a flourishing local population can transform the society of which it is an integral part. This will be a new frontier of learning for the foreseeable future, where insights will be generated that will ultimately benefit the whole Bahá'í world.

Releasing the potential of the youth

250.34The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan. If any proof were needed of the extraordinary potential that the youth possess, it has been incontrovertibly delivered. In the wake of the youth conferences convened in 2013, the surge of energy which was imparted to the work being carried out in clusters demonstrates clearly how the community of the Greatest Name is able to give shape to the highest aspirations of young people. How pleased we are to see that, following the participation of more than 80,000 youth in these conferences, an additional cohort of over 100,000 have joined them in taking part in numerous encounters held since then. Measures to encourage the full engagement of these growing contingents in the activities of the community must constitute a major component of the new Plan.

250.35The enthusiastic participation of the youth also highlighted the fact that they represent a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out. What has been learned in this regard is how to help young people become aware of the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society. As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express

eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way. Conversations along these lines kindle interest in how the physical and spiritual powers available to them at this time of life can be channelled towards providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations. Special gatherings for youth, now occurring more frequently at the level of the cluster and even the neighbourhood or village, have proved to be ideal occasions for bringing an intensity to this ongoing conversation, and they are an increasingly common feature of cycles of activity in many clusters.

250.36Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of “doing”, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of “being”, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life. And so it is that, having been introduced to the vision of the Faith for humanity and the exalted character of its mission, the youth naturally feel a desire to be of service, a desire to which training institutes swiftly respond. Indeed, releasing the capacity of the youth is, for each training institute, a sacred charge. Yet fostering that capacity as it develops is a responsibility of every institution of the Cause. The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

250.37Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another’s efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

250.38As youth advance along the path of service, their endeavours are integrated seamlessly into the activities of the cluster, and as a consequence, the entire community thrives as a cohesive whole. Reaching out to the families of young people is a natural way of strengthening community building. Institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth. With a greater awareness of this age group’s circumstances and dynamics, they are able to plan accordingly—for instance, providing opportunities for youth to study courses intensively, perhaps immediately upon the conclusion of a youth gathering. The infusion of energy from a vibrant band of youth allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.

250.39While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow

outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá’u’lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá’u’lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother’s milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law.

Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá’í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus. We rely on you and your auxiliaries to ensure that the spiritual and material prospects of the youth are given due weight in the deliberations of families, communities, agencies, and institutions.

Enhancing institutional capacity

250.40The demands of the present Plan—establishing thousands of new programmes of growth and fortifying existing ones—required from national and regional institutions, as well as yourselves, a feat of strength and coordination. Meeting them was made possible through a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan’s three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions. This spirit was the prerequisite for every important undertaking, including special initiatives to settle pioneers in selected countries and, of course, the organization of 114 youth conferences. A prevalent attitude of joyful service, flexibility, and detachment from personal preferences lent even routine administrative activities a sacred quality. The fresh demands of the coming Plan will, undoubtedly, test the capacity of Bahá’í institutions further still, but no matter what, they will surely preserve this unified spirit among all who work together.

250.41As indicated earlier, the movement of clusters along a continuum depends on there being a commitment from the institutions to guide and support cluster agencies and provide resources as necessary. This work is a critical

responsibility of Regional Bahá’í Councils and regional training institutes. The number of Councils in the world rose from 170 to 203 in the last five years, reflecting the growing need and the rising capacity for work to be undertaken at this level, and in some countries where Councils are yet to be formed, specific steps were taken to build experience in anticipation of their emergence, such as the appointment of regional teams. In some regions that stretch across a large territory, Councils have made arrangements for nurturing the development of groups of adjoining clusters. Meanwhile, in smaller countries that do not require the establishment of Regional Councils, National Assemblies are increasingly giving thought to ways of helping clusters advance, in some instances by forming a working group charged with this task; you are encouraged to stimulate learning in this area, with the aim that, in due course, formal structures can be defined that would assume this responsibility in much the same way that Councils do in other countries. And, as is the case with Councils, we envisage that any such structure which emerges at the national level will benefit from interaction with the institution of the Counsellors.

250.42To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee. Timely access to information about the movement of clusters and the work of the institute in their jurisdictions is required for institutions to support their agencies and take the many decisions that concern, for instance, the deployment of pioneers, the allocation of funds, the creation and promotion of Bahá’í literature, and the planning of institutional meetings; it allows them to accurately read the reality of their communities and act on the basis of clearly understood needs when marshalling the energies of the friends towards meeting the exigencies of the hour. At various intervals a National Assembly, in consultation with you, may find it advisable to formally adopt and disseminate certain aspects of the lessons that have been learned, especially in relation to organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. The need to stay well informed about the community’s accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

250.43Of course, a National Spiritual Assembly ultimately has responsibility for fostering all aspects of a Bahá’í community’s development. Although it pursues various lines of action itself, in many cases it fulfils this responsibility by ensuring that Regional Councils or specialized agencies are able to take steps to advance areas of endeavour entrusted to them. As the capacity of the friends increases and the size of a community grows, the work of a National Assembly in its manifold dimensions becomes commensurately more complex. Therefore, and in view of the magnitude of the task before the institutions in the coming Plan, National Assemblies—as well as Councils—will benefit from periodically considering, in collaboration with

you, whether their administrative operations, and indeed elements of their own functioning, could be adjusted or enhanced in ways that would better support the growth process.

250.44Attaining a higher level of functioning is similarly a pressing concern of training institutes. The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising. While it is important that institutes attend to day-to-day operational matters, the scale of what must be accomplished requires that they also become occupied with considerations of strategy. Training institute boards need to maintain an ongoing consultation with national or regional coordinators, as well as with Auxiliary Board members, about how an activity in a cluster gains strength, how it can be adequately resourced, what approaches prove effective in different settings, and how experience can be shared. We have in mind a systematic and concentrated effort by this collaborative group to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Addressing other dimensions of the institute's work—such as schemes of coordination at the cluster level, enhancing the capacity of coordinators, and the management of statistics and finances—will be essential too. In your work with training institutes, you will no doubt wish to arrange that they draw on the experience of other institutes in the same part of the world. Sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme also offer a rich source of insight for the institutes of nearby countries or regions.

250.45As institutions and agencies seek to accelerate the processes of expansion and consolidation in every land, the question of financial resources will surely claim increased attention. Indeed, an important aspect of enhancing institutional capacity over the coming years will be the ongoing development of local and national Funds. For this to occur, the generality of the friends must be invited to consider afresh the responsibility of all believers to support the work of the Faith through their own means and, further, to manage their financial affairs in the light of the teachings.

250.46The future civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh is a prosperous one, in which the vast resources of the world will be directed towards humanity's elevation and regeneration, not its debasement and destruction. The act of contributing to the Fund, then, is imbued with profound meaning: it is a practical way of hastening the advent of that civilization, and a necessary one, for as Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained, "He Who is the Eternal Truth—exalted be His glory—hath made the fulfilment of every undertaking on earth dependent on material means." Bahá'ís conduct their lives in the midst of a society acutely disordered in its material affairs. The process of community building they are advancing in their clusters cultivates a set of attitudes towards wealth and possessions very different from those

holding sway in the world. The habit of regularly giving to the Funds of the Faith—including in-kind contributions particularly in certain places—arises from and reinforces a sense of personal concern for the welfare of the community and the progress of the Cause. The duty to contribute, just like the duty to teach, is a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í identity which strengthens faith. The sacrificial and generous contributions of the individual believer, the collective consciousness promoted by the community of the needs of the Fund, and the careful stewardship of financial resources exercised by the institutions of the Faith can be regarded as expressions of the love that binds these three actors more closely together. And ultimately, voluntary giving fosters an awareness that managing one's financial affairs in accordance with spiritual principles is an indispensable dimension of a life lived coherently. It is a matter of conscience, a way in which commitment to the betterment of the world is translated into practice.

250.47We direct these statements to you in recognition of the unique responsibility that you, your deputies, and their assistants shoulder in helping the friends to advance their understanding in numerous areas, not least, of course, with respect to the dynamics of growth. As we have previously indicated, in the institution of the Counsellors the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part. As a progressively deeper understanding of the Five Year Plan emerges among the believers over time, insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared. In this regard, an immense debt of gratitude is owed by the community of the Greatest Name to the International Teaching Centre, which has done so much in recent years, and with such diligence, to lovingly nurture and energetically promulgate a mode of learning that has now become well established.

250.48The essential elements of the coming Plan, like those that came before it, are straightforward. Nevertheless, a profound understanding of its various facets requires an appreciation of the sophisticated set of operations through which a cluster develops. We rely on your institution being so familiar with the relevant guidance that the friends in general, and institutions and their agencies in particular, can depend on you to illuminate their deliberations by calling attention to pertinent considerations. Clearly, however, the need to assist the friends in at least 5,000 clusters where the pattern of action is being intensified will be a considerable challenge, one with implications for your own mode of functioning—but more especially for that of Auxiliary Board members. Clusters that are in the front ranks of the growth process in their areas will inevitably claim a large share of their time; also, administrative arrangements at the regional level will more frequently require their support. They are concerned with much of what occurs in the community; attentive both to the development of each stage of the educational process and to the strengthening of the cycles of activity, they promote coherence among the lines of action being advanced in a cluster and fan into flame a passion for teaching. In the exercise of their responsibility to foster learning and to help the friends enter the arena of service, they draw heavily on the training

institute, aspects of whose work align closely with theirs. But their other duties are equally demanding. As such, they will need to consider how, in order to fulfil those wide-ranging responsibilities, they can draw on the help of their assistants more extensively and more creatively. Assistants, of course, may be assigned any task—simple or complex, general or highly specific—and this versatility constitutes a distinctive strength. While some assistants might be occupied with the development of a local community, others might be given tasks that relate to an entire cluster. By properly orienting them, guiding them as capacity expands, and gradually increasing their duties, Auxiliary Board members will be able to better exploit the possibilities that exist. Much is sure to be learned as a result, and you are encouraged to derive insights from the experience of your auxiliaries.

A period of special potency

250.49The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. By convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár is evoked in any locality. The enhancement of the devotional character of a community also has an effect on the Nineteen Day Feast and can be felt at other times when the friends come together.

250.50Holy Day commemorations hold a special position in this regard. The Tablets recited, and the prayers, stories, songs, and sentiments voiced—all of them expressions of love for those sacred Figures Whose lives and missions are being remembered—stir the heart and fill the soul with awe and wonder. During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá’ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation, a Manifestation of God, was born to the world. Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá’í identity.

250.51Over the coming years, the community will, in fact, encounter a series of anniversaries, concluding with the Centenary of the Ascension of

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in November 2021, which will close the first century of the Formative Age. Next year the Bahá’í world will mark one hundred years since the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan flowed from the pen of the Master. In these fourteen Tablets, revealed during one of humanity’s darkest hours, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching work that defined its theatre of action as the entire planet. Held in abeyance until 1937, when the first in a succession of Plans launched at the instigation of the Guardian was assigned to the Bahá’ís of North America, the Divine Plan has continued to unfold over the decades since as the collective capacity of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers has grown, enabling them to take on ever-greater challenges. How wondrous the vision of the Plan’s Author! Placing before the friends the prospect of a day when the light of His Father’s Revelation would illuminate every corner of the world, He set out not only strategies for achieving this feat but guiding principles and unchanging spiritual requisites. Every effort made by the friends to systematically propagate the divine teachings traces its origins to the forces set in motion in the Divine Plan.

250.52The coming global endeavour to which the friends will be summoned calls for the application of proven strategies, systematic action, informed analysis, and keen insight. Yet above all, it is a spiritual enterprise, and its true character should never be obscured. The urgency to act is impelled by the world’s desperate condition. All that the followers of Bahá’u’lláh have learned in the last twenty years must culminate in the accomplishments of the next five. The scale of what is being asked of them brings to mind one of His Tablets in which He describes, in striking terms, the challenge entailed in spreading His Cause:

How many the lands that remained untilled and uncultivated; and how many the lands that were tilled and cultivated, and yet remained without water; and how many the lands which, when the harvest time arrived, no harvester came forth to reap! However, through the wonders of God’s favour and the revelations of His loving-kindness, We cherish the hope that souls may appear who are the embodiments of heavenly virtue and who will occupy themselves with teaching the Cause of God and training all that dwell on earth.

The systematic efforts of His loved ones throughout the world aim at the fulfilment of the hope thus expressed by the Blessed Perfection. May He Himself reinforce them at every turn.

The Universal House of Justice

251

Conference of the Continental Counsellors and Conclusion of the First Century of the Formative Age

2 January 2016

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

251.1We address you these words from the gathering where, for five successive days, the Continental Counsellors have earnestly considered the implications of the next global Plan. Their insightful consultations drew on the impressive body of knowledge about the process of capacity building that is being

generated in thousands of clusters worldwide. The numerous accounts that were shared in the course of the Conference attested the creativity, tenacity, and burgeoning abilities of the community of the Greatest Name and, above all, its reliance on the confirmations of the Almighty. There is a growing appreciation among people in all parts of the world of the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's remedy for healing the maladies of society.

251.2Before the first century of the Formative Age concludes, there lies a span of time that stretches between two anniversaries associated with documents of measureless significance. It begins with the centenary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, just as the friends are embarking on a new stage in the unfoldment of that Plan. It ends at the lapse of one hundred years since the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was followed by the opening of the Master's Will and Testament. With these thoughts in mind, and in preparation for their deliberations, the Continental Counsellors, led by the members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre, visited the House of the Master—the place where three of the Tablets of the Divine Plan had been revealed and where, a few weeks after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, His Will and Testament had been read aloud to believers from four continents. In that sacred House, on the eve of the present Conference, passages were recited from those two Charters which, Shoghi Effendi explained, set in motion processes for the propagation of the Faith and the establishment of its Administrative Order. This was a fitting prologue to five days of consultation focused on diffusing more widely the light of Bahá'u'lláh and strengthening the ability of His institutions to act as channels through which His promised blessings may flow to humankind.

251.3The provisions of the coming Five Year Plan are contained in the message that we addressed to the Conference on its opening day and which was at the same time distributed to all National Spiritual Assemblies. The colossal effort that will be asked from the loved ones of the Lord was clearly recognized by the Counsellors, but they also voiced their confidence in the capacity of the Bahá'í world to face this challenge. At no earlier time could such an undertaking have been seriously contemplated, but given what is being achieved in the present Plan, the realms of possibility are wider than ever before. Our hearts were moved by the reports that began to arrive, within hours of our message to the Conference being released, of the friends eagerly coming together in settings of all kinds to help one another become familiar with its contents. We hope that study of the message will spread rapidly throughout the community. Meanwhile, the institutions will be putting in place whatever administrative and organizational arrangements are necessary to ensure the most auspicious start to the Plan at Ridván.

251.4In the few months that remain before then, the work of the current Plan, establishing new programmes of growth in particular, will continue to be pursued. Every step taken in that direction will increase the readiness of the worldwide community to begin the next five-year enterprise. Each moment is precious. We long to see every believer choose the path of consecrated service and high endeavour to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly summoned the friends in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. In our supplications on your behalf, we will

beseech the Author of that Plan to intercede before the throne of His Father that He might guide you in your service as long as there are souls in need of the bread of heaven.
The Universal House of Justice
252
Updates to the Bahai.org Website
1 February 2016
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
252.1Further to the email letters dated 18 September 2014 and 20 January 2015 sent on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the new version of the Bahai.org website, we have been asked to inform you that the core of the sections entitled "What Bahá'ís Believe" and "What Bahá'ís Do" now also appears on the site in Arabic, Chinese, French, Persian, Russian, and Spanish. Efforts are under way to complete the translation process for the remainder of these two sections. Additionally, the same sections will also begin to become available in Hindi and Portuguese in the next three months.
252.2The efflorescence of the site through the introduction of these major international languages, covering a significant portion of the world's population, represents a notable development, and it is hoped that many people will come to make use of the valuable new resource made thus available.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
253
Importance of the Annual Report
17 February 2016
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
253.1The time is approaching when the thoughts of each National Spiritual Assembly turn towards preparations for the National Convention. An essential element of such preparations is the writing of the annual report. The Universal House of Justice has asked us to call to your attention the importance of the annual report and to review some of its basic functions.
253.2As most of you are well aware, the primary aim of the annual report is to give the delegates assembled at the National Convention as well as the members of the community a concise and accurate review of the major activities and achievements of the community as viewed within the context of the Plan. The report may discuss themes, including achievements and challenges, that will assist the delegates in understanding the condition and progress of the Bahá'í community and will stimulate and give direction to their deliberations. It is part of the National Assembly's attempt, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, to "radiantly and abundantly unfold to the eyes of the delegates, by whom they are elected, their plans, their hopes, and their cares." It is highly desirable that the annual report be made available to the delegates in advance of the Convention and that it be shared with the friends generally.

253.3A National Assembly's annual report constitutes a record of the activities of the Faith in its country and, as such, is a document whose research potential is of great historical importance. The House of Justice, the International Teaching Centre, and Offices and Departments at the Bahá'í World Centre rely on information from the annual reports of National Spiritual Assemblies to carry out aspects of their work.
253.4There is no specific format to be followed. When sending a copy of the report to the World Centre, if it is not in English it is sufficient to include a summary translation of key points in English. It is preferable that a copy be sent in electronic form. If a hard copy is sent, kindly send five copies. The Counsellors, of course, should also receive a copy.
253.5You are assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your preparations for the National Convention will attract the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty and that the consultations of the delegates will release a potent dynamic that will reinforce the energies of the friends as they apply themselves to the challenging requirements of the new Five Year Plan.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
254
Science and the Sacred Scriptures
21 February 2016
To an individual Bahá'í
Dear Bahá'í Friend,
254.1Your email letter … including your thoughtful questions about a paragraph regarding evolution in the foreword to the 2014 edition of Some Answered Questions has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which has asked us to convey to you the following in reply….
254.2As you have observed, the purpose of the paragraph in question, which the House of Justice approved for inclusion in the foreword, does not limit how a Bahá'í, as an individual, may personally choose to interpret the Sacred Writings. Yet, the paragraph does not insist that science is "absolute truth", nor, as you seem to conclude, does it attempt to "apologize" for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements. Rather, recognizing that He would not make a statement that contradicts reality, the paragraph encourages the friends to use all of the relevant texts on the subject as well as the most accurate and reliable picture of reality that science can provide to try to understand what 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually is conveying.
254.3It is evident that there are instances throughout history when statements made in the Sacred Scriptures that conflicted with the scientific views of the time were confirmed by science itself centuries later. There also may well be statements in the Writings about the material world the veracity of which will be proven by science in future. The notion of scientific "truth" does not encompass every claim or theory asserted in the name of science. But while a great deal of scientific discourse is tentative and subject to change, some scientific statements are accurate and reliable descriptions of reality, and those findings are not in conflict with true religion, that is, with the

Revelation and its authorized interpretations. It is for this reason that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes that religious beliefs should be weighed in the light of science and reason, so that personal interpretations of the meaning of the Revelation, which are also fallible and subject to change, do not lead to incorrect conclusions.

254.4The Master’s statements on evolution are subtle and complex and must be understood within the context of the entirety of the Bahá’í teachings, because His statements are both predicated upon and coherent with those teachings. In the passages found in Some Answered Questions, as well as in numerous other Tablets and talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates upon the principle of the harmony of science and religion, observes that human beings and animals have in common the same physical nature, emphasizes that it is the mind and the soul that distinguish humanity, and rejects the idea that human beings are merely animals, a haphazard accident, and captives of nature trapped in the struggle for existence. In light of all such statements, it is possible for a Bahá’í to conclude that one can disagree with the materialistic philosophical interpretation of scientific findings—that man is merely an animal and a random expression of nature—without contesting the scientific findings themselves, such as those in genetics which are incompatible with a concept of “parallel” evolution.

254.5Of course, different individuals, using their rational powers to reach personal interpretations of scientific findings and the meaning of Sacred Texts, may come to different conclusions on different questions. This is the inevitable outcome of the independent investigation of truth. On certain matters, there may for a time be a degree of ambiguity; on others, an exchange of views conducted in a consultative spirit may make the truth evident. Yet, in their efforts to explore the ocean of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, the House of Justice hopes that the friends will guard against two extremes. The first is to simply dismiss the truths found in the Revelation owing to a dogmatic attachment to materialistic interpretations of scientific findings. The second is to assume that in every instance where one’s personal understanding of the teachings conflicts with scientific findings, it is these findings that must change in future, for such a posture would place Bahá’ís in the position of constantly contending with science. Both of these extremes are incompatible with the Bahá’í principle of the harmony of science and religion.

254.6As you consider this matter, you may find of interest the work of those believers who have attempted to correlate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements with contemporary science, such as the article “Religion and Evolution Reconciled: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Comments on Evolution” by Courosh Mehanian and Stephen R. Friberg, published in The Journal of Bahá’í Studies, volume 13, number 1/4, pages 55–93, which may be found at bahai-studies.ca/past-issues.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

255

Centenary of the Revelation of the First of the Tablets of the Divine Plan

26 March 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the world acting under the Mandate of
'Abdu'l-Bahá

Dearly loved Friends,

255.1Today at dawn, on your behalf, the members of the Universal House of Justice gathered with the members of the International Teaching Centre in the Master's room at the house in Bahjí to commemorate that pivotal moment when the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Prayers from those wondrous Tablets were offered in thanksgiving for the glorious achievements of the past. Divine assistance was sought in support of the labours required in the forthcoming stage of the Plan's unfoldment. And heavenly bounties were implored to ensure still greater victories in meeting the challenges of future stages, one after another, reaching as far as the fringes of the Golden Age.

255.2The Divine Plan, that sublime series of letters addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Bahá'ís of North America between 26 March 1916 and 8 March 1917, constitutes one of the mighty Charters of His Father's Faith. Set forth in those fourteen Tablets, Shoghi Effendi explains, is "the mightiest Plan ever generated through the creative power of the Most Great Name." It is "impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise" and "claims as the theatre for its operation territories spread over five continents and the islands of the seven seas." Within it are held "the seeds of the world's spiritual revival and ultimate redemption."

255.3In the Tablets of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only provided the broad vision necessary to carry out the responsibilities entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to His loved ones, but He also outlined spiritual concepts and practical strategies necessary for success. In His exhortations to teach and to travel to teach; to arise personally or deputize others; to move to all parts of the world and open countries and territories, each meticulously named; to learn the relevant languages and translate and disseminate the Sacred Texts; to train the teachers of the Faith and especially youth; to teach the masses and, particularly, indigenous peoples; to be firm in the Covenant and protect the Faith; and to sow seeds and cultivate them in a process of organic growth, we find hallmarks of the entire series of Plans—each a specific stage of the Divine Plan shaped by the Head of the Faith—that will continue to unfold throughout the Formative Age.

255.4The initial response to the Tablets of the Divine Plan was limited to the noble exploits of a few who, like the immortal Martha Root, arose independently. It was Shoghi Effendi who assisted the Bahá'ís of the world to gradually grasp the significance of this Charter and learn to approach its requirements in a systematic manner. The Plan was held in abeyance for nearly twenty years while the Administrative Order took shape, after which communities were patiently guided to conduct national plans, including the two Seven Year Plans in North America that constituted the first stages of the Divine Plan, until finally, in 1953, all could unite in the first global Plan, the Ten Year Crusade. Shoghi Effendi looked beyond that crucial decade to "the launching of world-wide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in

future epochs” of the Formative Age, “by the Universal House of Justice, that will symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies.” The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet. Let every Bahá’í appreciate, more deeply than ever before, that the provisions of the next stage of the Divine Plan set forth in our recent message to the Counsellors’ Conference comprise the challenging requirements of the present hour—requirements both urgent and sacred, which, when sacrificially and persistently addressed, may hasten “the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace and the unfoldment of that world civilization which is the offspring and primary purpose of that Peace.” 255.5How is it possible to adequately convey our feelings of irrepressible love and unbounded admiration as we reflect on the exploits of the members of your communities, past and present, in pursuit of your sacred mission? The vision that unfolds before our eyes is of a grassroots stirring, an organic flowering, a resistless movement that has grown imperceptibly at times and at others in great surges to eventually embrace the entire world: God-intoxicated lovers exceeding their personal capacities, embryonic institutions learning to exercise their powers for the well-being of humanity, communities emerging as shelters and schools in which human potential is nourished. We pay homage to the humblest ministrations and ceaseless endeavours of the Faith’s devoted rank and file, as well as to the extraordinary accomplishments of its heroes, knights, and martyrs. On vast continents and scattered islands, from arctic regions to desert climes, atop mountain plateaus and across lowland plains, in crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths, you and your spiritual forebears brought the message of the Blessed Beauty to peoples and nations. You sacrificed rest and comfort and left your homes to journey to unfamiliar lands or homefront outposts. You set aside your own interests for the common good. Whatever your means, you sacrificially contributed your share of resources. You taught the Faith to multitudes, to groups in various settings, and to individuals in your homes. You quickened souls and helped them on their own paths of service, disseminated widely the Bahá’í writings and participated in deep study of the teachings, strove for excellence in all fields, engaged diverse peoples of all strata in conversations pertaining to the search for solutions to humanity’s ills, and initiated efforts for economic and social development. Though misunderstandings and problems sometimes arose, you forgave one another and marched together in serried lines. You raised the framework of the Administrative Order and clung steadfastly to the Covenant, protecting the Faith from every blow directed against it. In your ardour for the Beloved, you endured prejudice and estrangement, privation and loneliness, persecution and imprisonment. You welcomed and nurtured generations of children and youth upon whom the vitality of the Faith and future of humanity depend, and as tested veterans, you heeded the Master’s admonition to serve until your last breath. You have written the story of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan on the scroll of its first century. Before you, beloved friends, lies stretched out the blank scroll of the future on which you and

your spiritual descendants will inscribe fresh and lasting deeds of renunciation and heroism for the betterment of the world.
The Universal House of Justice
256
Significance for the Bahá'ís of North America of the Centenaryof the Revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan
26 March 2016
To the chosen recipients of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan,
the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Bahá'ís of Canada
Dearly loved Friends,
256.1We cannot allow this historic moment to pass without adding—to our message to the believers worldwide—a word to those whom the Author of the Divine Plan singled out for a sacred responsibility and whose triumphs and travails shaped much of the past century in accordance with His high expectations.
256.2Soon after the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá determined that one of the principal objectives of His ministry would be to establish a community in North America under the banner of His Father's Cause. He dispatched teachers, illumined pilgrims, embarked upon an unparalleled visit in His declining years, laid the cornerstone of your House of Worship, carved in fourteen Tablets addressed to you a divine mission, and "out of the abundance of His heart chose to bestow on His favored disciples, to the very last day of His life, the tokens of His unfailing solicitude." Later, at a time when the believers in the Cradle of the Faith were hamstrung by persecution, when the light of the Faith in Europe was eclipsed by the growing spectre of another war, when the most vibrant center in central Asia was dismantled, and even the world center of the Faith itself was disrupted by a conflagration in the Holy Land, the "one chief remaining citadel," the "mighty arm" that still raised aloft "the standard of an unconquerable Faith," was, Shoghi Effendi observed, "none other than the blessed community of the followers of the Most Great Name in the North American continent." He placed you—the Plan's chief executors and its co-executors—among the vanguard of Bahá'u'lláh's resistless legions.
256.3It is impossible here to recount the range of your illustrious achievements during the past century. You have already accomplished that which is worthy of the gratitude and admiration of the entire Bahá'í world, but your mission is far from complete. After a century of resolute action, you should, more than ever before, be able to discern the straight path traced by heavenly inspiration across the many stages of the Divine Plan since its systematic execution began in 1937, and thus grasp the full implications of the latest stage about to open. The tasks confronting you are not identical with those of an earlier age. With the international spread of the Faith largely concluded, demands on you are now most pressing on the home front. The process of entry by troops that emerged so tenuously in the Ten Year Crusade, and was fostered in the decades that followed, is now being extended through a sound process of community building in center after center in all those countries and territories that 'Abdu'l-Bahá marked out so long ago. Your sister

communities, so many of which you helped to establish, are now mature, and you stand with them ready to take on the sterner challenges that lie ahead. The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.

256.4This is a time for jubilation. Take pride in the sacrifices and victories of so many devoted souls who arose in response to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call. With the same spirit of renunciation shown by your predecessors, cast away the idle fancies and distractions of a world that has lost its way that you may consecrate yourselves in the next five years to the priceless opportunities and inescapable obligations of the latest stage of a spiritual enterprise on which the fate of humanity ultimately depends.

The Universal House of Justice

257

In Vitro Fertilization—Additional Considerations

27 March 2016

To an individual Bahá’í

Dear Bahá’í Friend,

257.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 12 March 2016 seeking guidance pertaining to the disposition of unused fertilized eggs following in vitro fertilization. Also received was your email letter of 11 March 2016 addressed to your National Spiritual Assembly and forwarded by it to the Bahá’í World Centre on 14 March 2016. Your desire to firmly adhere to the teachings of the Faith in this regard is warmly acknowledged. We have been asked to convey the following in reply.

257.2Statements made by the beloved Guardian establish the principle that, for Bahá’ís, the process of reproduction pertains to a husband and wife. In this light, the House of Justice has determined that, in relation to procedures for assisted reproduction, only the sperm of the husband and the egg cell of the wife should be used, and it would not be acceptable for the friends to use donated sperm or eggs from another party or to donate them to others. This also applies to the donation or receipt of a fertilized egg.

257.3Furthermore, the House of Justice has concluded that the spiritual and social implications of the use of a surrogate mother to provide for the gestation of an embryo, even when the embryo results from the fertilization of the wife’s egg cell by the husband’s sperm, are too far-reaching for such a procedure to be acceptable for Bahá’ís. Even if the concept of adoption of a fertilized egg was considered to be distinct from its donation, its transfer from a couple and implantation in the womb of another mother is very closely related to surrogacy and raises other complex issues.

257.4Beyond these determinations that are based on the guidance provided by Shoghi Effendi, the House of Justice does not wish to legislate now on the use of in vitro fertilization or the disposition of any fertilized eggs following the in vitro fertilization process. Hence, for the time being, it is left to the believers to decide on such matters.

257.5In making such a decision, a thoughtful believer will naturally have profound regard for the sanctity of life. The Bahá'í teachings indicate that the human soul comes into being at the time of conception. Yet, they do not precisely define the biological moment and nature of the event described as "conception". Indeed, one understanding of conception is that it coincides with fertilization; yet another is that it occurs following fertilization and implantation, the onset of pregnancy. Thus, it may not be possible to know when the association of the soul with the material form occurs, and such questions may be insoluble by human thought or investigation since they relate to mysteries of the spiritual world and the nature of the soul itself. The following extract from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh may be of interest in this regard:

Know that the soul which is common to all men cometh forth following the commingling of things and after their maturation, as thou dost observe in the germ: once it hath developed to its predestined stage, God manifesteth the soul that was latent within it. Thy Lord, verily, doeth what He willeth and ordaineth what He pleaseth.

(The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006, 2006 printing), pp. 229–30)

257.6Rest assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that you and your husband may be aided and assisted through the loving providence of the Almighty in your consideration of this matter.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

258

Birth Control

12 April 2016

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

258.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 26 January 2016 requesting guidance concerning the desire of you and your husband to limit the size of your family given that, in light of your age and health, you do not feel you could complete another pregnancy. The conscientious manner in which you have approached the matter is appreciated. We have been asked to reply as follows.

258.2There is no direct or explicit guidance in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the subject of birth control; this matter has been left for the decision of the House of Justice. In response to questions asked by Bahá'ís on previous occasions, the House of Justice has explained that married couples can decide to use birth control methods to delay the timing of a first pregnancy, to control the spacing between pregnancies, or to limit the size of their family.

258.3Some birth control methods act to prevent fertilization, some act after fertilization has occurred to prevent implantation or to abort the fertilized ovum, while in the case of others there is a difference of opinion as to how they work. There is no objection to contraceptives which prevent the occurrence of fertilization. However, it would be improper for a Bahá'í to use a

method the effect of which would be to terminate a pregnancy even at its earliest stage, since the Teachings state that the soul comes into being at conception.

258.4It is understood that within the medical profession there is a difference of opinion as to how intrauterine devices work, that is, whether they prevent fertilization or whether they prevent the fertilized ovum from attaching to the wall of the uterus. Yet the Writings do not clearly define when during the biological process “conception” occurs. Indeed, one understanding of conception is that it coincides with fertilization; yet another is that it occurs following fertilization and implantation, the onset of pregnancy. Thus, it may not be possible to know when the association of the soul with the material form occurs, and such questions may be insoluble by human thought or investigation since they relate to mysteries of the spiritual world and the nature of the soul itself.

258.5With regard to the use of a surgical procedure as a form of birth control, this is permissible if the procedure is reversible. In light of the purpose of marriage, the House of Justice has generally been reluctant to condone irreversible sterilization as a method to be used by a couple to avoid having additional children. Permanent sterilization is an action with far-reaching implications and results beyond those usually necessary for the immediate purpose of limiting the size of a family. In this contingent world, it is not possible to be certain of what the future holds, and therefore it is necessary to guard against too easily making a choice to relinquish a God-given capacity, which later may become a cause of regret. Therefore, it is preferable to use other methods of preventing conception to which one may have recourse. Nevertheless, there may be medical circumstances or other compelling reasons that would justify such a procedure. In your case, if the medical advice you are given indicates that you would suffer too severely from further pregnancies, you would be justified in considering such a step.

258.6In arriving at a decision as to the best method of birth control to use, the friends must take into consideration the methods available to them and be guided by the Bahá’í principles involved, the best medical advice they can obtain, and their own consciences.

258.7It is hoped that the considerations discussed above will be of assistance to you and your husband as you weigh the options before you. You are assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your family may be surrounded by the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty and guided and sustained by His grace and bountiful favour.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

2016–2021

The Five Year Plan

259

Ridván Message 2016

Ridván 2016

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

259.1With the advent of the King of Festivals, the period of preparation for the next global Plan is over: we now summon the friends of God to a new five-year commitment of courage, resolve, and resources.
259.2The company of Bahá'u'lláh's faithful stands poised. Institutional gatherings convened across the world in recent months have sent out successive signals of eagerness to begin this mighty enterprise. The imperatives contained in the message addressed to the Counsellors' Conference are already being translated into decisive plans of action. Decades of heroic endeavour have shaped the community and earned it a measure of proven ability in fostering growth, steeling it for this moment. The last two decades, in particular, have markedly accelerated this longed-for rise in proficiency.
259.3During this period, the adoption of an evolving framework for action has enabled the friends to progressively nurture and refine essential capacities, giving rise to simple acts of service at first, leading to more elaborate patterns of action, which in turn demanded the development of capacities still more complex. In this way, a systematic process of human resource development and community building has been started in thousands of clusters—and, in many of them, become far advanced. The focus has not been solely on the individual believer, or the community, or the institutions of the Faith; all three inseparable participants in the evolution of the new World Order are being stimulated by the spiritual forces released through the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. The signs of their progress are more and more apparent: in the confidence that countless believers have acquired to share accounts of Bahá'u'lláh's life and discuss the implications of His Revelation and peerless Covenant; in the growing contingents of souls who, as a result, have been attracted to His Cause and are contributing to the achievement of His unifying vision; in the ability of Bahá'ís and their friends, at the very grassroots of the community, to describe in eloquent terms their experience of a process capable of transforming character and shaping social existence; in the significantly larger numbers of those indigenous to a country who, as members of Bahá'í institutions and agencies, are now guiding the affairs of their communities; in the reliable, generous, and sacrificial giving to the Fund, so vital for sustaining the advancement of the Faith; in the unprecedented efflorescence of individual initiative and collective action in support of community-building activities; in the enthusiasm of so many selfless souls in the prime of youth who are bringing immense vigour to this work, notably by tending to the spiritual education of younger generations; in the enhancement of the devotional character of the community through regular gatherings for worship; in the rise in capacity at all levels of Bahá'í administration; in the readiness of institutions, agencies, and individuals to think in terms of process, to read their immediate reality and assess their resources in the places where they live, and to make plans on that basis; in the now familiar dynamic of study, consultation, action, and reflection that has cultivated an instinctive posture of learning; in the mounting appreciation for what it means to give effect to the Teachings through social action; in the multiplying opportunities being sought and seized to offer a Bahá'í perspective on discourses prevalent in society; in the awareness of a global

community that, in all its endeavours, it is hastening the emergence of divine civilization by manifesting the society-building power inherent in the Cause; indeed, in the friends' growing consciousness that their efforts to foster inner transformation, to widen the circle of unity, to collaborate with others in the field of service, to help populations take charge of their own spiritual, social, and economic development—and, through all such efforts, to bring about the betterment of the world—express the very purpose of religion itself.

259.4While no single measure can capture the totality of the Bahá'í community's progress, much can be inferred from the number of clusters worldwide where a programme of growth has been established, which, with gratitude for the bounties bestowed by the Abhá Beauty, we confirm has surpassed 5,000. So broad a foundation as this was a prerequisite for taking on the task that now confronts the Bahá'í world—strengthening the process of growth in every cluster where it has begun and extending further an enriching pattern of community life. The sustained effort required will be arduous. But the outcome has the potential to be profoundly significant, even epoch making. Small steps, if they are regular and rapid, add up to a great distance travelled. By concentrating on the advance that must be made in a cluster in an initial period—for instance, in the six cycles occurring before the first of the bicentennial anniversaries—the friends will do much to bring their goal for the full five years within reach. In each cycle are vested fleeting opportunities for a stride forward, precious possibilities that will not return.

259.5In society at large, alas, the symptoms of an ever-deepening malaise of the soul multiply and worsen. How striking that, as the peoples of the world suffer for want of the true remedy and turn fitfully from one false hope to another, you are collectedly refining an instrument that connects hearts with the Word of God eternal. How striking that, amid the cacophony of fixed opinions and opposing interests that grows everywhere more fierce, you are focused on drawing people together to build communities that are havens of unity. Far from disheartening you, let the world's prejudices and hostilities be reminders of how urgently souls all around you need the healing balm that you alone can present to them.

259.6This is the last in a series of consecutive Five Year Plans. At its close, a new phase in the evolution of the Divine Plan will open, set to propel the community of Bahá'u'lláh towards the third century of the Bahá'í Era.

May the friends of God in every country appreciate the promise of these few years ahead, which will be rigorous preparation for the even mightier tasks yet to come. The present Plan's broad scope enables every individual to support this work, however humble one's share. We ask you, cherished co-workers, adorers of Him Who is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, to spare no effort in applying all you have learned and every God-given ability and skill you possess to advance the Divine Plan into its next essential stage. To your own ardent supplications for heavenly assistance we add ours, offered in the Holy Shrines, on behalf of all who labour for this all-encompassing Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

260
Passing of Joy Stevenson, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre
25 April 2016
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
260.1We were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of Joy Stevenson, distinguished maidservant of Bahá’u’lláh, whose dedicated endeavours for the Cause of God spanning several decades were crowned by her serving for ten years as a Counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre. Before taking on responsibilities connected with the worldwide promulgation and protection of the Faith, she made a distinctive contribution to the advancement of Bahá’í communities in Australasia as a Counsellor and an Auxiliary Board member and as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia. To her gift of exceptional spiritual perception she added a remarkable ability to nurture the capacity of others, most especially of the youth. She will also long be remembered for her kindly and loving nature, as well as for her earnest enthusiasm in teaching.
260.2To her children and other members of her family we extend our heartfelt condolences. At the Sacred Threshold we will supplicate Bahá’u’lláh for the progress of her radiant soul throughout the worlds of God. We ask, too, that commemorative gatherings be convened in her honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá’í communities everywhere.
The Universal House of Justice
261
Celebrating the Bicentenaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and the Birth of the Báb
18 May 2016
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
261.1In its message dated 29 December 2015 to the Counsellors’ Conference, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to the two bicentenaries that are approaching, marking the elapse of two hundred years respectively since the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and the Birth of the Báb. The House of Justice feels it would now be timely to explore further the manner in which these highly significant Festivals are to be celebrated so that preparations can begin to be made. As indicated in the 29 December message, these Holy Days should be viewed as special opportunities for the friends to reach out to the widest possible cross-section of society and to all those with whom they share a connection—whether through a family tie or common interest, an occupation or field of study, neighbourly relations or merely chance acquaintance—so that all may rejoice in the appearance, exactly two hundred years before, of One Who was to be the Bearer of a new Message for humankind.
261.2The locus of activity for the bicentenaries is to be at the local level. The House of Justice anticipates that in countless places across the world, both rural settings and urban centres, the friends will find creative ways to honour the Twin Manifestations Whose lives and sacred missions will be recalled on Their anniversaries. There might also be an opportunity for initiatives at the national level, which could include a gathering to which dignitaries and

prominent individuals who have a relationship with the Faith could be invited. But the most distinguishing feature of these bicentenaries will be a tremendous flourishing of activity by Bahá'ís and their friends in local communities.

It should be noted that, although each anniversary is associated primarily with just one of the Manifestations, in each case the celebrations ought to encompass both of the Twin Birthdays, and events may be spread out across the full length of the two days. Naturally, these Holy Days will also be marked at the Bahá'í World Centre by those pilgrims, visitors, and staff who are in the Holy Land at the time.

261.3At the heart of these festivities must be a concerted effort to convey a sense of what it means for humanity that these two Luminaries rose successively above the horizon of the world. Of course, this will take different forms in different contexts, extending to a myriad artistic and cultural expressions, including songs, audio-visual presentations, publications and books. Such initiatives, coupled with widespread celebrations that are both uplifting and reverent, are also sure to spark the curiosity and wonder of many who may as yet be unfamiliar with the names of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. However, the real transformative power of the Faith is likely to be perceived more readily still if people experience how worship and meaningful service are being woven into the fabric of the lives of Bahá'ís everywhere. Indeed, from the community-building activities of the Five Year Plan emerges a pattern of collective life within which anyone can discern the vivifying influence of the divine teachings brought by God's Manifestations. Each bicentenary will doubtless kindle a spirit of faithful endeavour that will permeate all the noble undertakings of the friends.

261.4As suggested in this year's Ridván message, the six cycles leading up to the first of the special anniversaries can be viewed as an initial period over which progress toward the overall goal of the Five Year Plan can be measured. The steps taken during these months, and the achievements that come as a result, will constitute an offering of ardent love, yielded collectively to Him Who is the Unifier of the world on the bicentenary of His Birth. The spiritual forces that are sure to be released on that most auspicious occasion will do much to spur the friends into action as they commence the eight cycles that lie between the two bicentenaries, during which the greatest share of the effort needed to fulfil the goal of the Plan will be required. Similarly, events surrounding the two-hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb will lend an infusion of energy to the global spiritual enterprise as it enters its final six cycles leading up to Ridván 2021. There is, therefore, every reason to expect that the emphasis given to commemorating these Holy Days will have a considerable and cumulative impact on the work of raising vibrant communities—not least on the enrichment of devotional life.

261.5This letter is being sent now so that there is ample time for you to impress upon your respective communities the significance of the coming Festivals and encourage preparations to begin. An important aspect of what must occur is the sense of shared experience and global solidarity arising from so many gatherings being held in a concentrated span of time, and in an enormous variety of places, bringing together souls who have glimpsed the timeless

splendour of those divine Figures Who set in motion an irresistible process of individual and social change. Arrangements will be put in place to enable communities to submit reports on their activities so that these can rapidly be made available to the widest possible audience. More information about these arrangements will be provided at a later date.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

262

Appointment of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

19 May 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

262.1It is with great pleasure that we inform you that the following individuals have been appointed to the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh for the coming three-year term, which will commence on the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb: Mr. Enos Makhele, Dr. Manijeh Reyhani, Mr. Adam Robarts, Mrs. Marzia Rowhani Dalal, and Mr. William Wieties.

262.2The increase in the membership of the Board from three to five represents another significant step in the evolution of the institution of Huqúqu'lláh. It is an indication of the growing capacity of the Bahá'í world to implement this mighty law of Bahá'u'lláh, which in turn has placed greater demands upon the 31 Regional and National Boards throughout the world, operating under the guidance of the International Board of Trustees.

262.3Dr. Ramin Khadem and Mr. Rodrigo Tomás, now released from service on the International Board, have earned our abiding gratitude for the exemplary dedication they have shown in the discharge of their duties as Trustees of the Right of God.

The Universal House of Justice

263

Call for Pioneers

23 May 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

263.1In our letter dated 26 March 2016, we described the response of the Bahá'í world to the Tablets of the Divine Plan, in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged the friends to travel "toward the East and toward the West and enlighten the people with the light of the Most Great Guidance, so that they may take a portion and share of eternal life." In the decades following the issuance of those weighty Tablets, a stream of believers settled in far-flung corners of the world and planted the banner of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh amidst divers peoples and nations. While devoted pioneers serving in the international arena initially came mainly from North America, Iran and Europe, as the Faith has advanced globally, they now hail from numerous spots across the planet. Indeed, over the course of the last Five Year Plan, some 1,500 friends from over 110 countries ventured into this field. At the same time, capacity has gradually grown in national communities to foster a systematic

process of building vibrant communities, and the task of propagating the Faith has come to rest primarily on the shoulders of local inhabitants labouring on the home front, where they have the advantage of familiarity with the language and culture and can settle more readily in nearby clusters as well as remote areas. That nearly 5,000 believers arose to serve as homefront pioneers during the last Plan bears testimony to this greatly increased capacity and is a source of immense joy to us.

263.2Although in recent years an increasing proportion of pioneers are serving on the home front, it is our hope that the friends will continue to consider entering the international arena, whenever their circumstances allow. Opportunity is, of course, open to any believer to arise and settle where he or she can contribute to the progress of the Plan, yet in some countries the need for international pioneers is particularly pressing. In this regard, as anticipated in the last pioneer call, throughout the previous Five Year Plan we drew the attention of selected National Spiritual Assemblies to specific pioneering needs that arose in relation to ten special initiatives that were launched to support the growth and development of the Faith in certain regions with the help of friends from several countries. These devoted servants of Bahá'u'lláh, working alongside the local friends, have helped to strengthen the roots of the Cause in all the countries covered by these initiatives, bringing greater dynamism to the institute process and local community life and, in a number of instances, aiding in the emergence of institutions. Over the coming five years, the International Teaching Centre will continue to identify areas that would benefit from such endeavours with the expectation that, as a result, by the end of the Plan there will be at least one well-advanced intensive programme of growth in every country in the world where external conditions allow for such a development.

263.3The deployment of homefront pioneers over the next five years will be largely guided by the requirements set out in our message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. As stated in that message, the Five Year Plan just launched aims at raising the number of clusters with an intensive programme of growth to 5,000. A continuing flow of homefront pioneers will contribute significantly to this monumental goal. Whatever assistance they are able to provide to further the work of the Plan is, of course, most welcome; nevertheless, their efforts will have an even greater effect if, guided by the institutions, their capabilities are directed towards specific needs in clusters where the friends are labouring to intensify the growth process. While many friends who wish to serve as homefront pioneers can make commitments that span years, there are those who may only be able to offer shorter periods, sometimes as little as three months. Such friends can kindle a spirit of selfless service and transmit valuable experience from stronger clusters to emerging ones. In time, they return to their communities much inspired and enriched, able to contribute even more effectively to the advancement of their own clusters. We hope that the friends, especially the youth who may have the time and determination to do so during their extended holidays, will take advantage of the opportunity to enter the pioneering field in this way.

263.4It is to the two pioneering imperatives set out above—one primarily in the international field, the other on the home front—that we now call the friends, confident that their response, which with each stage of the Divine Plan grows in both quantity and quality, will be equal to the demands before the community of the Greatest Name. The friends who arise to foster, with tact, love, unity and fortitude, a pattern of community life in clusters across the globe will undoubtedly draw inspiration from the Master's heartfelt cry expressed in the Tablets of the Divine Plan: "O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of 'Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá' in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it."

The Universal House of Justice

264

Selection and Settlement of Pioneers

23 May 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

264.1You have by now received the pioneer call of the Universal House of Justice for the current Plan, in the letter dated 23 May 2016. Considering the vital responsibility that your institution bears to facilitate, in close collaboration with the Continental Counsellors, the flow of pioneers to intended destinations, we have been asked to convey the following.

264.2As mentioned in that letter, over the last five years special initiatives were launched in ten regions of the world to support the growth and development of the Faith with the help of international pioneers. In each case, the House of Justice called upon specific National Spiritual Assemblies to identify, in consultation with the Counsellors, a few friends who might wish to participate. The ability of National Assemblies to quickly find, orient, and dispatch pioneers has been, in no small measure, a critical factor in the success of these initiatives. There is no doubt that new endeavours of this nature will be announced in this Plan, and it is the hope of the House of Justice that, when called upon, National Assemblies will demonstrate a similar expeditious response. Continental Pioneer Committees, which are fully cognizant of the requirements of each initiative, will, of course, be able to assist them by continuing to provide timely advice and resources in order to facilitate the movement of pioneers.

264.3As a result of the systematic efforts of the friends who were involved in these endeavours, an approach has gradually emerged that has proven to be efficacious in reinforcing the process of growth in those countries where it has lagged. The main elements of this approach include the selection and settlement of pioneers; the appointment of one or more resource persons who work closely with the pioneers and local believers and assist with the strengthening of the training institute; the fostering of genuine friendships with a growing number of individuals, particularly from among the youth who are often invited to participate in youth gatherings where insightful conversations on the community-building process take place; the introduction of courses of

the training institute and the ensuing multiplication of core activities, especially the junior youth programme; and the regular gathering of friends involved at the level of coordination in order to plan and to disseminate learning. While the approach outlined above has so far been applied in the context of international pioneering, in larger countries it could be implemented with similar effectiveness on the home front, in those regions that would greatly benefit from outside assistance in order to unlock the potential for growth.

264.4It is expected that during this Plan many of those who will arise to serve in the field of pioneering will come from the ranks of the youth. In this connection, the pioneer call puts forward a suggestion that friends, especially from strong clusters, may wish to offer service for a short period during their extended holidays; indeed, some may be able to settle in a village or neighbourhood within a nearby cluster, buttressing the efforts of local inhabitants. All these friends will require not only your encouragement, but also the timely provision of guidance and resources. The movement of pioneers in support of activities within a cluster is, of course, but one strategy amongst others, albeit a vital one. The efforts of pioneers need to be complemented through other means, such as visiting teams or institute campaigns, to ensure that the progress of the cluster proceeds uninterrupted.

264.5Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that an outpouring of divine bestowals may reinforce your efforts to assist all who wish to respond to its call for pioneers and go forth, relying on the confirming power of Bahá'u'lláh, to serve His Cause both at home and in other lands.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

265

Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Not Yet Universally Applied

24 May 2016

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

265.1Further to our letter dated 11 November 2015, sent in response to your email letter of 21 September 2014 enquiring about the applicability of Bahá'í laws related to burial and wills, the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to convey the following.

265.2Enclosed is a basic overview, recently approved by the House of Justice, of laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that are not yet universally applied. This document also sets forth the universally binding laws related to burial of the dead (see IV.D.1.k).

265.3The writing of a will is one of the laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas which is already binding on the friends (see paragraph 109). Furthermore, as you will know from your study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh has laid down detailed rules for the devolution of property in cases of intestacy—that is, when the individual dies without leaving a will. However, as the enclosed overview confirms, the laws of intestacy in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are currently not universally applicable and are normally covered by civil laws

(see IV.C.3.a–n).
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
LAWS OF THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS NOT YET UNIVERSALLY APPLIED
March 2016
265.4After the universal application of the provisions of the Badí'
calendar, the Universal House of Justice has provided the following basic
overview of laws noted in the Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas
which are not at present universally binding upon the friends. The numbers of
the sections are given for ease of reference. As the House of Justice has
explained in the Introduction to The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book,
"where Bahá'u'lláh has
given a law as between a man and a woman, it applies mutatis mutandis between a
woman and a man unless the context makes this impossible."
IV.C.1.i.i
The laws governing betrothal: the period of engagement not exceeding 95 days.
IV.C.1.j
The law concerning the payment of a dowry by the groom to the bride on
marriage.
IV.C.1.l & m
The laws concerning the travelling of a husband away from his wife.
IV.C.1.n & o
The laws relating to the virginity of the wife.
IV.C.2.b
That part of the divorce law relating to fines payable to the House of Justice.
IV.C.3. a–n
The law of inheritance in cases of intestacy. This is normally covered by civil
laws at the present time.
IV.D.1.a
The law of pilgrimage.
IV.D.1.d
The law of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is gradually being put into effect.
IV.D.1.j
The age of maturity applies only to Bahá'í religious duties as yet. On
other matters it is subject to the civil law of each country. The age of
administrativematurity in the Bahá'í community has, for the time being,
been fixed at 21.
IV.D.1.k
For the burial of the dead, the only requirements now universally binding are
to bury the body in a coffin (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a
distance of one hour's journey from the place of death, and to say the Prayer
for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.
IV.D.1.p
The law of tithes.
IV.D.1.r
The law concerning the hunting of animals.
IV.D.1.t,

u, v & w
The laws relating to the finding of lost property, the disposition of treasure trove, the disposal of objects held in trust, and compensation for manslaughter are all designed for a future state of society. These matters are usually covered by the civil law of each country.
IV.D.1.y.xiv,
xv, xvi,
& xvii
Arson, adultery, murder, and theft are all forbidden to Bahá'ís, but the punishments prescribed for them in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are designed for a future state of society. Such matters are usually covered by the civil laws of each country.
IV.D.1.y.xxv,
xxx, xxxi, & xxxii
The laws prohibiting the use of the type of pools which used to be found in Persian baths, the plunging of one's hand in food, the shaving of one's head, and the growth of men's hair below the lobe of the ear.
265.5All the exhortations listed in section IV.D.3 are applicable universally at the present time insofar as it is possible for the friends to implement them; for example, the exhortation to teach one's children to chant the Holy Verses in the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár can be literally carried out only on a limited scale at the present time, but the friends should, nevertheless, teach their children the Holy Writings as far as possible.
266
International Financial Collaboration Programme
10 July 2016
To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
266.1For many years now, the international financial collaboration goals programme has proved to be a useful approach for allowing selected national communities to assist their sister communities financially. It provides an opportunity for these communities to give practical expression to their sense of global solidarity. The Master describes the need for voluntary sharing, affirming that it "leadeth to society's comfort and peace" and that "it lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind."
266.2As you know, at the beginning of each of the recent Plans, the Universal House of Justice has asked National Spiritual Assemblies it has deemed able to offer such assistance to consider how much they could contribute towards the capital expenses of other national communities during the course of that Plan. On the basis of these estimates, the House of Justice called upon these National Assemblies to assist communities in various countries as and when specific needs came to its attention.
266.3During the recently concluded Five Year Plan, 43 National Assemblies contributed more than US$3,500,000 to 41 national Bahá'í communities in all parts of the globe. These funds were expended on a variety of needs, such as the acquisition, construction, renovation, and upkeep of Bahá'í properties as well as the purchase of furniture and equipment necessary for

teaching and administrative work. The House of Justice has observed with pleasure the generosity and eagerness with which national communities have rushed to each other's aid—another demonstration of the ties of unity that bind together the Bahá'í world in one common Cause.

266.4Your National Spiritual Assembly is one of 51 now being invited to participate in the international financial collaboration goals programme for the new Five Year Plan. You have been selected because the House of Justice believes you are in a position to assist other national communities that have not been endowed materially to the same extent. In this connection, it would be appreciated if you could provide the House of Justice, before 30 September 2016, with an estimate of the amount you can offer as financial collaboration during this Plan. Such an estimate would preferably break down the total sum you can make available, indicating how much you believe you can provide each year. If, in the months between Ridván 2016 and when you submit your pledge, you receive a request to fulfil a specific goal, then the sum you are requested to contribute will be counted towards the amount you are able to offer in the first twelve months. To assist you in determining the total sum you can provide, we have been asked to inform you that the House of Justice anticipates that at least US$3,500,000 will be required to meet the financial collaboration goals to be assigned during the current Plan. Kindly note that if monies remain from the pledge your Assembly made at the start of the previous Plan, these may be carried forward to form part of your new pledge.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

267

Delegates to the National Convention

4 August 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

267.1One of the distinguishing features of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is the Bahá'í Administrative Order, the nucleus and pattern of the future World Order He has promised. A fundamental aspect of the endeavours of the friends to upraise that Order is the election by believers in locations across the globe of their delegates to the National Convention, occasions which also allow for discussions regarding local and national affairs. These delegates, in turn, will "fulfil the functions of an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly." In addition, it is they, as Shoghi Effendi explained, who have the great privilege and delicate task "to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause". It behooves each National Assembly, then, to do everything possible to assist the friends to become conscious of their vital obligation and to facilitate the participation of the greatest number in the election of the delegates.

267.2As stated in the by-laws of a National Spiritual Assembly, delegates are chosen under the principle of proportionate representation. In a letter dated 21 July 1985 to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of

Justice indicated that delegates to National Conventions everywhere would be elected on the basis of electoral units. To this end, a National Assembly would divide the territory under its jurisdiction into electoral units, based on the number of adult Bahá'ís in each area, in such a way that each unit would be responsible for electing preferably one delegate only. However, in some instances, a unit could be made large enough to be the electoral base for several delegates. Although a convention is usually called in each unit, the House of Justice indicated that if holding a unit convention was not effective or viable, National Assemblies were free to explore other methods of facilitating the process of voting, such as dividing electoral units into sub-units or establishing polling stations where the friends could leave their ballots on the voting day.

267.3Since 2001, the division of countries into clusters has greatly enhanced the administration of affairs related to the expansion and consolidation of the community. When determining the boundaries of clusters, National Assemblies generally took into consideration such factors as culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants. Within the boundaries of a cluster the believers are able to interact with greater ease, to develop strong bonds of friendship, to serve together in common projects, to think about the growth of the Faith on a manageable scale, and to design and implement plans close to the grassroots of the community. As anticipated, other administrative processes of the Faith have not remained unaffected by such developments at the level of the cluster. In this regard, a number of National Assemblies have found it prudent to establish electoral units on the basis of cluster boundaries, thus drawing upon the positive dynamics generated by the expansion and consolidation of the community to reinforce and reinvigorate the electoral process related to unit conventions.

267.4Over time, several aspects of this approach have become clear. In an area of a country with a relatively sparse Bahá'í population, a unit may include a number of clusters, while a cluster with a high population of believers might constitute a single unit, and perhaps even require the allocation of more than one delegate in accordance with the principle of proportionality. The House of Justice has followed with interest this approach to delineating electoral unit boundaries and urges all National Assemblies that have not done so to consider the viability of implementing it for the current year. The Assembly should ensure that the divisions, wherever possible, are made in such a way that each unit has at least one community with a well-established pattern of growth in which the unit convention can be held.

267.5There may be cases where the National Assembly would need to apply other criteria—for example, in small countries with very few clusters, the manner of division outlined above may result in allocating a large number of delegates to a single unit. In such instances, the area of jurisdiction of Local Spiritual Assemblies could be used as the boundary; however, under no circumstances should such a locality be divided between electoral units. In other cases, for example in countries that have several well-functioning communities situated far apart, a cluster could be divided into a number of

separate units, or into several sub-units. If electoral units are divided into sub-units, it will be important to remember that the delegates to be elected represent the entire unit, and therefore each voter has all the adult believers resident in the entire unit to choose from.

267.6In allocating delegates under the principle of proportionate representation—that is, in direct proportion to the number of adult believers residing in each unit—it would not be correct to use the degree of activity of the believers as a criterion. Beyond this, however, National Assemblies have a certain latitude in interpreting the information they have on the Bahá'í population in their countries. For instance, it is possible for them to maintain a list of believers with known addresses, and another list of those whose addresses are unknown. Maintaining two lists in this fashion does not reduce the figure for the total number of Bahá'ís, and the Assembly is then free to assign delegates according to the adult believers with known addresses. In those countries where a significant advance has been made in entering data into the Statistical Report Program, the population figures in the Program can be considered to be an accurate representation of the number of believers about whom information is known and used when allocating delegates to the electoral units.

267.7It is the responsibility of the National Assembly to allocate delegates to units within the country and to decide all matters of detail regarding the methods and procedures by which the elections will take place in each unit. In countries where Regional Bahá'í Councils have been established, the National Assembly may ask them to oversee the arrangement of unit elections. Given that the Councils are well familiar with the realities of the communities within the region, they may also be requested to submit a proposal for the division of their regions into electoral units, including sub-units, for the review and approval of the National Assembly. In all countries, details related to the actual holding of unit conventions or sub-unit meetings are usually devolved to Local Assemblies. In the absence of a strong Local Assembly, this task may be entrusted to a committee.

267.8An imperative for those responsible for organizing the unit convention is to ensure that all the adult believers residing in a unit are provided ample opportunity to cast their ballots for electing their delegate. In this regard, careful attention will need to be given to the choice of venue, including those for sub-unit conventions, in order to afford the friends easy access. As there are occasions when the friends gather to discuss the affairs of their community and the progress of the Cause, reflection meetings for example, consideration could be given to having the believers cast their ballots at a unit convention held on the same day as such meetings. For those friends who are unable to attend the unit convention, arrangements may be made to receive their ballots at the Nineteen Day Feast or a specially designated venue, or by mail. Ballots may also be accepted by telephone, email, text message, or online, if the institution overseeing the election is able to reliably identify the person who is voting and to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.

267.9Everything possible should be done to ensure that delegates, once elected, attend the National Convention, where they carry out their responsibilities as

summarized in the 16 May 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice. In some countries there may be formidable obstacles preventing full attendance, but the National Assembly can learn over time to facilitate maximum participation. For instance, the long distances some delegates must travel in order to attend the National Convention may create a financial burden they are unable to bear. In general in such cases, if a delegate is unable to pay his or her own travel costs, the believers from the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged to defray such expenses. If funds are unavailable from this source, delegates may approach the National Assembly to seek assistance; however, it would not be wise for an Assembly to apply a policy of fully reimbursing all the delegates. This would not prevent it, of course, from considering the situation of each delegate and deciding whether it could assist with his or her participation at National Convention. Those delegates who cannot attend should nevertheless exercise their spiritual obligation to vote for the membership of the incoming National Assembly.

267.10Since the inception of the new series of Plans aimed at the systematic acceleration of the process of entry by troops, the community of the Greatest Name has gained much insight about the evolution of the Administrative Order in light of the principles enshrined in the Writings and the precious experience related to growth that has been accumulated in cities, towns, and villages in the four corners of the earth. A well-ordered electoral process implemented in accordance with the Bahá'í Teachings is a key component of the healthy development of the institutions of the Faith. Unit conventions provide a venue to deepen the understanding of the friends about the unique nature of Bahá'í elections, and wholehearted participation in the election of delegates to the National Convention affords an opportunity for every responsible, conscientious believer to develop deeper bonds of love and enhance a spiritual connection with his or her National Spiritual Assembly. That the friends will come forward, in ever-increasing numbers, to perform this sacred obligation is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice. Rest assured of its prayers in the Holy Shrines that divine bestowals may accompany you in your diligent efforts towards this end.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

268

Development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in Areas of Large-Scale Growth

17 August 2016

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

268.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 24 June 2016 regarding the meeting of members of a Regional Bahá'í Council with Local Spiritual Assemblies. As you have rightly indicated, such visits should have a specific purpose decided upon by the Regional Council and should not merely be at the initiative of an individual member. Of course, the mandate that has been given to Councils in connection with the development of Local Assemblies goes beyond such occasional meetings. Your Assembly would naturally wish to follow closely the trajectory along which Local Assemblies grow in

capacity and, in close consultation with the Counsellors, support Regional Councils as they direct their efforts towards stimulating this process. To assist you with your own exploration of this matter, we have been asked to convey the following.

268.2Endeavours to enhance institutional capacity represent a long-term process, one which is intricately linked to the implementation of the provisions of the global Plans. The Cause has now entered a stage in its organic development defined by the systematic advancement in the process of entry by troops through the strengthening of all three of the Plan's protagonists—the individual, the institutions, and the community. In this light, it is evident that the strengthening of the institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly cannot be pursued in isolation from other essential aspects of the Plan.

268.3In the message dated 28 December 2010, the House of Justice envisioned the emergence of Local Assemblies in clusters worldwide, which would come into existence and steadily develop along "a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth". Individual awareness of that process, born of the personal involvement in it by Assembly members, must coalesce "into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it." These Local Assemblies, vital protagonists of the Plan, must emerge and develop in locality after locality in the precious years ahead to reinforce and coordinate the efforts of the believers. As the House of Justice explained:

> Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word." Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

268.4Currently, well over half of the clusters with a programme of growth in India do not have any Local Spiritual Assemblies. Nevertheless, in these clusters there are usually one or more localities in which the friends are implementing the pattern of action called for in the Plan, often accompanied by agencies that serve at the cluster level, as well as by Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Such clusters often have a high proportion of youth, only a few of whom may have formally enrolled in the Faith. In time, and with an increase in the number of adult believers in each locality, the Regional Council must learn how to introduce into the ongoing conversations among the friends in these clusters a discussion about Local Spiritual Assemblies, which,

even as loving parents, are “charged with the responsibility of promoting at all times the best interests of the communities within their jurisdiction”. This would also include discussing the responsibility of every adult believer to “regard it his sacred duty to take part, conscientiously and diligently,” in their election and to support the Assembly once formed. Such conversations will be especially urgent in those clusters that have advanced beyond the second milestone.

268.5To foster a more systematic approach to the emergence and development of Local Assemblies, you are advised to consult with the Counsellors, select a few of the stronger Regional Councils, and help them initiate a process of learning in selected clusters about how to introduce the believers to the basics of Bahá’í administration, facilitate the election of Assemblies, and support the Assemblies as they gain in experience and maturity. Thoughtful attention to the guidance in the 28 December 2010 and 29 December 2015 messages will ensure that Assemblies emerge in a sound manner that takes advantage of and complements the wide range of developments at the level of locality and cluster. Early steps would of course be modest. Over time, the Regional Councils, with the close support of the Counsellors, would seek to address many issues that naturally arise in the course of the development of Local Assemblies.

268.6Among these are the need to learn about the nature of a conversation about administration and the election of an Assembly and how such a conversation can be introduced; the basic concepts that need to be understood by all community members; whether it would be necessary or desirable in certain contexts to take some preliminary administrative steps as a precursor to the formation of a Local Assembly; how the first election would be organized; what means the Board member, or his or her assistant, could use early on to help orient the members of an Assembly to the nature of their responsibilities as envisioned in the 28 December 2010 message, for example, what can be done to assist the Assembly to lay the foundation of “that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship” with individual believers and to reinforce the community activities already taking place in the locality; and how the Assembly will begin to address its initial administrative responsibilities, such as holding regular meetings, arranging for the Nineteen Day Feast, and establishing the local Fund. The scope of this endeavour should include learning about the contribution that must be made to this process by National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá’í Councils, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, Area Teaching Committees, and the training institute.

268.7Further, the matter of the jurisdiction of Local Assemblies may need consideration. In this regard, thought will need to be given as to whether a modification in the approach to establishing the jurisdiction of a Local Assembly would enable it to better align itself to the growth process in the cluster. Following consultation with the Counsellors, kindly share your conclusions with the House of Justice and seek its views.

268.8In time, your Assembly should be able to document the experience being gained about the development of Local Assemblies, from their early inception to higher levels of mature functioning. Such a document will prove invaluable for

all the Regional Bahá'í Councils in India. In all your efforts in this regard, you will no doubt take into account the many lessons and insights that are already imparted to the generality of believers through the sequence of courses of the training institute. While all the courses are relevant to this end, those that come later in the main sequence aim more specifically at building capacity for the development of the communities and institutions.

268.9Of course, the responsibility of Regional Councils is not confined to the formation of new Local Assemblies in those clusters and localities that do not have one at this time. Local Assemblies, each at a different stage of development, already exist in every region of the country and these would also need varying degrees of assistance to ensure that they are formed each year and steadily grow in strength and maturity. One matter before all Assemblies at this time is preparations for the observances of the bicentenaries of the Twin Birthdays in 2017. As the House of Justice indicated in its letter of 18 May 2016, the locus of activity for the bicentenaries will be at the local level, in both rural and urban settings, and, wherever Assemblies have at least a basic level of functioning, they will play an important part in the arrangements. Indeed, focusing on a concrete task of this significance could help Assemblies develop critical capacities in such areas as planning and organizing befitting activities, raising resources, rallying the believers, interacting with segments of the wider society, and managing the follow-up efforts after the events conclude.

268.10The House of Justice assures you of its prayers at the Sacred Threshold that the institutions in India may be surrounded by the guidance and abundant confirmations of the Blessed Beauty in all their endeavours.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

269

Change of Representative at the Dedication of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in Chile

24 August 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

269.1We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to inform you that, owing to unforeseen circumstances, Ms. Alison Milston, member of the International Teaching Centre, will be unable to attend the dedication of the Mother Temple of South America in October 2016. In her stead, the House of Justice has called upon another member of the International Teaching Centre, Mrs. Antonella Demonte, to serve as its representative on that auspicious occasion.

Department of the Secretariat

270

Use of Digital Technology in Publishing Works of Scripture

5 September 2016

To a Bahá'í Publishing Trust

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

270.1Your email letter dated 16 April 2016 outlining your plans for a new approach to publishing Bahá'í literature in … and your email letter of

22 February 2016 requesting digital files of various publications have been received by the Universal House of Justice, and we have been asked to reply as follows.

270.2The detailed presentation of your thoughts on the application of digital technology to Bahá'í publishing was appreciated. It is understood that you envision [your] role as shifting from a focus on traditional book publishing to the digital management of texts and translations. Undoubtedly, advances in technology have made possible the dissemination of Bahá'í literature to a degree hitherto unimaginable, and that potential must certainly be harnessed and deployed to the fullest. Yet, for all its formidable power and potential, technology is a tool that serves other higher goals and purposes and should not become the chief determinant of direction. The possibilities it offers must be evaluated with attention to their impact on the encounter between the reader and the revealed Word. Consider, for example, the capability of hypertext to make supplemental information from a multitude of sources immediately accessible to the reader. While that is unquestionably valuable in some contexts, there are principles to consider. Throughout history the practice of combining commentary and Sacred Text has been ubiquitous; only in this Dispensation has it become possible for each individual to read the Word of God and its authorized interpretations without the mediation of a priestly class. Because of the need to avoid encumbering the Text with commentary, the House of Justice has determined that it would be inappropriate to publish editions of the Writings that incorporate study guides or other extensive explanatory material. When viewed in light of such considerations, the provision of substantial supplemental information in conjunction with the Text would not be appropriate. It should be noted that there is a distinction between what an individual may freely do for his or her own use and what is appropriate for a Bahá'í agency to issue as an edition of the Holy Text.

270.3To offer another example, the practice of repeatedly revising translations must be viewed in light of the impact of frequent change upon readers—a consideration that outweighs all but the most serious of corrections or revisions to the translation of a text. As the House of Justice has indicated in a letter dated 7 October 1973 to a National Assembly:

You will find that where translations already exist believers will have formed many emotional attachments to the forms of words used. In the case of prayers for example, they may have committed many of them to memory. It is thus unwise to repeatedly change translations and therefore we advise you to do so only when the translations are really poor and there are obvious errors, and to concentrate your efforts on obtaining translations of the great volume of Bahá'í literature which has not yet been made available….

270.4It should be remembered that however advanced digital technology seems to be today, it is still new and at an early stage of its development. As its capabilities become more refined in the future, some of the problems you noted, such as the difficulty in recognizing variant spellings and transliterations of the same word or phrase, may be resolved. In that event, to resort to the drastic step of changing the texts to accommodate the limitations of today's technology would be premature. In any case, the thousands of texts that

comprise the unprecedented, incomparably rich treasury of writings of the Central Figures of the Faith and the beloved Guardian must be approached on their own terms, in all their complexity and variety, rather than as objects to be standardized so they may be managed by a system. It is helpful to keep in mind that although standardization is reasonable at the level of an individual text, a library is not a text but a collection of many different books, each with its own individuality.

270.5With respect to the English-language works available at this time on the new Bahá'í Reference Library website, those that are the most recent publications of the Bahá'í World Centre represent the current versions of those books, while others reproduce printed editions from the United States Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Publishers and translators are still advised to refer to the most recent printing of works and to contact the World Centre for information about editorial corrections that have been approved but not yet incorporated into a published edition.

270.6The vision for the Bahá'í Reference Library approved by the House of Justice includes some of the goals you have outlined, such as the assignment of reference numbers, which will be implemented as time and resources permit. Paragraph numbers are already included in the downloads for a number of works in the Reference Library. However, in the planning and implementation of the Library various approaches and issues, including some mentioned in your letter, were considered and evaluated in light of relevant factors as well as the learning gained, and decisions as a result were made to develop the Library in a particular direction. As you rightly note, international coordination is necessary if any system is to function properly, but such coordination naturally must come from the World Centre. It would be counterproductive for national agencies to launch their own systems intended for universal use or to outpace developments at the World Centre. Therefore, before proceeding further, it would no doubt be helpful for you to consult with your National Assembly about the direction and focus of the [Publishing Trust] and how it can best serve the needs of the Cause.

270.7Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your endeavours in the path of service may attract divine confirmations.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

271

Open Letter to the President of Iran

6 September 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

271.1The Universal House of Justice has directed us to share with you the enclosed copies, in English and Persian, of an open letter dated 6 September 2016 from the Bahá'í International Community to His Excellency Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The communication concerns the ongoing economic oppression of the Bahá'í community in that country and provides a history of the many and various ways in which the opportunities open to the Bahá'ís to earn a livelihood have been progressively curtailed. It

ends with the Bahá’í International Community expressing the expectation that the situation will be addressed by the President at a time when he is actively pursuing Iran’s economic and business cooperation with the international community.

271.2To write such a letter is a most unusual step, but you will appreciate that the situation faced by the Bahá’ís in Iran is quite extraordinary, one where a government is so swayed by prejudicial elements within its ranks that it has for several decades undertaken a systematic and unrelenting campaign of oppression against a significant section of its own population.

271.3The letter is sent to you for your information and in case you are asked about it by your government and others.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Open Letter to the President of Iran

6 September 2016

His Excellency Hassan RouhaniPresident

Islamic Republic of Iran

Your Excellency,

271.4The Office of the Bahá’í International Community at the United Nations, representing Bahá’ís in more than 230 countries and territories across five continents, would like to respectfully draw your attention to the stark contradiction that exists between the statements of the government of “Prudence and Hope” regarding “creating justice for all Iranians equally” and “promoting job creation and reducing unemployment” on the one hand, and the unrelenting economic oppression imposed upon the Bahá’í community in your nation on the other, and to ask for the immediate consideration of the matter. This economic oppression has now been continuing for four decades, and regrettably there has been no sign of improvement since the inauguration of your government.

271.5Bahá’ís are part of the citizenry of that same land whose diverse peoples Your Excellency has, in one of your recent talks, likened to the “branches of a strong tree called Iran”. The history of the past 170 years attests their loyalty and their constructive contributions to their cherished homeland. Regardless of the views held by some of the authorities towards Bahá’í religious beliefs and practice, the concept of all citizens having equal entitlement to basic rights is endorsed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is confirmed by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s own Constitution, and represents one of the fundamental requisites for the creation of an enlightened society. Since the inception of the Bahá’í Faith in Iran in 1844, severe and continuous opposition from religious fanatics supported by the governments of the time has continued to endanger the persons, livelihoods, and properties of the followers of the Bahá’í Faith, including their holy places and extending even to their cemeteries. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, this persecution took a different turn and became a major policy of the government of Iran. The purpose here is not to detail all the various forms of oppression inflicted on the Iranian Bahá’ís—for that would make of this letter a veritable treatise—but rather to offer a synopsis of the

economic limitations with which for nearly 40 years they have been confronted.
271.6In the early days of the Revolution, thousands of Bahá'í employees of government ministries, departments, and other entities were expelled from their posts without any compensation; their pensions were terminated, and some were even forced to pay back the salaries earned during their years of employment. Bahá'í workers were ousted from factories and companies wholly or partially owned by the government without any compensation for their years of work, any termination payments, or any of the insurance benefits rightfully owed to them. The prohibition against employment of Bahá'ís in the public sector of their native land remains in full force.
271.7Once Bahá'ís had been completely barred from government jobs, attention was turned to the private sector. Various methods, such as pressuring companies to dismiss their Bahá'í employees, forcing banks to block their Bahá'í clients' accounts, and using discriminatory tactics to prevent projects being awarded to appropriately qualified Bahá'ís, were used to severely limit the economic activities of the Bahá'ís in this sector. Under the irrational and offensive pretext of their being religiously "unclean", Bahá'ís were forbidden to engage in a wide range of trades and professions. Issuing or extending business licenses for Bahá'ís in other trades are often impeded through numerous obstacles and deliberate delays. With the properties of the Bahá'ís being confiscated on the basis of specious accusations, how many the flourishing farms that were wrested from hard-working farmers, some of whom had previously received letters of appreciation from the government, and how many thriving factories and companies were closed down. Countless incidents of injustice—such as when a taxi driver was refused a business license and explicitly told that this was because of his Faith, when a kiosk owned by a physically disabled individual was repeatedly vandalized and finally confiscated because "a Bahá'í does not have the right to work", or when the Bahá'ís in one province were arbitrarily denied the right to import goods from other provinces in Iran—are all justified under the baseless excuse of combatting the "threat to national security". In the past few years, many Bahá'ís have faced a new problem: when they close their shops in observance of one of the Bahá'í Holy Days, which are very few and scattered throughout the year, authorities seal off their businesses and threaten to withdraw their permits.
271.8Parallel with the actions mentioned above, many holdings belonging to the Bahá'í community, including sacred sites, administrative buildings, cemeteries, and even philanthropic foundations, were seized without any legal justification; valuable properties that had been donated to the community over the years were plundered; financial institutions holding considerable savings, some on behalf of Bahá'í children, were appropriated. In the cities, such confiscations were often combined with the imprisonment and in some instances even the execution of Bahá'ís, while in rural areas, these were typically done through coercion and violence.
271.9The economic consequences resulting from the denial of opportunities to Bahá'í youth to nourish their God-given talents are considerably more serious than many other forms of oppression. Numerous are those Bahá'í

artists or athletes who have been prevented from developing their evident talent and pursuing successful careers in their fields. And many are those who passionately wish to further their studies but, banned from either entering schools for gifted students or attending universities, see their advancement through the educational institutions of the country cruelly blocked. Soon after the Revolution, in addition to expelling Bahá'í academic professionals from universities, those responsible for the cultural aspects of the Islamic Republic also expelled Bahá'í students—some in the very last months of their education—and debarred new Bahá'í applicants from entering universities. This expulsion was formally instituted as government policy when, in 1991, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution created a statutory regulation that officially deprived Bahá'í youth of entry into institutions of higher education. The third clause of this document not only forbids the registering of Bahá'ís at university but also stipulates that, if students are identified as Bahá'í at any point during their studies, they should be immediately expelled and denied any further education.

271.10The Bahá'ís face yet further acts of persecution, every one of which has significant negative economic consequences, including repeated attacks on their homes and the plundering of their belongings, illegal imprisonment for spurious "crimes" and the setting of extremely high amounts for bail, constituting legal limitations on inheritance among the Bahá'ís, and efforts to instill fear and insecurity through implementing anti-Bahá'í policies.

Mr. President,

271.11This economic apartheid against a significant segment of Iran's population has undeniable negative consequences for the economic dynamism of the country and has ultimately deprived Iran of considerable human and financial resources. How will history judge those who have designed and carried out this scheme of economic strangulation? How can the deliberate policy of a government be to impoverish a section of its own society? How will those who are responsible for the financial, social, and psychological consequences of these discriminations justify what they have done? What religious or civil standard allows for a calculated exclusion of a population from participation in the economic life of its own country? How can talk of building a just and progressive society continue in the midst of such systematic injustice? What guarantee exists that other segments of the population will not face the same discrimination with similar excuses? What answers could satisfy the concerns voiced by informed Iranians over this oppression inflicted upon their fellow citizens? How can the contrast between these deprivations and the desire for the economic development of Iran through cooperation with the international community be reconciled? In what way do the discriminations against the Bahá'ís accord with the claims made by respected representatives of the Islamic Republic at international fora that the goal of their government is to improve the economic condition of the country for all its citizens? Above all, will the responsible authorities in a government claiming adherence to the ideals of Islam, account, in the presence of Almighty God, for such actions?

271.12It would be laudable were the members of the government to ponder the

damaging effects that these injustices exert on Iranian society, on the youth of that land, who are its future—youth who uphold the equality and nobility of people from diverse backgrounds, races, and beliefs and who are aware that the ultimate prosperity and happiness of their country and its citizens are unattainable except through this path. The question these forward-looking young people have for Your Excellency, as the custodian of the protection of the rights of all the citizens of Iran, is this: since belief in the Bahá'í Faith is not a crime, why do Bahá'ís face such all-embracing violation of their civil, economic, social, and cultural rights? How lamentable that because of ingrained prejudice, the distortion of history, and enslavement to conspiracy theories, the loyalty of Bahá'ís to their country and their sincere efforts to contribute to its well-being have been systematically disregarded, while bigoted individuals are left free to propagate unsubstantiated slander against them.

When prejudice appeared, virtue became hidden,
A hundred veils rose from the heart to the eye.

271.13Your stated aim to bring "hope, tranquillity, and economic prosperity" to Iran and to find innovative ways for it to benefit from the capacities and capabilities of all its citizens, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or religion, is commendable. The vision you have described of "equal citizenship rights and opportunities for all people" and "fair distribution of wealth to improve living standards of the people" has not been forgotten, and there are still those who hope that they will witness, in the not too distant future, the fulfilment of these high ideals. The Bahá'ís of Iran dearly love their homeland. They endeavour to contribute to the building of a progressive and dynamic society. They believe in the oneness of God, the oneness of humanity, and the oneness of religion. They regard the fostering of unity and accord to be their moral duty and, despite the severe oppression they endure, hold no hostility towards any authority or individual. They aim to educate their children so that, with reliance on spiritual and material resources, future generations will be enabled to dedicate their lives to the service of humankind and their country. It would be fitting that an environment be created in which the experience of the Bahá'í community, along with the experience of other citizens, could be utilized for the progress and advancement of the country.

271.14The expectation of the Bahá'í International Community is that you call upon your government to undertake an immediate review of the economic oppression imposed on the Bahá'ís, the largest non-Muslim minority in your country, and to remove the obstacles over time but with reasonable pace.

Yours respectfully,
[signed: Bani Dugal]
Principal Representative
Bahá'í International Community

272
Dedication of the Mother Temple of South America
14 October 2016

To the Friends Gathered in Santiago, Chile, for the Dedication of the Mother Temple of South America

Dearly loved Friends,

272.1We greet you with immense joy on this singular occasion, a moment of high achievement for the Bahá'í world after much earnest striving: The process of raising up Bahá'í Houses of Worship, an endeavour whose origins can be traced back to the days of the Blessed Beauty Himself, has reached the point where today a Mother Temple stands upon the soil of every continent. Three such Temples now lie on a pan-American axis, to whose southern pole you have all been drawn. As anticipated by the Guardian, it is the Chilean capital city that has become the site of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of South America. Blending grace and grandeur in equal measure, this Dawning-Point of God's Remembrance now summons all comers to worship the One Who is their Creator, their sovereign Lord, the Giver of Light to the world.

272.2The weighty statements in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas addressed to the presidents of the republics of the Americas, adding to the mandate given by the Báb to all the "peoples of the West" to aid His Cause, confer upon those countries, north and south, honour and obligations ineffaceable. Those pregnant words portended the intimate association of South America with the Faith. We recall with deep admiration the heroic and sacrificial deeds of those believers who first introduced to this continent the name of Bahá'u'lláh. With their resolve kindled by the rallying call of the Master in His Tablets delineating the Divine Plan, and urged on by Shoghi Effendi in the successive directions he gave for the Plan's prosecution, pioneers travelled to the nations of Latin America and began nurturing communities that could maintain Local and, eventually, National Spiritual Assemblies—communities that came to be designated by the Guardian as "associates of the chief executors of the Plan bequeathed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá". The success of large-scale teaching endeavours revealed the purity and open-mindedness of the continent's inhabitants in all their diversity, and their evident receptivity to the divine impulse. One of the most striking hallmarks of that period was the enthusiasm with which indigenous people embraced the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith, recognizing the power of His Word to liberate the soul and transform society. With such advances made, the friends took up the challenge of learning how to sustain a process of rapid expansion and consolidation. Insights that emerged from the experience accrued in this region have benefited the entire Bahá'í world, and the present-day efforts of the South American believers to spread the Faith and build communities upon spiritual foundations are a continuing source of inspiration. How fitting, then, that at a time when the peoples and nations of the Western Hemisphere have never been more in need of the illumination brought by the teachings of God's universal Messenger, a powerful spiritual beacon is now in full blaze at the foot of the Andes.

272.3The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is "one of the most vital institutions in the world". A Temple and its associated dependencies embody two essential and inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. As a potent symbol and an integral element of the divine civilization towards which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ushers all peoples, the House of Worship

becomes the focal point of the community from which it emerges. “The holy fragrances of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “vivify the souls of the righteous, and its vitalizing breezes confer life upon the pure in heart.” Indeed, its influence is such as to galvanize an entire people to reach for a more profound sense of unified purpose. The gaze of the Bahá’í world is at this hour fixed upon its newly dedicated Temple, and we are certain that this longed-for victory will bring jubilation to the friends everywhere. Yet they will surely not be content to simply rejoice amongst themselves. Inspired by all that this sublime edifice stands for, let them invite others to discover the abiding joy that comes from the praise of God and from service to humankind.

272.4Bowing our heads at the Threshold of the Ancient Beauty, we give thanks that He has enabled His devoted followers to construct so striking a Temple fashioned of glass, stone, and light, nurturing an attraction to the sacred. The gratitude we feel increases our longing for that glorious day when the blessing of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár will be conferred upon every city and village, and we look first with eagerness to those countries where national and local Houses of Worship are beginning to emerge. May the resplendent sight of what the community of the Greatest Name has now accomplished in Santiago spur the faithful everywhere to intensify their service, however humble, rendered for the betterment of the world, offered to the Glory of God.

The Universal House of Justice

273

Martyrdom of Farhang Amírí

25 October 2016

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

273.1With profound sorrow, the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to share with you information pertaining to the martyrdom of Farhang Amírí from Yazd, Iran, on 26 September 2016, and to request you to take action, as outlined below.

273.2The circumstances surrounding Mr. Amírí’s murder are now well established. On the evening of 25 September, two young men arrived outside his home and, since he was not there, spoke with one of his sons, asking to purchase Mr. Amírí’s van. Mr. Amírí’s son said that he was not aware that his father wished to sell the vehicle, but the two men insisted. He asked for their contact information, but they made excuses and left. The following evening, the same two individuals returned and met with Mr. Amírí himself outside his residence while family members remained inside. Soon after, Mr. Amírí was heard screaming. A family member, who was then joined by several other people, found him severely injured with multiple stab wounds in the chest. At the same time, local shopkeepers apprehended a man who was running away from the scene and delivered him to the police; a second man was also detained by the police later. Mr. Amírí was brought by ambulance to the hospital where he died a few minutes after arrival.

273.3While being questioned by the police in front of witnesses, the two suspects admitted killing Mr. Amírí with a knife they brought with them for

this purpose. When asked about their motive, one of the suspects answered that he carried out the murder because he knew Mr. Amírí was a Bahá'í. Even though during subsequent interrogations the two suspects claimed that they had attacked him because the discussion over the sale of the vehicle escalated, the most recent reports confirm that the suspects have admitted that their actions were indeed religiously motivated.

273.4Such a heinous deed is a consequence of a longstanding, systematic effort by the authorities to encourage hatred and bigotry. Just in the city of Yazd alone, there have been multiple acts of persecution over the past few years, including dozens of wrongful arrests and imprisonments as well as scores of raids on Bahá'í residences and businesses. Mr. Amírí's own children had their business and residences searched last year by government agents who confiscated laptops, telephones, and other items. In early August of this year, a believer in this town was told while being interrogated by government agents in Yazd that they knew of people in the city who intended on killing Bahá'ís….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

274

Development of the Institution of the Auxiliary Board

25 November 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

274.1Today, the Day of the Covenant, marks the start of a new term of service for the members of the Auxiliary Boards for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith throughout the world, a term which will conclude in the final hours of the first century of the Formative Age. These consecrated officers of the Cause constitute an institution originally conceived and created by Shoghi Effendi to assist the Hands of the Cause of God in their "dual and sacred task of safeguarding the Faith and of promoting its teaching activities." Now serving as auxiliaries to the Continental Counsellors, they and their assistants play a decisive part in the unfoldment of the global Plans, bringing to the work breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. In cluster after cluster, from the first stirrings of activity, they labour alongside the friends, assisting individuals, communities, and institutions to focus their attention on the Plan, to maintain a conception of what needs to be done and the next steps to be taken, and to appreciate the complementarity of the efforts of all the friends and the need for mutual support. And in every aspect of their service, they foster a spirit of love and unity. So great will be the demands asked of them in the present Plan that we feel compelled to add to the ranks of Auxiliary Board members some 144, bringing the total number to 1,134, equally divided between the Boards for Protection and Propagation. As the Auxiliary Board members take up their new appointments, they will be assisted in deepening their understanding of the spiritual nature of their work and the wide-ranging responsibilities they will shoulder through a series of conferences, called for by the International Teaching Centre, that will take place between now and Ridván 2017. It is our

ardent hope that, as a result of these gatherings, an added surge of energy will be diffused throughout the community, reinforcing the valiant exertions of the friends everywhere, and we will offer our supplications at the Sacred Threshold that the sacrificial efforts of the Auxiliary Board members may draw forth unceasing confirmations from the hosts of the celestial Concourse.
The Universal House of Justice
275
Release of Training Institutes: Attaining a Higher Level of Functioning
10 January 2017
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
275.1Enclosed is a copy of a document entitled Training Institutes: Attaining a Higher Level of Functioning, prepared by the International Teaching Centre at the request of the Universal House of Justice. It is the latest in a series of documents that have been issued, beginning in 1998, to summarize the experience being gained throughout the world in advancing the process of entry by troops. The study of the present document will, it is hoped, enrich your ongoing consultations with the Counsellors and reinforce your own efforts in overseeing the development of the training institute. To aid in the effective dissemination of this document, the International Teaching Centre will encourage the Counsellors to organize a few gatherings on each continent, to which a number of individuals, including those from various agencies closely associated with the institute and some members of institutions, will be invited.
275.2As the friends incorporate the insights gained from their study of the document into the plans for each institute, the House of Justice is confident that their endeavours to build spiritually vibrant communities will gain a fresh impetus.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
276
Publication of Days of Remembrance
17 January 2017
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
276.1As you will recall, in July 2015, in anticipation of the first universal observance of the Twin Holy Birthdays of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh according to the Badí' calendar, the Universal House of Justice released three Tablets from the volume Days of Remembrance: Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for Bahá'í Holy Days then in preparation. The House of Justice is pleased to announce the publication of this work and to present your National Spiritual Assembly with a complimentary copy.
276.2The volume contains forty-five selections from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh that were specifically revealed for, or which pertain to, nine Bahá'í Holy Days. Most of the Tablets and excerpts comprising the volume appear here for the first time in English translation….
With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat
277
Passing of Fred Schechter, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre
29 January 2017
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
277.1We feel great sorrow as we mourn the passing of humble, loving, steadfast servant of the Cause of God, Fred Schechter. His wide-ranging achievements, spread over many decades, are the fruits of a life lived with selfless devotion to the Faith. Not long after enrolling as a Bahá'í, he answered the call of the beloved Guardian for believers to go to Africa, and there he was named a Knight of Bahá'u'lláh for French Somaliland. He also travelled as a pioneer to several countries in Latin America. His efforts to encourage Bahá'í youth were a notable feature of his thirteen years as a Continental Counsellor in the Americas, years which culminated in his appointment to the International Teaching Centre. His wisdom, kindness, and good humour, combined with a practical approach and friendly demeanour, enabled him in so many settings to advance the Cause and to help others develop a capacity for service.
277.2In the Holy Shrines we will supplicate for the progress of his illumined soul, now reunited in the realms above with his dear wife, Julia. To his three children, as well as other family members, we offer our condolences. We call for memorial gatherings to be held in his honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá'í communities throughout the world.
The Universal House of Justice
278
Implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for Economic Life
1 March 2017
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
278.1In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one whose heart has been attracted to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty can remain unmoved by these consequences. "The world is in great turmoil," Bahá'u'lláh observes in the Lawh-i-Dunyá, "and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions." As the Bahá'í community strives to contribute at the level of thought and action to the betterment of the world, the adverse conditions experienced by many populations will more and more demand its attention.
278.2The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the

welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. The teachings of the Faith leave no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

278.3The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds. The vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Bahá'í thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Bahá'u'lláh's memorable words, "No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it."

278.4Although Bahá'u'lláh does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society. Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics. Of course, the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today. With this in mind, we hope that the comments below will stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection by the friends. The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.

278.5Our call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life is intended to reach Bahá'í institutions and communities but is directed more especially to the individual believer. If a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings, is to emerge, must not the company of the faithful demonstrate in their own lives the rectitude of conduct that is one of its most distinguishing features? Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims. Naturally, the friends habitually look to the teachings to set the standard to which to aspire. But the community's deepening engagement with society means that the economic dimension of social existence must receive ever more concentrated attention. Particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers, the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples. Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard.
278.6A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the nobility inherent to every human being is unequivocally asserted; it is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. The soul's capacity to manifest all the names and attributes of God—He Who is the Compassionate, the Bestower, the Bountiful—is repeatedly affirmed in the Writings. Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. "Man's merit lieth in service and virtue", Bahá'u'lláh avers, "and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches." And further: "Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest." By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself. At the outset of His celebrated treatise The Secret of Divine Civilization, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

> And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

278.7Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. “Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft,” explains the Master, “so that he may carry other people’s burdens, and not himself be a burden to others.” The poor are urged by Bahá’u’lláh to “exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood”, while they who are possessed of riches “must have the utmost regard for the poor”. “Wealth”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has affirmed, “is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual’s own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes.” At the same time, the Hidden Words is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a “mighty barrier” between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. No wonder, then, that Bahá’u’lláh extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul “shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that “if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement”. For wealth is most commendable “provided the entire population is wealthy.” Examining one’s life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one’s obligation in relation to the law of Huqúqu’lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one’s priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

278.8The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Bahá’ís recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world. Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one’s generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one’s eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the qualities and attitudes nurtured by the courses of the training institute, through exposure to the Word of God, help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self. And ultimately,

the systematic study of the Word of God and the exploration of its implications raises consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

278.9Beloved Friends: The extremes of wealth and poverty in the world are becoming ever more untenable. As inequity persists, so the established order is seen to be unsure of itself, and its values are being questioned. Whatever the tribulations that a conflicted world must confront in the future, we pray that the Almighty will help His loved ones to overcome every obstacle in their path and assist them to serve humanity. The larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead.

The Universal House of Justice

279

International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

5 March 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

279.1As you know from the message dated 19 May 2016 to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Universal House of Justice, new members of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh were appointed last year. Shortly after their appointment, the members of the International Board convened their first meeting at the Bahá'í World Centre. Given the significance of this gathering in the Holy Land and of the letter addressed to the International Board by the House of Justice on that occasion, we have been asked to share with you the enclosed extract from that letter. For your information, all Boards of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh have also received this same extract from that letter.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Extract from a letter dated 21 June 2016 from the Universal House of Justice to the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

279.2It is with great joy that we welcome you, the newly appointed members of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, to the Holy Land for your initial meeting. The opening of the current term of the Board marks a significant juncture in the evolution of the institution of Huqúqu'lláh—an institution founded by Bahá'u'lláh Himself. We offer our gratitude to Him for the profound impact that obedience to this law has thus far had on the worldwide activities of the Bahá'í community, an

impact which portends far-reaching implications for the transformation of society. As you gather to consult on the responsibilities that lie before you as Trustees of the Right of God, we call upon you to turn your attention to a few areas of fundamental importance to the further development of this institution.

279.3In ordaining the mighty law of Huqúqu'lláh, the Blessed Beauty has vouchsafed a favour unto His ardent lovers through which they can express their personal sense of devotion to God in a profoundly private act of conscience. This sacred law creates a direct and vital link between the individual believer and the Head of the Faith, enables the friends to become firm and steadfast, and, as the beloved Master affirms, exerts "a great influence on their hearts and souls". Above all, when those privileged to pay the Right of God offer it in a spirit of joy, fellowship, and contentment, it will impart prosperity and protection, purify their worldly possessions, and enable them and their offspring to benefit from the fruits of their endeavours. Beyond the bestowal of such spiritual benefits upon the individual, this law promotes the common good and contributes to the spiritualization of humanity through the promotion of a new attitude towards the acquisition and use of material resources necessary for great collective enterprises designed to improve all aspects of life. Indeed, the institution of Huqúqu'lláh is a key instrument for constructing the foundation and supporting the structure of the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, serving as a powerful element in the growth of a world civilization.

279.4It is essential, then, that the spiritual significance of this mighty law, both in its individual and its social dimensions, remain uppermost in the minds of those serving the institution of the Right of God. In carrying out the vital functions they have been summoned to perform, the members of the Regional and National Boards of Trustees share in the responsibility of ensuring that the institution of Huqúqu'lláh is distinguished by the impeccable probity with which it is administered and that the believers' understanding of the spiritual and practical aspects of the law deepens. Naturally, the ways in which the Boards have conducted their work have evolved over the years; as you consider the greater demands that will be placed upon them, you are encouraged to examine how their current mode of functioning could be enhanced. The effective execution of their growing responsibilities will require the Boards to approach their duties in the same spirit of learning that characterizes the endeavours of the friends in the pursuit of every aspect of the Five Year Plan. No doubt, efforts to enhance the operation of the Boards will have an impact on the way in which they select, appoint, and orient Representatives and, more importantly, on how they nurture these friends and interact with them on a regular basis. In pursuing this work, it should also be recognized that the Continental Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies play a part in supporting this institution as they, too, endeavour to assist believers to uphold the laws of Bahá'u'lláh. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the members of the Boards continue to foster loving relationships with the Counsellors and their deputies as well as with National Assemblies. To this end, the Boards should be encouraged to consult with these two institutions

when necessary on matters relating to Huqúqu’lláh—particularly the various dimensions involved in the education of the believers in the law.

279.5As those serving this institution strive to cultivate in the hearts of the believers a deep love and appreciation for this divine law, they will no doubt realize that the success of their efforts largely depends on the extent to which loving and trusting relationships are fostered between them and the believers. It is love for Bahá’u’lláh which will be the primary motive for the friends in obeying this law, but they will carry out their duty with greater assurance and promptitude the greater their confidence in those on whom has been conferred the responsibility of receiving the Right of God. In performing their spiritual task of drawing the attention of the friends to their obligations as Bahá’ís, Deputies and Representatives must act with utmost sensitivity and discretion so that believers never feel pressured to adhere to a law which is to be offered joyfully and without hesitation. Raising consciousness among different segments of a Bahá’í community requires a nuanced approach, owing to varying needs and circumstances. For example, young people who are at the early stages of earning a livelihood could be assisted to cultivate the habits and take on the perspectives that this sacred law promotes and to avail themselves of the bounties that obedience to it bestows throughout every phase of a fruitful and consecrated life.

279.6In the discharge of your weighty duties, a number of legal and fiscal issues relating to the custodianship of Huqúqu’lláh funds will require your ongoing attention, particularly given the new financial regulations being implemented in many parts of the world. Among these matters are ensuring that the processes and systems that the 31 Regional and National Boards have in place for receipting, holding, and remitting the funds are operating in an efficient and wise manner and that accurate and timely records are being maintained.

280

Messages to the Bahá’ís of Iran Now on Payamha-Iran Website

6 March 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

280.1We have been asked to inform you that recent messages of the Universal House of Justice addressed to the believers in Iran and their authorised English translations, as well as Persian translations of selected other messages of the House of Justice, will no longer be routinely sent to National Spiritual Assemblies and other Bahá’í institutions as had been the practice in the past; such communications are now available on the website www.payamha-iran.org.

280.2You may wish to bring this site to the attention of the believers in your community. The website has a subscription function that allows individuals to receive a notification when new items have been uploaded.

Department of the Secretariat

281

Enhancements to the Bahá’í World News Service

19 March 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

281.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to write to you concerning an important advance in the development of the Bahá’í World News Service, which is located at news.bahai.org. Efforts undertaken over the last several years have allowed the News Service to offer a window on certain dimensions of how the members of the Bahá’í community are applying the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh and striving to contribute to the betterment of society, providing thereby a glimpse of constructive processes unfolding across the globe. The accounts featured and the insights from practical experience they contain have increasingly stimulated meaningful conversations amongst Bahá’ís and their friends, and the News Service has emerged as a promising instrument to reinforce the current endeavours of the Bahá’í community. To build on these strengths, steps have now been taken to further enhance the News Service through the refinement of the website’s design and presentation across various types of devices, the addition of multimedia elements, the introduction of mobile applications and the improvement of ways to share articles and features on social media. It is envisaged that in time the News Service will also be made available in all the languages of the Bahai.org site.

281.2Given these developments, the House of Justice hopes that National Assemblies will, however they deem appropriate, inform their communities about the Bahá’í World News Service and encourage the use of its email subscription feature by Bahá’ís and their friends, thereby significantly increasing the number of people around the world who are drawing on this valuable resource.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

282

Release from Service of a Member of the International Teaching Centre

17 April 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

282.1Owing to compelling personal circumstances, Mr. Ramchand Coonjul has asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as a member of the International Teaching Centre, and we have assented to his request. Mr. Coonjul has contributed significantly to the work of the Faith as a member of that institution, and we pray for divine confirmations to surround him as he continues his labours in other fields of service to the Cause.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

283

Ridván Message 2017

Ridván 2017

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

283.1See how the community of the Greatest Name arises! With but one year elapsed since the inception of the new Plan, reports testify to the scale of what is being attempted and beginning to be accomplished. Bringing greater

intensity to 5,000 programmes of growth is demanding a level of effort quite without precedent. With a firm grasp of the fundamentals of the Plan, large numbers of the friends are acting on its requirements, demonstrating rigour and sacrifice in the quality of their response. As envisaged, some intensive programmes of growth that have been long sustained are becoming reservoirs of knowledge and resources, lending support to surrounding areas and facilitating the rapid dissemination of experience and insight. Centres of intense activity—those neighbourhoods and villages where the community-building work is most concentrated—are proving to be fertile ground for collective transformation. An expanded and invigorated legion of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants are stimulating the endeavours of the believers, helping them acquire a vision of how to advance the growth process in various circumstances and identifying approaches that suit the conditions in each cluster. Supported by their respective National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils are learning how the momentum of the Plan can be built across a range of clusters simultaneously, while in some smaller countries without Councils, new entities at the national level are starting to do the same. Although, as would be expected of any organic process, the swift progress being witnessed in some places is yet to appear in others, the total number of intensive programmes of growth in the world is already beginning to mount. Further, we rejoice to see that participation in the activities of the Plan surged markedly during its first four cycles.

283.2The signs could hardly be more promising, then, for what the coming year might bring. And what could be more fitting to offer the Blessed Beauty on the two hundredth anniversary of His Birth than the earnest striving of His loved ones to extend the reach of His Faith? The first of the two bicentenaries to be celebrated by the Bahá'í world is thus an occasion with prospects most thrilling. Viewed aright, this year presents the single greatest worldwide opportunity there has ever been for connecting hearts to Bahá'u'lláh. In the months ahead, let all be mindful of this precious chance and alert to the possibilities that exist in every space for acquainting others with His life and sublime mission. For the teaching opportunity that is now before the Bahá'í world to be seized to its fullest extent, creative thought needs to be given to the conversations that could unfold with every kind of person. In the course of such meaningful conversations, perception is heightened and hearts are opened—sometimes immediately. In this worthy occupation all find a calling, and of the joy that comes from being engaged in this work none should deprive themselves. We entreat the one Beloved that the whole of this bicentennial year may be filled with this joy that is purest and sweetest: telling another soul of the dawning of the Day of God.

283.3The obligations that must be met by the company of the faithful are made the more pressing by the confusion, distrust, and cloudiness in the world. Indeed, the friends should use every opportunity to shine a light that can illuminate the way and offer assurance to the anxious, hope to the despairing. We are reminded of the counsel given by the Guardian to one Bahá'í community in words that seem intended for our own time: "As the fabric of present-day society heaves and cracks under the strain and stress of portentous

events and calamities, as the fissures, accentuating the cleavage separating nation from nation, class from class, race from race, and creed from creed, multiply, the prosecutors of the Plan must evince a still greater cohesion in their spiritual lives and administrative activities, and demonstrate a higher standard of concerted effort, of mutual assistance, and of harmonious development in their collective enterprises." Always emphasizing the spiritual significance of the work of the Faith and the single-minded resolve with which the believers are to discharge their sacred duties, Shoghi Effendi warned too against having any share in political controversies, entanglements, and bickerings. "Let them rise above all particularism and partisanship," he urged on another occasion, "above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world." These are the inevitable foam and spray cast up as wave after wave convulses a turbulent and divided society. Too much is at stake to be occupied with distractions of this kind. As every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well, humanity's ultimate well-being is dependent upon its differences being transcended and its unity firmly established. Every contribution Bahá'ís make to the life of their society is aimed at fostering unity; every community-building endeavour is directed towards the same end. For those tired of contention, the communities growing under the shadow of the Greatest Name offer a potent example of what unity can achieve.

283.4We render praise to the Lord of Lords at seeing so many of His loved ones, in so many ways, giving their all that the banner of the oneness of humankind may be raised aloft. Most cherished friends: As a highly auspicious year now commences, might not each one of us contemplate what heavenly deeds His grace may aid us to perform?

The Universal House of Justice

284

Social Action, Discourse and Non-involvement in Political Affairs

27 April 2017

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

284.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 31 January 2017 in which you seek guidance on the latitude Bahá'ís have to engage in social action and public discourse, particularly in relation to the principle of non-involvement in political affairs. We have been asked to convey the following.

284.2Your heartfelt desire to apply the principles of the Faith to address the ills of society is warmly acknowledged. The House of Justice agrees with many of your thoughtful points and wishes to provide some additional ideas for your consideration.

284.3As you are no doubt well aware, in discussing the principle of non-involvement in politics, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'ís are to "refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions." In political controversies, they "should assign no blame, take no side, further

no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests" of their "world-wide Fellowship". They are called to "avoid the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician". And they are to "rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world." Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions should not take positions on the political decisions of governments, including disputes among governments of different nations; should refrain from becoming involved in debates surrounding any political controversy; and should not react, orally or otherwise, in a manner that could be taken as evidence of support for a partisan political stance. It is not for a Bahá'í, in offering social commentary, to vilify specific individuals, organizations, or governments or to make attacks on them. Indeed, the Guardian specifically cautioned the friends against referring to political figures in their public remarks, whether in criticism or support.

284.4Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá enjoined Bahá'ís to be obedient to the government of their land. Unity, order, and cooperation are the basis for sound and lasting change. Even civil disobedience, in the form of a conscious decision to violate the law to effect social change, is not acceptable for Bahá'ís—whatever merit it appears to have had in particular political settings. Ultimately, obedience to government has a bearing on the unity of the Bahá'í community itself. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi stated that individual Bahá'ís should not become immersed in the "faulty systems of the world" or judge their government as "just or unjust—for each believer would be sure to hold a different viewpoint, and within our own Bahá'í fold a hotbed of dissension would spring up and destroy our unity." These considerations, however, do not imply an endorsement of the actions or policies of one's government. As Shoghi Effendi explained in another letter written on his behalf: "The principle of obedience to government does not place any Bahá'í under the obligation of identifying the teachings of his Faith with the political program enforced by the government. For such an identification, besides being erroneous and contrary to both the spirit as well as the form of the Bahá'í message, would necessarily create a conflict within the conscience of every loyal believer."

284.5The principles of non-involvement in politics and obedience to government, far from being obstacles to social change, are aspects of an approach set forth in the Bahá'í writings to implement effective remedies for and address the root causes of the ills afflicting society. This approach includes active involvement in the life of society as well as the possibility of influencing and contributing to the social policies of government by all lawful means. Indeed, service to others and to society is a hallmark of the Bahá'í life. And Shoghi Effendi has explained that "the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá'u'lláh, be safely embodied therein." The way

in which Bahá'ís seek to effect social change is described in the 2 March 2013 message of the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran. A copy of that message is enclosed for your study.

284.6There can be no question then that Bahá'ís are committed to efforts toward social transformation. "Much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party," Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, cautioned, "they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part, with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings—such as, for instance, better race relations." This involvement in activities for social reform and well-being can in certain circumstances even extend to taking part in demonstrations. A letter written on the Guardian's behalf indicated that he did not see any objection to Bahá'í students taking part as Bahá'ís in a protest concerning racial prejudice on campus, since "there was nothing political about it" and "he does not see how they could remain indifferent when fellow-students were voicing our own Bahá'í attitude on such a vital issue and one we feel so strongly about." Thus, individual Bahá'ís are free to participate in those efforts and activities, such as peaceful rallies, that uphold constructive aims in consonance with the Bahá'í teachings, for example, the advancement of women, the promotion of social justice, the protection of the environment, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, and the safeguarding of human rights.

284.7In deciding whether it would be appropriate for Bahá'ís to participate in particular public activities, a crucial distinction should be drawn between those events that have a partisan political character and those that do not. A further distinction can be drawn between those activities that are fully in keeping with the teachings and that can be supported explicitly by Bahá'í institutions and those where the situation is less clear, in which Bahá'í institutions should not participate but in which individuals can be given some latitude to make a personal decision to take part, without in any way implying that they are representing the Faith directly by their choice. If a believer harbors any doubt as to the appropriateness of involvement with a particular event or approach, guidance should be sought from the National Spiritual Assembly, which is in the best position to evaluate the specific circumstances and is responsible for making the final determination on such questions.

284.8Beyond this clarification of basic principles, there are other important considerations. Too often political goals, even when pursued in the name of justice, are a chimera, for the fundamental partisanship in contemporary political life means policies are often implemented without building consensus and consequently seeds of discontent and continuing political struggle are sown. Conflict and contention ultimately yield more conflict and contention. Eliminating social problems, rather than merely ameliorating them to an extent, requires unity of thought as well as action, an open heart as well as an open hand—conditions which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is intended to bring about.

284.9For many decades following the second great war of the twentieth century,

humanity moved, with fits and starts, toward the promise of a united world. The failure to complete the project of the unification of nations, however, left gaps in relations in which supranational problems could fester and threaten the security and well-being of peoples and states, leading to a recrudescence of prejudice, of divers expressions of factionalism, and of virulent nationalism that are the very negation of Bahá'u'lláh's message of peace and oneness.

284.10 One of the current features of the process of the disintegration of the old world order manifest in the United States is the increasing polarization and fragmentation that has come to characterize so much of political and social life. There has been a hardening of viewpoints, increased incivility, an unwillingness to compromise or even entertain differing perspectives, and a tendency to automatically take sides and fight. Science and religion, two great lights that should guide human progress, are often compromised or swept aside. Matters of moral principle and questions of justice are reduced to intractable liberal or conservative viewpoints, and the country is increasingly divided along divergent lines. In this context, the friends have to hold steadfastly to the Bahá'í teachings and consultative methods and not allow their pursuit of noble aims and high aspirations to draw them into one side or the other of fruitless debates and contentious processes.

284.11 In their reflections on how to contribute to the betterment of the world, Bahá'ís will undoubtedly recognize that demonstrations are not the only, or even the most effective, means available to them. Rather, they can learn and grow in capacity over time to help their fellow citizens to frame concerns in a way that rises above fissures, to share views in a manner that transcends divisive approaches, and to create and participate in spaces to work together in the quest to enact solutions to the problems that bedevil their nation. As Bahá'u'lláh stated: "Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation." In this light, justice is indeed essential to resist the vain imaginings and idle fancies of social and political machinations, to see reality with one's own eyes, and to identify the requirements for an equitable social order. But then unity is essential—forged through consultative processes, including action and reflection—to achieve the power required for positive social change.

284.12 Unfortunately, sometimes when approaching such important and deeply felt matters, the friends can create dichotomies where none exist. Thus, for example, it is contended that one must choose between either non-involvement in politics or social action; either teaching the Faith or involvement with society; either the institute process and the community-building activities it fosters or a program for race unity; and so on. Such apparent conflicts can be greatly dissipated by keeping in mind Shoghi Effendi's advice, conveyed in a letter written on his behalf, to conceive of the teachings as one great whole with many facets. "Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory," the same letter indicated, "and yet it is all one if you carry the thought through to the end." A careful reading of the Bahá'í writings and the guidance of the House of Justice can clarify how two matters

that appear to be in tension with one another are coherent once the concepts and principles that connect them are understood. Particular circumstances in a locality, timeliness, and the periodic need for focus also have a bearing on such issues.

284.13In a recent letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice explained to your National Assembly that the scope of the Five Year Plan offers ample opportunities for believers to address the social concerns of their communities and society as a whole. The Plan's activities for sustained growth and community building lie at the heart of a broad scheme for social transformation. The friends are called to three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action: community-building efforts in clusters; projects and activities for social action; and involvement in the discourses of society, whether in neighborhoods or in personal or professional associations. An assessment of the efforts of Bahá'ís across the United States will reveal that there is already an army of believers working in all strata of society to promote the Bahá'í teachings and combat the spiritual and social ills afflicting their country. As the learning process that has proven to be so effective in the expansion and consolidation work worldwide is increasingly employed in all endeavors, the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to apply Bahá'u'lláh's healing remedy to achieve profound and lasting change will become ever more pronounced, assisting the nation along the path of its destiny.

284.14Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh may bless your efforts to be a promoter of unity and justice.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

285

Measures to Make Pilgrimage More Accessible

27 April 2017

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

285.1Pilgrimage is one of the divine ordinances enshrined in the Most Holy Book. Addressing a pilgrim, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "Render thanks unto God that thou didst come to the Blessed Spot, didst lay thy head upon the Threshold of the Sacred Shrine, and didst make pilgrimage to the hallowed sanctuary round which circle in adoration the intimates of the spiritual realm." Statements made by and on behalf of the beloved Guardian indicate that pilgrimage to the Holy Shrines can become a means whereby one "can experience that mystic love which constitutes the very core of every true religion", can enable one to obtain "a clearer vision of the mission and significance of the Faith", and can "greatly invigorate the friends and stimulate them to greater services and sacrifice."

285.2The Universal House of Justice has had occasion to review the matter of pilgrimage to the Holy Land and has directed us to share with you measures it has taken over the years and more recently to make pilgrimage more accessible to a greater number and diversity of believers.

285.3The long waiting list that had existed for many years has been eliminated and, at present, those seeking to come on pilgrimage are offered, shortly after receipt of their application, a range of dates from which to choose. The five year waiting period before one can apply to undertake another pilgrimage has been reduced to three years, and steps have been taken to make it easier for a larger number of families and friends to come on pilgrimage together. Permission may now be requested by relatives or friends for those who are not registered members of the Bahá'í community to join them. Efforts are under way to further streamline the online application process through the website pilgrimage.bahai.org.

285.4Some of you will be aware that the House of Justice has also instituted a group pilgrimage programme, the response to which has been very encouraging. With logistical support provided by their National Assemblies, groups of pilgrims from selected areas of the world from which few had previously come, including remote parts of vast and distant countries, are now among those who have the privilege of spending precious days in the precincts of the Holy Shrines and Holy Places associated with the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. To date, seventy National Assemblies have been invited to participate in the programme, and believers from forty-five countries have already had the privilege of making their pilgrimage through this process.

285.5You are requested to consider, in consultation with the Counsellors, ways in which awareness among the friends of the significance of pilgrimage may be increased—including those in remote and isolated areas—and how greater numbers of believers can be encouraged to avail themselves of this great blessing, bearing in mind 'Abdu'l-Bahá's counsel that to visit the Holy Shrines "is obligatory if one can afford it and is able to do so, and if no obstacle stands in one's way." A film, "Pilgrimage: A Sacred Experience", which was created to help the friends to better appreciate the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage and its role in fostering the development of one's dedication to the Cause, may be of assistance to you in this connection. The film may be viewed at pilgrimage.bahai.org. As you will recall, the film was made available to all National Assemblies on a DVD enclosed with a covering letter dated 20 January 2006.

285.6The House of Justice will supplicate at the Sacred Threshold that your deliberations and actions to this end may attract the confirmations of the Abhá Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

286

Preparations for Celebrating the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

2 May 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

286.1As the first of the bicentenaries to be celebrated by the Bahá'í world approaches, reports are being received at the Bahá'í World Centre of how local communities in every land are readying themselves and making preparations. Inspiring accounts of the friends' experiences were presented

in a recent edition of the Reflections on Growth newsletter, and it is understood that the International Teaching Centre intends to share more stories of this nature in a future edition. There is a growing appreciation by the believers that the coming year, as characterized by the Universal House of Justice in its Ridván 2017 message, represents “the single greatest worldwide opportunity there has ever been for connecting hearts to Bahá’u’lláh”. The countless events that will occur in neighbourhoods and villages, within households and communities, attracting all comers, will form part of a single, global coming together of peoples to honour a Manifestation of God, the Unifier of the human race.

286.2It is now well understood that the locus of activity for the bicentenaries will be at the local level, and individuals and families as much as Local Spiritual Assemblies are thinking of befitting ways to mark the first of these auspicious occasions. Notwithstanding that an efflorescence of local activity will surely be the defining characteristic of the upcoming Festival, certain initiatives at the national level may also be contemplated, through which the Bahá’í community’s relations with prominent persons in society may be strengthened. The House of Justice anticipates that, in the course of normal interactions—whether formal or informal—that naturally occur in your country with senior public figures or their representatives, opportunities will arise to raise their awareness of the Faith and its Founder, especially in the context of the upcoming anniversary, and to acquaint them with what Bahá’u’lláh’s followers in that nation are doing to respond to His call. The individuals you approach may decide to offer public expressions of greeting and appreciation as the bicentenary draws near. A remarkable example of what can be achieved in this regard, which featured some weeks ago on the Bahá’í World News Service, is the written tribute paid to the life and vision of Bahá’u’lláh by a head of state. From this, the many possibilities that could be explored in similar situations may be imagined. You are invited to consult about this matter and consider any steps that could be taken in your own circumstances.

286.3While the preparations being made by Bahá’ís around the world are intensifying, measures to support the endeavours of the friends are taking shape at the Bahá’í World Centre. One initiative is the production of a film that has been commissioned by the House of Justice specifically to mark the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh. More details will be provided shortly, including information about how national communities can produce separate versions in various languages where required and feasible. The film will be available for general viewing during the Twin Birthdays, and it is hoped that the friends, in addition to their many other activities, will put on screenings that stimulate conversations about the Person of Bahá’u’lláh, about how He was willing to bear extraordinary hardship so that humankind might be rescued from its confusion and suffering, and about how He now inspires the efforts of millions of people who derive from His teachings inner strength and spiritual direction for their lives.

286.4In the letter dated 18 May 2016 sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies about the bicentenaries, it was mentioned that arrangements would be made to

share with the widest possible audience reports on how these highly significant occasions are being celebrated around the world. The instrument that is being developed for this purpose will be a dedicated section of the Bahai.org website. Starting in the days immediately leading up to the bicentenary this year, this online facility will describe community activities taking place in a selection of countries. Over the course of the hours through which the friends in every part of the world will gather for each of the Twin Birthdays, the website will be updated with information on the festivities occurring in particular places. Before, during, and after the Holy Days, it is expected that this website will serve as a resource upon which the friends may draw for inspiration and encouragement.

286.5In the months ahead, may the great devotion of the friends, expressed through the initiatives being undertaken for this very special anniversary, result in an outpouring of heavenly grace upon your communities.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

287

Passing of Firuz Kazemzadeh

18 May 2017

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United States

287.1We grieved to learn of the passing of stalwart, devoted and distinguished servant of the Ancient Beauty, Firuz Kazemzadeh. The strength of faith and acuity of mind that characterized his services over many decades are recalled with profound love. His valued contributions as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States over an extended period and his pioneering endeavors in the area of external affairs at both national and international levels will long illumine the annals of the Cause. Particularly notable were his activities in defence of the fledgling Bahá'í communities in the former Soviet Union, in the latter part of the last century, and of the beleaguered Bahá'í community in the Cradle of the Faith. His outstanding academic accomplishments and a sincere dedication to the welfare of humanity marked his prominent involvement in the wider civil society.

287.2We offer our heartfelt condolences to his dear wife, Wilma, to their children and their families and assure them of our fervent supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his luminous soul throughout the worlds of God and for the consolation of their hearts. It is befitting that a memorial service be held in the House of Worship in Wilmette in his honor.

The Universal House of Justice

288

Passing of Muhammad Afnan

8 August 2017

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Canada

288.1We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of dearly loved Muhammad Afnan, devoted servant of the Ancient Beauty and an esteemed scion of the noble family of the Blessed Báb. His exemplary services to the Cause over many

decades—in the administration of the Faith in Iran, in the enrichment of Bahá'í scholarship, and, in particular, in the study of the Writings of the Báb—were distinguished by diligence, wisdom, and surpassing humility. Serving at the Bahá'í World Centre, he made invaluable and lasting contributions to the work of the Research Department.

288.2We offer our loving sympathy to his dear wife, Mehri, their children, and other family members and assure them of our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his illumined soul in all the worlds of God and for the consolation of their hearts.

The Universal House of Justice

289

Dedication of the House of Worship in Cambodia

1 September 2017

To the Friends Gathered in Battambang, Cambodia, for the Dedication of the House of Worship

Dearly loved Friends,

289.1A full year has yet to pass since the Bahá'í world marked the completion of the last of the continental Houses of Worship, and already a new dawn is breaking in the development of the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. You are gathered at the very dawning-place itself—the site of the first local House of Worship to rise above the horizon in the stage that has now opened. The dedication of this unique edifice is a historic occasion, prefiguring the appearance of many more local as well as national Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, in obedience to Bahá'u'lláh's commandment revealed in His Most Holy Book: "Build ye houses of worship throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions."

289.2It is fitting that this special moment is celebrated in a region that has a long and proud association with the Faith, for even within the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh His message had reached as far as Asia's south-eastern peninsula. It was a message that summoned all peoples to work for unity and peace, and its urgency has only intensified in the intervening years. Does not disunity fuel the crises and conflicts that afflict the world? Does it not exacerbate the pain and hardship experienced by so many? God be praised that the pure-hearted people of Cambodia, who have themselves suffered much, are responding with such enthusiasm to the call of the Ancient Beauty. Drawing on the power of unity, they are making strenuous efforts to uplift souls through spiritual and material education and are enabling populations to develop their capacity for service. Indeed, the believers in Cambodia are among those on the frontiers of learning in the Bahá'í world's efforts to build communities on enduring foundations.

289.3The emergence of a House of Worship in Battambang, then, is a testament to how brightly the light of faith shines in the hearts of the friends there. Its design, the work of an accomplished Cambodian architect, reflects the grace and beauty of that nation's culture; it uses innovative techniques but blends them with forms traditional to the region; it unquestionably belongs to the land from which it has risen. Even before its dedication, the Temple has succeeded in elevating the consciousness of those who reside in its shadow

about a theme that is integral to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár—the inseparability of worship and service in the life of a community. It has fostered a greater appreciation of the importance of unity, now reinforced through the collective worship that will occur within its walls. Its emergence is a spur to the efforts being made to nurture communities of spiritual distinction. It is an edifice of noble purpose, erected by a people of noble spirit.

289.4Now that this Temple is opening its doors to the inhabitants of Battambang and to those living far beyond, may the blessings of heaven be attracted to this region in even more abundance than before—we entreat Bahá'u'lláh that it be so. May those who pass through its portals feel their spirits soar within, may their worship of the one true God strengthen the bonds of affection between them, and may their love for God be expressed through the service they render to those around them. We call to mind at this moment the benediction of Bahá'u'lláh: "Blessed are they that occupy themselves in the House of Worship with the remembrance of Him Who is the Lord of the righteous! Blessed are they that arise in the service of this House! Blessed are they that have raised up this House!"

The Universal House of Justice

290

Release of a Compilation on the Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár

12 September 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

290.1We have been directed by the Universal House of Justice to send you a compilation titled "The Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár". The compilation consists of eighty-six extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the writings of Shoghi Effendi, and the letters of the Universal House of Justice. Twenty-two of these are newly translated and appear in English for the first time. The compilation is accompanied by an introduction; both have been prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre at the request of the House of Justice and are now available on the Bahá'í Reference Library in the section containing compilations. National Spiritual Assemblies with Publishing Trusts are asked to consider producing printed editions of the compilation with its introduction. It is the ardent hope of the House of Justice that this compilation will assist the friends in gaining a deeper understanding of the vital role that the House of Worship is destined to play in the spiritual transformation of society.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

291

Release of Light to the World

19 September 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

291.1It is with great joy that the Universal House of Justice makes available to you the final versions of Light to the World.

291.2High-resolution copies of the film with subtitles in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, and Spanish, as well as one with voice-over in Persian, have been placed on a website, in a number of formats to suit different needs. Also online are the DVD cover artwork, technical instructions, and video and audio files that will allow National Assemblies, where required, to finalize versions of the film with subtitles or voice-over in relevant languages….

291.3It is hoped that on the occasion of the two-hundred-year anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as in years to come, this film will uplift the viewers' spirits, inspire thoughtful reflection, and increase their love for the Blessed Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

292

Bahai.org to Provide Information about Events during the Twin Holy Days

28 September 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

292.1As you are aware from the letter about the bicentenary celebrations dated 2 May 2017, a section of the Bahai.org website has been in development that will provide information about the events unfolding in various countries during the Twin Holy Days. This online portal, which has been created in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Persian, is now active, and it can be accessed by the friends at bicentenary.bahai.org. Some content related to the coming anniversary is already available on the site, and the film Light to the World will be added on 18 October 2017. Throughout the hours when the believers and their friends will celebrate the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the site will offer glimpses of activities in a few score locations that will be illustrative of the wide array of initiatives being undertaken in localities throughout the world. As previously stated, it is hoped that before, during, and after the Holy Days, this website will serve as a resource upon which the friends may draw for inspiration and encouragement.

292.2You are warmly invited to share this information with the members of your communities.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

293

Bicentennial Anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

October 2017

To all who celebrate the Glory of God

Dearly loved Friends,

293.1This salutary truth we maintain: that the peoples of the earth have always been remembered by their God. In every era of history, that unknowable Reality has opened the gates of grace to the world by sending an Emissary charged with providing the moral and spiritual stimulus that human beings need to cooperate and advance. Many of the names of these great Lights to humankind are lost. But some shine out from the annals of the past as having revolutionized thought,

unlocked stores of knowledge, and inspired the rise of civilizations, and Their names continue to be honoured and praised. Each of these spiritual and social visionaries, stainless mirrors of virtue, set out teachings and truths that answered the urgent needs of the age. As the world now faces its most pressing challenges yet, we acclaim Bahá'u'lláh, born two hundred years ago, as such a Figure—indeed, as the One Whose teachings will usher in that long-promised time when all humanity will live side by side in peace and unity.

293.2From His early youth, Bahá'u'lláh was regarded by those who knew Him as bearing the imprint of destiny. Blessed with saintly character and uncommon wisdom, He seemed to be touched by heaven's kindly light. Yet He was made to endure forty years of suffering, including successive exiles and incarcerations at the decree of two despotic monarchs, campaigns to vilify His name and condemn His followers, violence upon His Person, shameful attempts on His life—all of which, out of a boundless love for humanity, He bore willingly, with radiance and forbearance, and with compassion for His tormentors. Even the expropriation of all His worldly possessions left Him unperturbed. An observer might wonder why One Whose love for others was so complete should have been made the target of such hostility, given that He had otherwise been the object of universal praise and admiration, famed for His benevolence and high-mindedness, and had disavowed any claim to political power. To anyone who is familiar with the pattern of history, the reason for His ordeals is, of course, unmistakable. The appearance of a prophetic Figure in the world has invariably given rise to ferocious opposition from wielders of power. But the light of truth will not be put out. And so, in the lives of these transcendent Beings one finds sacrifice, heroism and, come what may, deeds that exemplify Their words. The same is evident in each phase of the life of Bahá'u'lláh. In spite of every hardship, He was never silenced, and His words retained their compelling potency—words spoken with the voice of insight, diagnosing the world's ills and prescribing the remedy; words carrying the weight of justice, warning kings and rulers about forces that would ultimately sweep them from their thrones; words that leave one's soul uplifted, awed and transformed, determined to free itself from the thorns and brambles of self-interest; and words that are clear, arresting, and emphatic: "This thing is not from Me, but from God." Might one not ask, in considering such a life: if this be not from God, what can be pointed to that is?

293.3The perfect Educators Who, throughout history, brought light to the world, left behind a legacy of sacred words. Within the words that flowed like a river from the pen of Bahá'u'lláh are gifts of enormous range and sublime character. Not infrequently, one who encounters His Revelation responds first to prayers of surpassing beauty that satisfy the soul's longing to befittingly worship its Maker. Deeper in the ocean of His words are discovered the laws and moral imperatives to liberate the human spirit from the tyranny of worldly instincts unworthy of its true calling. Here, too, are found enduring ideals in whose light parents may raise children not simply in their own likeness, but with aspirations more exalted. There are also explanations that reveal the hand of God at work in the history of humankind's winding journey

through the stages of tribe and nation towards higher forms of unity. The diverse religions of the world are shown to be expressions of a single underlying truth, related to one another by a common origin, and also by a common purpose: to transform humanity's inner life and outer conditions. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings testify to the nobility of the human spirit.

The society He envisions is one worthy of that nobility and founded on principles that guard and reinforce it. The oneness of the human family He places at the core of collective life; the equality of women and men He unequivocally asserts. He reconciles the seemingly counteracting forces of our own age—science and religion, unity and diversity, freedom and order, individual rights and social responsibilities. And among His greatest gifts is justice, manifested in institutions whose concern is for the progress and development of all peoples. In His own words, He has "blotted out from the pages of God's holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men" and, concurrently, "laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity". Might one not ask, what would be a befitting response to such gifts?

293.4"It is the duty of every seeker to bestir himself and strive to attain the shores of this ocean," Bahá'u'lláh states. The spiritual teachings brought by successive Messengers through the ages found expression in religious systems that, over time, have become fused with aspects of culture and weighed down with man-made dogmas. But look past these and it becomes clear that the original teachings are the source of the universal values through which diverse peoples have found common cause and which have moulded humanity's moral consciousness. In contemporary society, the reputation of religion has suffered a great deal, and understandably so. If, in the name of religion, hatred and strife are promoted, it is better to do without it. However, true religion can be known by its fruits—its capacity to inspire, to transform, to unite, to foster peace and prosperity. It is in harmony with rational thought. And it is essential to social progress. The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh cultivates within the individual and the community the discipline of acting in the light of reflection, and by this means, insights gradually accumulate about effective ways to work for the betterment of society. Attempts at social change through political intrigue, sedition, vilification of particular groups, or outright conflict are condemned by Bahá'u'lláh, for they merely perpetuate cycles of struggle while lasting solutions continue to elude. He champions instruments of a very different sort. He calls for good deeds, kind words, and upright conduct; He enjoins service to others and collaborative action. And to the task of constructing a world civilization founded on the divine teachings, He summons every member of the human race. Might one not ask, in contemplating the breadth of His vision, upon what foundation shall humanity realistically build hope for the future, if not this?

293.5In every land, those who have been attracted to the message of Bahá'u'lláh and are committed to His vision are systematically learning how to give effect to His teachings. Cohorts of youth are becoming ever more conscious of their spiritual identity and are directing their energies towards the advancement of their societies. People with divergent perspectives are

discovering how to replace contention and the imposition of authority with consultation and the collective search for solutions. From every race, religion, nationality, and class, souls are uniting around a vision of humanity as one people and the earth as one country. Many who have long suffered are finding their voice and becoming protagonists of their own development, resourceful and resilient. From villages, neighbourhoods, towns and cities are arising institutions, communities, and individuals dedicated to labouring together for the emergence of a united and prospering world that might truly deserve to be called the kingdom of God on earth. On this two hundredth anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh's appearance, the many who are part of this enterprise are reaching out to those around them with a simple invitation: seize this opportunity to find out who He was and what He represents. Put to the test the remedy He has prescribed. His coming offers sure proof that the human race, threatened by numerous perils, has not been forgotten. When so many people of goodwill throughout the world have for so long beseeched God for an answer to the problems that beset them in their common homeland, is it so surprising that He should have answered their prayer?

The Universal House of Justice

294

Significance for Iran of the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

17 October 2017

To the Bahá'ís of Iran

294.1By now, you will have read our message dated October 2017 addressed to the multitude of people throughout the world who are celebrating the bicentenary of the Birth of the Abhá Beauty. Millions of souls, in more than 240 independent countries, territories, and islands, are reflecting upon the implications of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the outstanding Son of the sacred land of Iran. Surely, every insightful and illumined Iranian will view with pride a commemoration on such an unprecedented scale held to honour a Personage from that land. The diversity of races and ethnicities of these people is so vast as to portend the fulfilment of the unity of the human race, the ultimate goal of His Revelation.

294.2What a wonder is this! Fair-minded historians of course know why a distinguished Person from the Núrí family—inhabitants of Mázindarán—born in Tehran, descended from the ancient kings of Persia, One who held His native land in such special affection, was forced to leave His country. Forty years of exile did not diminish in the slightest His connection to that land. With tender love and benevolence for His compatriots, Bahá'u'lláh set about establishing a united, vibrant, and progressive community composed of people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Through the dispatch of Tablets, the sending of teachers, and the messages of loving kindness conveyed through those who flocked to His presence in the prison-city of ʻAkká in the Holy Land, He assisted the people of Iran who, in His words, are "adorned with the ornaments of talent and capacity" to nurture that God-given capacity.

294.3Such were the achievements of your spiritual forebears that today people all over the world are able to benefit from the radiant light of the divine

teachings. The first among these is a strong emphasis on goodly character and rectitude of conduct. Bahá'u'lláh describes spirituality and morality as the sure foundation for a progressive society and the solid basis for the protection and soundness of the social order and for the advancement of the common good. The Bahá'í teachings clarify, for example, that trustworthiness and truthfulness enhance the ability for collective undertakings, advance industry and the economy, and ensure the progress of other constructive endeavours. No nation can achieve prosperity and salvation without the refinement of character. If morality were to dominate, success in all aspects would be guaranteed because thoughts would become illumined; individual and collective relations strengthened; moral courage enhanced; arts, sciences, and rationality promoted; commerce advanced; and spiritual and material welfare and mutual respect and freedom for all would become the pivot of policies for the management of affairs. Thus would a nation be transformed into another creation. How numerous are the groups, the world over, who claim to be in the forefront of working for social progress, yet, because of their lack of adherence to trustworthiness and truthfulness, are in fact striking an axe to the root of their societies. Their actions are the embodiment of what has been stated in the Qur'án: "They demolish their homes with their own hands."

294.4As we have discussed in our recent messages, the essence of the other teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the unity of humankind, the plan and the path for its realization, a new conception of religion commensurate with the stage of humanity's coming maturity, and the founding of necessary provisions for the prosperity of the world on the basis of unity, justice, and peace. The Bahá'í Writings explain this important point that the fruits of religion must be the promotion of oneness and solidarity, and that if instead it should become the cause of conflict and contention, its absence is certainly preferable. Your conversations with your friends, colleagues, and neighbours during these blessed days will undoubtedly be a reminder of the fact that today the highest ideals of all the peoples of Iran are but a reflection of the same ideals that have been a motivating force in your life and that of your spiritual forebears. History testifies that the main difficulties confronting the Iranian nation at the time of the appearance of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh—difficulties that still persist—included ethnic conflict, religious contention, social decline, and the challenge of reconciling modernity and tradition. Countless people in the world see in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh a remedy for these and other contemporary ills of humanity.

It is the joy and the hope generated by efforts to translate His teachings into action that are attracting millions to observe these celebrations. Imagine if Iranians, even setting religious considerations aside and purely for the sake of their nation, would decide to act in accordance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, how much hardship would be prevented, how much progress would be achieved, and how much comfort and general prosperity would be attained. And the glory of Iran—a promise according to repeated statements in the Bahá'í Writings—would surely be realized.

294.5Recall, beloved friends, the dream of the father of Bahá'u'lláh when

his Son was a child of tender years. Let us then raise our hands in gratitude to the Threshold of Almighty God that we are able to witness with our physical eyes clear indications that no earthly power can thwart the Divine Will. You are constantly remembered in our prayers in the Holy Shrines.

The Universal House of Justice

295

Release of Summary of Achievements and Learning for the Five Year Plan, 2011–2016

19 October 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

295.1At the request of the Universal House of Justice, we enclose for your Assembly three complimentary copies of The Five Year Plan, 2011–2016: Summary of Achievements and Learning, prepared under the supervision of the International Teaching Centre. Also enclosed are two copies for each Regional Bahá'í Council and national and regional training institute under your jurisdiction. The volume illustrates the endeavours of the Bahá'í community in furthering the process of growth, and highlights, among other themes, advances made toward releasing the potential of the youth, enhancing institutional capacity, and the establishment of Houses of Worship. This work also describes activities undertaken by the Bahá'í community in the areas of social action and participation in the discourses of society, as well as developments that have unfolded at the Bahá'í World Centre. The friends in your community will no doubt be pleased to read of the manifold achievements of the Bahá'í community in the course of the previous Plan, and draw much inspiration from the accounts of the services of the believers across the world….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

296

Reports from All Continents Regarding the Celebration of the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

31 October 2017

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

296.1Reports continue to stream in from all continents, but we will wait no longer to communicate to you our unbounded joy. The outpouring of love and esteem for Bahá'u'lláh witnessed around the world at His bicentenary has moved us greatly. In settings of all kinds, from homes to stadiums, His life was celebrated with the utmost devotion and remarkable creativity. At many a gathering, guests outnumbered the Bahá'ís several times over; in some island nations, participation may be measured as a proportion of all the inhabitants. Truly, we confess our astonishment at the flood of grace Bahá'u'lláh has poured forth. And in every precious effort made to honour Him, we recognize the wholehearted striving of each believer to attain a full share. With all that transpired, we know that every one of you will wish to reflect on the implications for the progress of the Cause in your own locality.

We urge you to see in each person who responded to your invitation a potential protagonist in the community-building process. Consider how conditions may be created that would enable many to walk this path together. Connected to the transformative power of the Revelation, every soul can draw closer to Bahá'u'lláh, grow in capacity, find joy in service, and learn to assist others. The results of the magnificent effort you have made offer tremendous promise—but fulfilling that promise will require fortitude. Let the forces released in this period lend impetus to your personal and collective endeavours during the remainder of this bicentennial year and, indeed, through all eight cycles leading up to the two hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb. With our expectations heightened and our hearts imploring divine favours on your behalf, we give praise to the Ancient Beauty, a fresh glimpse of Whose soul-entrancing glory He has in these days chosen to disclose.

The Universal House of Justice

297

Release from Service of Two Members of the Universal House of Justice

6 November 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Beloved Friends,

297.1Conscious of the heavy burden of work resting upon members of the Universal House of Justice, Mr. Gustavo Correa and Dr. Firaydoun Javaheri have, after prayerful consideration as to the best interests of the Cause and in light of their advanced ages, requested permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.

297.2The House of Justice has regretfully accepted the resignation of these beloved members, who have served on this Body since 2008 and 2003, respectively. In view, however, of the imminence of the Twelfth International Bahá'í Convention, we have requested them to remain in office until that time, and to this they have readily agreed.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

298

Passing of Ursula Grossmann

10 November 2017

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Germany

298.1We were grieved to learn of the passing of consecrated handmaid of Bahá'u'lláh Ursula Grossmann, whose depth of faith, generosity of spirit, and selfless dedication to the Cause of God will long be remembered. Pioneering and travel teaching in several countries and two decades of sacrificial service at the Bahá'í World Centre—including tireless support of her esteemed husband, Mr. Hartmut Grossmann, and devoted labours as a pilgrim guide—are but a few of the many distinguished contributions that she made to the advancement of the Faith she so cherished.

298.2To her husband and her dearly loved children and grandchildren we convey our heartfelt sympathy and assure them of our ardent supplications at the

Sacred Threshold for the progress of her luminous soul in the Abhá Kingdom.
The Universal House of Justice
299
Climate Change, Public Discourse and Social Action
29 November 2017
To three Bahá'ís
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
299.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 21 June 2017 raising questions about the involvement of the Bahá'í community in addressing the issue of anthropogenic climate change. You express your views about the contemporary discourse surrounding climate change, observing that there is pressure to accept an extreme position about the causes and predicted catastrophic results of climate change and to support associated economic and social policies. You also share your perception that some Bahá'ís have taken a position strongly aligned with such an extreme position, promoting its arguments and suppressing the views of other believers and, as a result, you fear that they may be raising the requirement to act on this issue to the level of a religious principle and involving the community in a partisan political debate. We have been asked to convey the following.
299.2The House of Justice appreciates your turning to it for clarification of matters that have been a source of concern to you. It welcomes the opportunity not only to address the issue of climate change itself but, more broadly, to clarify certain ideas about the way in which Bahá'ís are to understand and contribute to the betterment of the world.
299.3Your letter reflects thoughtful concern about the practical limits of scientific knowledge, its implications for public policy, and its possible misrepresentation in an argument warning about catastrophic anthropogenic climate change that you feel is extreme, political, and unjustified by the facts. Although you do not mention it, you are surely aware that your measured skepticism is largely overshadowed in the public debate by another extreme perspective, promoted by political and vested interests, that goes as far as denying climate change and attempting to dismiss or contend with relevant scientific findings. Specific concerns about possible extremes on one side of the debate, therefore, must be addressed without appearing to advocate the other extreme. On the matter of climate change and other vital issues with profound implications for the common good, Bahá'ís have to avoid being drawn into the all too common tendencies evident in contemporary discourse to delineate sharp dichotomies, become ensnared in contests for power, and engage in intractable debate that obstructs the search for viable solutions to the world's problems. Humanity would be best and most effectively served by setting aside partisan disputation, pursuing united action that is informed by the best available scientific evidence and grounded in spiritual principles, and thoughtfully revising action in the light of experience. The incessant focus on generating and magnifying points of difference rather than building upon points of agreement leads to exaggeration that fuels anger and confusion, thereby diminishing the will and capacity to act on matters of vital concern.
299.4One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is

how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources.
Certain biological realities present themselves when an organism negatively affects or exceeds the capacity of its ecosystem. The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war. And particular arrangements of human affairs can have devastating consequences for the environment. The question of the impact of climate change, and to what extent it is man-made and its effects can be ameliorated, is today a major aspect of this larger problem. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh directly and indirectly touches on a range of such concerns in a manner that speaks to a harmony between society and the natural world. It is essential, therefore, that Bahá'ís contribute to thought and action regarding such matters.

299.5Among the Bahá'í teachings are those concerning the importance of science. "Great indeed is the claim of scientists … on the peoples of the world," Bahá'u'lláh observed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the "sciences of today are bridges to reality" and repeatedly emphasized that "religion must be in conformity with science and reason." Significantly, on an occasion when a scientific question was asked of Shoghi Effendi, he responded in a letter written on his behalf that "we are a religion and not qualified to pass on scientific matters." And in reply to scientific issues raised on a number of occasions, he consistently advised Bahá'ís that such matters would need to be investigated by scientists.

299.6Scientific inquiry into the question of human contributions to global warming has gradually unfolded over a century of investigation and, more recently, with intense scrutiny. While there will naturally be differences of view among individual scientists, there does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change. Sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon; ultimately, the outcomes of action must stand the test of further scientific inquiry and the objective facts of the physical world. In the spectrum of issues under discussion—which includes the extent of human contribution, projections of the possible future consequences, and alternatives for response—some aspects are, of course, less supported than others by scientific findings and hence subject to additional critical analysis.

299.7A phenomenon as complex as climate change cannot be reduced to simple propositions or simplistic policy prescriptions. Even when there is agreement on some underlying facts, there may be a diversity of views about what to do in response to those facts, and the problem is compounded when uncertainty exists or when basic facts are contested for partisan reasons. But while there may indeed be a localized and highly charged political component to the public discussion, more remarkable is the fact that at a time when nations have difficulty reaching agreement on many important issues, the governments of nearly every country on earth have reached political consensus on a joint framework, in the Paris accord, to respond to climate change in a manner that

is anticipated to evolve over time as experience accumulates. More than a century ago, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred to “unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will erelong be witnessed.” The recently adopted international agreement on climate change, irrespective of any shortcomings and limitations it may have, offers another noteworthy demonstration of that development anticipated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.
The agreement represents a starting point for constructive thought and action that can be refined or revised on the basis of experience and new findings over time.

299.8While as a fundamental principle Bahá’ís do not engage in partisan political affairs, this should not be interpreted in a manner that prevents the friends from full and active participation in the search for solutions to the pressing problems facing humanity. Given that the question of climate change gives rise to social, economic, and environmental concerns across the world, interested Bahá’ís and Bahá’í institutions and agencies have naturally addressed it, whether at local, regional, national, or international levels. However, this does not mean that conclusions about scientific findings on climate change associated with such initiatives should be construed or presented as matters of religious conviction or obligation. Different Bahá’ís will, given their range of backgrounds, understand ideas about science and climate change in different ways and feel impelled to act differently, and there is no obligation for them to have uniformity of thought in such matters. Whenever Bahá’ís do participate in activities associated with this topic in the wider society, they can help to contribute to a constructive process by elevating the discourse above partisan concerns and self-interest to strive to achieve unity of thought and action. A range of Bahá’í concepts can inform these efforts; the letter of the House of Justice dated 1 March 2017, for example, addresses moral questions of consumption and excessive materialism that are associated with the exploitation and degradation of the environment. At the start, there are no doubt many uncontroversial areas of overlap where the effort to address the question of anthropogenic climate change corresponds with widely accepted approaches to improving the environment. Areas for collaboration with others could broaden as experience and learning unfolds.

299.9In those parts of the world where discussions surrounding anthropogenic climate change have indeed fallen prey to an almost intractable divide, Bahá’ís must be sensitive to the danger of this divisive partisan approach taking root in the community. This may well mean that some individuals or agencies have to consider to what extent their views about action required on climate change reflect a posture that is too extreme, whether in exaggerating the problem or minimizing it. Concepts and principles associated with Bahá’í consultation inform how the friends should interact among themselves and how they participate in social discourses and social action. Consultation provides a means by which common understanding can be reached and a collective course of action defined. It involves a free, respectful, dignified, and fair-minded effort on the part of a group of people to exchange views, seek truth, and attempt to reach consensus. An initial difference of opinion is the

starting point for examining an issue in order to reach greater understanding and consensus; it should not become a cause of rancor, aversion, or estrangement. By acting in unity, a conclusion about a particular course of action may be tested and revised as necessary through a process of learning. Otherwise, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.”

299.10Also relevant to such participation is greater appreciation and application of Bahá’u’lláh’s insights on moderation. “In all matters moderation is desirable,” He states. “If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil.” This call for moderation includes in particular the manner of speech if a just conclusion is to be achieved. “Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation,” Bahá’u’lláh writes. “One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison,” He explains. “It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man’s station.” By moderation, Bahá’u’lláh is in no way referring to mere compromise, the dilution of truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus. The moderation He calls for demands an end to destructive excesses that have plagued humanity and fomented ceaseless contention and turmoil. Moderation in deliberation and action stands in contrast to the arbitrary imposition of views through power or insistence upon ideological aims, both of which obstruct the search for truth and sow the seeds of continuing injustice. A moderate perspective is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice. “Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation,” Bahá’u’lláh states. “He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing.”

299.11The House of Justice trusts that, in pursuing the many facets of their work of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society, individuals, communities, and institutions will continually grow in their capacity to make a distinctive and effective contribution to addressing the multitudinous problems afflicting society and the planet, including those associated with climate change.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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Passing of Hartmut Grossmann, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice

17 December 2017

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

300.1Our hearts are grieved to learn of the passing of our dearly loved former colleague Hartmut Grossmann. A distinguished son of an illustrious father, he poured out his life in uninterrupted service to the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, as a teacher, pioneer, and member of the National Spiritual Assemblies of

Germany and Finland, the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe, the International Teaching Centre and, ultimately, of the Universal House of Justice. He combined immense personal warmth, generosity of spirit, and serene humility with utter consecration, unwavering obedience, firmness in the Covenant, and vigilance in the protection of the Faith. His cheerfulness and dedication touched and inspired the hearts of all those who crossed his path, and heightened their enthusiasm for service. His tireless efforts to raise pioneers and nurture nascent Bahá'í communities left a legacy that will be felt for generations.

300.2We are ardently supplicating at the Sacred Threshold that his noble soul may be richly rewarded and that he may be joyously reunited with his beloved wife, Ursula, who so recently ascended to the Abhá Kingdom. We extend our deepest condolences to his dear daughters, Kerstin, Claudia, Anke, Maren, and Barbara and their families, and will pray that their grieving hearts may be solaced. The friends everywhere are advised to hold befitting memorial gatherings, including commemorative services in his honour in all Houses of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

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Religious Prejudice

27 December 2017

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

301.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 24 March 2017 … regarding a query you have received about the Bahá'í community's perspective on religious prejudice and what action it is taking to address this issue in the world. We have been asked to convey the following comments, which, it is hoped, will assist you in your response.

301.2The Bahá'í teachings unequivocally proclaim the essential oneness of God and unity of all religions. "There can be no doubt whatever", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God." He explains that the Founders of the world religions, the great universal Educators of humanity, share a common purpose to unite humanity and ensure the advancement of civilization. "They all abide in the same tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith." He urges the peoples of the world to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." And He further states:

That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion. These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.

301.3At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh offers a stark warning about the

pernicious effects of religious prejudice, stating that “religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction.” He calls upon Bahá’ís to act so that “the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be completely obliterated.”

301.4‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses that “the divine religions must be the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction.” He furthermore observes that “religion must be the cause of fellowship and love. If it becomes the cause of estrangement then it is not needed, for religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary.” The purpose of true religion, then, is to produce good fruits, and if, in the name of religion, conflict, prejudice, and hatred are engendered among humanity, this is due to fallible human interpretations and impositions that can be overcome by seeking the divine truth that lies at the heart of every religion. “May fanaticism and religious bigotry be unknown,” He urges, “all humanity enter the bond of brotherhood, souls consort in perfect agreement, the nations of earth at last hoist the banner of truth, and the religions of the world enter the divine temple of oneness, for the foundations of the heavenly religions are one reality.”

301.5Religious prejudice forms a formidable barrier to the progress and well-being of humanity. This prejudice, along with many others, permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on individual and collective consciousness. In fact, it is often deliberately fostered and exploited through manipulation and propaganda, using methods that ignore truth and promote self-serving agendas for political or other expediencies. A system of governance befitting a mature human race will, in time, abandon such ways of dividing people to obtain and consolidate power, of promoting agendas benefiting only certain groups or segments within society at the expense of others, and of directing the masses “toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization”. It will instead unite people and channel capacities and resources to promote “the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race”.

301.6The destructive consequences of religious prejudice are thus of great concern to the Bahá’í community. The oneness of humankind is, after all, the pivot around which all of the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve and is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of the Bahá’í Faith. The betterment of the world, its ultimate objective, is retarded by this affliction. Further, the Bahá’í community itself has suffered the direct consequences of religious prejudice for nearly two centuries, particularly in the land of its birth.

301.7Yet, Bahá’ís are confident that the peoples of the world can learn over time to weaken and eventually eliminate the scourge of religious prejudice. All people have the right to freedom of conscience and belief, the

right to express those beliefs, and the obligation to have due regard for these same rights for others. They can then engage each other with mutual respect and find in their common values a common purpose and unity in action that contribute to the building of a better world. The Bahá'í community, for its own part, strives to foster patterns of tolerance, cooperation, and fellowship in a number of ways.

301.8As individuals, Bahá'ís strive daily to live according to the teachings and to embody and express the principles of the Faith in action. "So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural", the House of Justice has stated, addressing the Bahá'ís of the world, "that even the stranger sees in you loving friends." Bahá'ís are taught from the earliest age about the common foundation of all the world religions, to accept and love the Founders of all of them as their own, and to embrace those of all religions or none with friendliness and fellowship.

301.9In the affairs of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'ís are learning to transcend traditional barriers that divide people in the wider society and exacerbate tensions among people from different religious backgrounds. Shoghi Effendi explained that "every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it." One example is the way in which all minorities, including those from a religious minority background, are encouraged in their participation. "If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated", Shoghi Effendi has for instance stated when discussing the corrosive effects of prejudice, "it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise." The practice of Bahá'í elections is symbolic of this commitment to encouraging minorities—when a tie vote arises and one of those involved belongs to a minority group in that society, that person is unhesitatingly accorded the priority without the necessity of another vote to break the tie.

301.10Furthermore, Bahá'ís are engaged in cities and villages across the globe in establishing a pattern of life in which increasing numbers, irrespective of background, are invited to take part. This pattern, expressive of the dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, includes classes for the spiritual education of children in which they also develop a deep appreciation for the fundamental unity of the various world religions; groups that assist young people to navigate a crucial stage of their lives and to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them; circles of study wherein participants reflect on the spiritual nature of existence and build capacity for service to the community and society; gatherings for collective worship that strengthen the devotional character of the community; and, in time, a growing range of endeavours for social and economic development. This pattern of community life is giving rise to vibrant and purposeful new communities wherein relationships are founded on the oneness of mankind, universal participation, justice, and freedom from prejudice. All are welcome. The process which is unfolding seeks to foster collaboration and

build capacity within every human group—with no regard to class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, and irrespective of gender or social status—to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.

301.11Another area to which the Bahá'í community has been giving a progressively greater share of attention is participation in discourses which have a significant bearing on the well-being of humanity. Its efforts in this regard have been directed towards engaging in conversations in a widening range of spaces at the international and national levels, working shoulder to shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals, seeking, where possible, to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built. A number of these discourses, such as those on the role of religion in society, religious coexistence, and freedom of religion or belief, directly address the imperative of overcoming the challenge of religious prejudice.

301.12In this light, the Bahá'í community has particularly been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities since the time of their inception, working alongside others to increase understanding and cooperation among religions. The achievements of the interfaith movement were highlighted in a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the world's religious leaders in April 2002. The letter also emphasized that the efforts of the movement to date, however constructive, were not sufficient to effectively address the growing challenge posed by religious prejudice and fanaticism; more was required. "With every day that passes," the letter stated "danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable", and the House of Justice urged earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership.

301.13Fundamentally, a great share of the Bahá'í community's efforts has been directed at addressing the root cause of religious prejudice—ignorance. "The perpetuation of ignorance", the House of Justice has stated, "is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind…. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities." This orientation has particularly manifested itself in the Bahá'í community's focus on education, which has been a central concern since the inception of the Faith; in its efforts to foster in individuals a growing consciousness and capacity to recognize prejudice and to counter it; in its practice of using consultative processes in all its affairs; and in its commitment to and upholding of the dual knowledge systems of science and religion as being necessary for the advancement of civilization. Moreover, the development of the life of the mind and independent investigation of reality, which are highly prized in the Bahá'í writings, serve to equip individuals to distinguish truth from falsehood, which is so essential if prejudices, superstitious beliefs, and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers the assurance in this respect that "once every soul inquireth into

truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past.”

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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Footnotes to the Notes Section of The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

25 March 2018

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

302.1In light of the message dated 10 July 2014 to the Bahá’ís of the world calling for the adoption of provisions for the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar, the Universal House of Justice has instructed that four explanatory footnotes be added to the Notes section of The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book. Accordingly, the following changes should be incorporated into all future editions of the book (page references are to the United States Bahá’í Publishing Trust’s pocket-size edition, 2009 printing).

Note 25, page 179, line 4: insert an asterisk after “(see note 26).” and place the following footnote at the bottom of the page:

On 10 July 2014, the Universal House of Justice announced the adoption of provisions for the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar beginning at Naw-Rúz 172 (20 March 2015). The first day of the month of fasting now varies according to the day on which Naw-Rúz of the coming year falls.

Note 26, page 179, line 31: after “left to the decision of the Universal House of Justice.”, insert an asterisk (or the appropriate symbol) and place the following footnote at the bottom of the page:

In its message dated 10 July 2014 concerning the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar beginning at Naw-Rúz 172, the Universal House of Justice designated Tihrán as the spot on the earth that would serve as the standard for determining, by means of astronomical computations from reliable sources, the moment of the vernal equinox in the northern hemisphere and thereby the day of Naw-Rúz.

Note 138, page 224, line 21: after “solar or lunar basis.” insert an asterisk and place the following footnote at the bottom of the page:

In its message dated 10 July 2014 concerning the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar, the Universal House of Justice stated that the Festivals of the Twin Birthdays are to be observed on the first and the second day following the occurrence of the eighth new moon after Naw-Rúz, as determined in advance by astronomical tables using Tihrán as the point of reference.

Note 147, page 227, line 13: after “to the solar year.”, insert an asterisk and place the following footnote at the bottom of the page:

With the implementation of the Badí‘ calendar as announced by the Universal House of Justice in its message dated 10 July 2014, the number of intercalary days varies according to the timing of the vernal equinox in successive years.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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Ridván Message 2018

Ridván 2018

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

303.1We greet you in the enduring afterglow of those memorable events that marked the bicentenary of the Birth of the Blessed Beauty. As we consider what transpired then and since, we find that the global Bahá’í community now in view is not the same as when it embarked on the first six cycles of the current Plan. It is more conscious than ever before of its mission. It has experienced an unprecedented surge in its capacity to bring friends and acquaintances into contact with its community life; to inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour; to articulate how spiritual truths can be translated into sustained practical action; and, above all, to converse not only about the teachings that will build the world anew, but about the One Who taught them: Bahá’u’lláh. Accounts of His life and of His suffering told in myriad tongues by adults, youth, and children touched countless hearts. Some showed themselves ready to explore His Cause further. Others pledged collaboration. And many a receptive soul was moved to an avowal of faith.

303.2One telling indicator of progress was the numerous places where it became clear that the Faith had emerged from obscurity at the national level. There were government leaders and leaders of thought who stated publicly—and sometimes emphasized privately—that the world stands in need of Bahá’u’lláh’s vision and that the Bahá’ís’ endeavours are admired and should be expanded. It delighted us to see that it was not only Bahá’ís who wished to honour Bahá’u’lláh and celebrate His life—special gatherings were hosted by some from beyond the Bahá’í community. In areas where hostility to the Faith exists, the friends were undismayed; showing marvellous resilience, they encouraged their compatriots to examine the truth for themselves, and many joyfully participated in the festivities. The bicentenary also gave rise to a seemingly limitless efflorescence of artistic expression, magnificent testimony to the wellspring of love from which it stemmed. The character of the Bahá’í community’s entire approach to this occasion was confirmation of how much has been learned over more than two decades now, since the current series of global Plans began. The individual believer took initiative, the community arose in collective effort, and the friends channelled their creative energy into the plans prepared by the institutions. A significant anniversary, marking the passage of two centuries, offered a powerful stimulus to the work of building communities for the century to come. In the period leading up to the second bicentenary, let every seed so lovingly sown at the first be nurtured patiently towards fruition.

303.3Two years into the present Plan, although naturally progress is not uniform from country to country, the number of intensive programmes of growth in the world is approaching half the five thousand contemplated in the current global endeavour, and the rate at which this number is rising has been steadily increasing. Looking more closely, there are promising signs of how the powers and potentialities of individuals, communities, and institutions are being manifested. For the believers everywhere, the experience of the bicentenary celebration demonstrated that many of their day-to-day interactions with the

people around them can be infused with the spirit of teaching. And as the work in thousands of villages and neighbourhoods gathers momentum, a vibrant community life is taking root in each. The number of clusters where the system for extending this pattern of activity to more and more locations is becoming well established—enabling, thereby, the friends to pass the third milestone along a continuum of development—has grown markedly. And it is here, at the frontiers of the Bahá'í world's learning, particularly in the movement of populations towards the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, where not only are large numbers coming into the widening embrace of Bahá'í activities but the friends are now learning how sizeable groups come to identify themselves with the community of the Most Great Name. We are seeing the Faith's educational efforts take on a more formal character in such places, as children move seamlessly through the grades year after year and one level of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme reliably succeeds another. In these places, the training institute is learning to ensure that sufficient human resources are being raised up to provide for the spiritual and moral edification of children and junior youth in ever-increasing numbers. Participation in these foundational activities is becoming so embedded in the culture of the population that it is viewed as an indispensable aspect of the life of a community. A new vitality emerges within a people taking charge of their own development, and they build immunity to those societal forces that breed passivity. Possibilities for material and spiritual progress take shape. Social reality begins to transform.

303.4Cherished friends, this is truly a moment to give thanks to the Best-Beloved. There are a great many reasons to be encouraged. Yet we are only too aware of the scale of the task that remains. Fundamentally, as we have previously indicated, there must emerge in many hundreds of clusters a growing band of believers who can maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity, and who are distinguished by their ability and their discipline to reflect on action and learn from experience. Raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals in each place—not just at the level of the cluster but within neighbourhoods and villages—is at once a formidable challenge and a critical need. But where this is occurring, the results speak for themselves.

303.5We are reassured to see that the institutions of the Faith are keeping this supreme need at the forefront of their thinking, devising effective mechanisms to enable the insights arising from progress to be widely applied. At the same time, greater experience is endowing national, regional, and local bodies alike with broader vision. They are becoming involved in all aspects of the community's development and are concerned with the well-being of people beyond its formal membership. Conscious of the profound implications the institute process holds for the advancement of peoples, they are paying particular attention to how the training institute can be strengthened. They remain mindful of the need to maintain the community's focus on the requirements of the Plan and call the ever-widening circle of friends to higher and higher levels of unity. They faithfully uphold their responsibility to refine their administrative and financial systems so that the work of expansion

and consolidation can be properly supported. In all this, they are ultimately occupied with cultivating in the community those conditions that conduce to the release of powerful spiritual forces.

303.6As the work of community building intensifies, the friends are using the new capacities they have developed to improve conditions in the society around them, their enthusiasm kindled by their study of the divine teachings. Short-term projects have soared in number, formal programmes have expanded their reach, and there are now more Bahá'í-inspired development organizations engaged in education, health, agriculture, and other areas. From the resulting transformation visible in the individual and collective lives of peoples may be discerned the unmistakable stirrings of the society-building power of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. No wonder, then, that it is from such instances of social action—whether simple or complex, of fixed duration or long sustained—that the Offices of the Bahá'í International Community are increasingly taking inspiration in their efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society. This is another important field of endeavour for the Faith that has advanced well. At the national level, contributions to discourses that are meaningful to that society—the equality of men and women, migration and integration, the role of youth in social transformation, and religious coexistence, among others—are being made with growing confidence, proficiency, and insight. And wherever they live, work, or study, believers of all ages and backgrounds are making valued contributions to particular discourses, bringing to the attention of those around them a principled perspective shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation.

303.7The Faith's standing in various spaces in which discourses unfold has been much enhanced by its official presence on the World Wide Web, a presence which has expanded considerably through the launch of numerous national Bahá'í websites and the further development of the family of sites associated with Bahai.org. This has immense value for both the propagation and protection of the Cause. Over the span of just a few days a large global audience was attracted to carefully conceived content about the Faith that was presented on the bicentenary website and updated in nine languages simultaneously, and which has now been augmented by individual country pages illustrating the diversity of the celebrations that occurred. Plans are already far advanced for introducing to the Bahá'í Reference Library site a feature that will allow previously untranslated and unpublished passages or Tablets from the Holy Writings to be released online over time. As well as this, new volumes of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings rendered into English are set to appear in the coming years.

303.8In Santiago, Chile, and Battambang, Cambodia, the world's most recently dedicated Houses of Worship are becoming established centres of attraction, beacons to their societies of all that the Faith stands for. And their number is about to grow. We are delighted to announce that the dedication ceremony for the Temple in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, is to take place in July. Further, the construction of more Houses of Worship lies just over the horizon. In Vanuatu, permission is being obtained to start building. In India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a highly complex and exacting process has at last led to

the successful acquisition of land. The joy at seeing the design of the first national Mashriqu'l-Adhkár unveiled in Papua New Guinea at Naw-Rúz had hardly subsided when the design of the local House of Worship in Kenya was also revealed. Meanwhile, we have every expectation that the recently released statement and compilation about the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, prepared by our Research Department, will further stimulate the friends' appreciation of the significance of worship in community life. For in their acts of service, especially in their regular devotional gatherings, Bahá'ís everywhere are laying the spiritual foundations of future Houses of Worship.

303.9Only three years remain of a quarter-century effort that began in 1996 focused on a single goal: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. At Ridván 2021, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will embark on a Plan lasting a single year. Brief, but pregnant with portent, this one-year endeavour will begin a new wave of Plans bearing the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era. During the course of this auspicious twelvemonth, the Bahá'í world's commemoration of the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá will include a special gathering at the Bahá'í World Centre to which representatives of every National Spiritual Assembly and every Regional Bahá'í Council will be invited. This, however, is to be but the first in a sequence of events that will prepare the believers for the demands of the decades to come. The following January, the elapse of one hundred years since the first public reading of the Master's Will and Testament will be the occasion for a conference in the Holy Land bringing together the Continental Boards of Counsellors and all members of the Auxiliary Boards for Protection and Propagation. The spiritual energy released at these two historic gatherings must then be carried to all the friends of God in every land in which they reside. For this purpose, a series of conferences will be convened worldwide in the months that follow, a catalyst to the multi-year endeavour that shall succeed the coming One Year Plan.

303.10Thus, a new phase in the unfoldment of the Master's Divine Plan is approaching. But a thrilling and more immediate prospect lies directly ahead. The bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb is now just a year and a half away. This is a period in which to recall the extraordinary heroism of the Martyr-Herald of our Faith, Whose dramatic ministry thrust humanity into a new era of history. Though separated from our own time by two centuries, the society in which the Báb appeared resembles the present-day world for the sense of oppression and for the longing of so many to find answers to slake the soul's thirst to know. In considering how this two-hundred-year anniversary might befittingly be marked, we recognize that these festivities will have a special character of their own. Nevertheless, we anticipate a flourishing of activity no less rich and no less inclusive than that which accompanied the bicentenary just passed. It is an occasion to which every community, every household, every heart will undoubtedly look forward with eager expectation.

303.11The months ahead will also be a time for calling to mind the lives of the Báb's intrepid followers—heroines and heroes whose faith was expressed in matchless, sacrificial acts that will forever adorn the annals of the Cause. Their qualities of fearlessness, consecration, and detachment from all save God

impress themselves upon everyone who learns of their ventures. How striking, too, is the young age at which so many of those lionhearts made their indelible mark on history. During the coming period, may their example give courage to the entire company of the faithful—not least to the youth, who are once more summoned to the vanguard of a movement aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the world.

303.12This, then, is our bright, bright hope. In the six cycles that lie between this Ridván and the next bicentenary—indeed, throughout the remaining three years of the current Plan—let the same all-consuming, all-surpassing love that spurred the Báb's disciples to the diffusion of the divine light inspire you to great deeds. That you may be the recipients of heavenly aid is our supplication at the Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

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Message to the Delegates Attending the Twelfth International Bahá'í Convention

25 April 2018

To the Delegates to the Twelfth International Bahá'í Convention

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

304.1It is with great joy and anticipation, more particularly during this period of special potency, that we extend to you a most loving welcome to the Holy Land on the occasion of the Twelfth International Bahá'í Convention. The convocation of delegates from an anticipated 166 countries—the highest number of National Spiritual Assemblies to be represented at an International Convention—is a cause for celebration; it also brings to mind the presence in spirit of delegates from other countries, whose involvement, owing to certain circumstances, is confined to voting through postal ballot. With profound gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh, we acknowledge the historic participation of representatives from a number of Arab countries. The National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt, as a result of restrictions and government policies in that country, was dissolved in 1960, prior to the election of the first Universal House of Justice; that National Assembly, initially formed during the early years of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, was finally re-established at Ridván 2014. Also, although they have participated in past elections by post, we welcome for the very first time delegates from the National Spiritual Assemblies of Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Beyond this, we are most happy to note the presence of members of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Liberia and Mozambique, which were reformed within the past five years.

304.2As you prepare for the sacred duty of electing the members of the Universal House of Justice, you are lovingly invited to visit the Holy Shrines. Mindful of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that attaining the Most Holy Threshold is akin to attaining the very presence of the Blessed Beauty, let your whole being be refreshed with the perfume of divine fragrance. With sanctified spirits and in a rarefied atmosphere of purity and detachment, you will then gather on the first morning of the Convention to discharge, in a manner far, far removed from the prevailing standards of elections in the

world, your weighty responsibility.
304.3Your participation, as the chosen representatives of the Bahá'í world, in the consultative sessions of the Convention offers a precious opportunity to contemplate together, in the light of experience, the vital issues facing the Cause as everywhere individuals, institutions, and communities strive and grow in capacity to serve humanity—a humanity caught up in a bewildering maelstrom. The exigencies of the present stage of the Divine Plan will be at the heart of these deliberations, as indicated by the themes designated for each of the various sessions. You may, of course, after due reflection, bring forward additional matters that you feel are essential to the progress and well-being of the Faith.
304.4A specially commissioned film entitled A Widening Embrace—presenting a synthesis of efforts at the grassroots to document learning about growth in a range of diverse settings—will be screened on the second day of the Convention. The film provides vivid glimpses of the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation that is becoming manifest as believers across the planet labour with vision, earnestness, and devotion.
304.5During your stay, you will no doubt find time to visit and enjoy the new Pilgrim Reception Centre in Haifa, recently acquired and refurbished to host growing numbers of eagerly anticipated pilgrims from the communities you serve. The beloved Guardian had himself hoped to acquire this property, so close to the hallowed precincts of the Shrine of the Báb, for the Faith.
304.6These precious days spent in prayer and contemplation within the Sacred Shrines and Holy Places during this Ridván season, together with your participation in the International Convention, will surely inspire your souls and prepare you for the vital undertakings awaiting you in the field of action. Returning to your communities as beacons of light, may your renewed consecration, heightened consciousness, and increased resolve sustain you throughout these swiftly passing, final years of the first century of the Formative Age.
With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice

305
Election of the Universal House of Justice
30 April 2018
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
305.1The newly elected members of the Universal House of Justice are Paul Lample, Chuungu Malitonga, Payman Mohajer, Shahriar Razavi, Stephen Hall, Ayman Rouhani, Stephen Birkland, Juan Francisco Mora, Praveen Mallik.
The Universal House of Justice

306
Release of A Widening Embrace
1 May 2018
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
306.1It is with pleasure that the Universal House of Justice makes available to you a film that it commissioned for presentation at the Twelfth International

Bahá'í Convention. This film, entitled A Widening Embrace, captures experiences and insights from clusters, neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and cities in all parts of the world where peoples are taking charge of their own spiritual, social, and material development through the application of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. The segments of the film illustrate distinct but interrelated dimensions of the work of building vibrant communities—embracing large numbers, youth summoned to the vanguard, and stirrings of social action.

306.2You may wish to show the film early in the proceedings of your forthcoming National Convention, as a means of helping to inform the consultation of the delegates and uplifting their spirits. You are also encouraged to consider, together with the Counsellors, ways in which this film can be made widely available among the friends and utilized as an instrument for reflection. To assist you in this regard, the film will be made available to download or view online at http://www.bahai.org/widening-embrace. In addition, each National Spiritual Assembly is being provided with a flash drive with high-resolution copies of the film with subtitles in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, and Spanish. These files have also been placed on a secure website, in a number of formats to suit different needs. Also available on the flash drive and at this website are the DVD cover artwork, technical instructions, and video and audio files that will allow National Assemblies, where required, to create versions of the film with subtitles or voice-over in relevant languages….

306.3May this film be a source of inspiration and hope to growing numbers around the globe who are joyfully contributing to the collective effort of building the world anew.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

307

Determining When the Fast Ends and Naw-Rúz is Celebrated

3 May 2018

To three Bahá'ís

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

307.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 20 March 2018 concerning when Naw-Rúz should be celebrated. We have been asked to convey the following.

307.2In "Questions and Answers", number 35, in The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh states: "The Festival of Naw-Rúz falleth on the day that the sun entereth the sign of Aries, even should this occur no more than one minute before sunset." The expression referring to the sun's entering the sign of Aries is the traditional way of designating the vernal equinox, the moment in which the sun crosses the plane of the earth's equator into the northern hemisphere. In a letter dated 15 May 1940 written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, Shoghi Effendi stated, "Regarding Naw-Rúz: if the vernal equinox falls on the 21st March before sunset it is celebrated on that day. If at any time after sunset, Naw-Rúz will then, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, fall on the 22nd. As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of

Justice will have to decide."

307.3The moment of the vernal equinox is independent of any geographical location on the earth. However, as indicated by the above-quoted letter written on behalf of the Guardian, to determine the Bahá'í day on which the vernal equinox occurs, this moment must be compared with sunset. A location was required to serve as the standard for determining the Bahá'í day on which the vernal equinox occurs and thereby the day of Naw-Rúz for the Bahá'í world. As announced in its message dated 10 July 2014 to the Bahá'ís of the world, the House of Justice decided that Tihrán would serve as this location.

307.4The moment of the vernal equinox this year in Tihrán was 20 March 2018 at 19:45 Iran Standard Time. Since in Tihrán the moment of the vernal equinox occurred after sunset on 20 March, Naw-Rúz was celebrated by Bahá'ís in their respective locations on the Bahá'í day that fell between sunset on 20 March and sunset on 21 March. Therefore, the Gregorian calendar equivalent of Naw-Rúz for this year was 21 March.

307.5The nineteen days preceding the day of Naw-Rúz constitute the month of fasting. The Fast ends and Naw-Rúz begins at sunset on 19 'Alá'. The moment of the vernal equinox marks the day on which Naw-Rúz, 1 Bahá, falls; the vernal equinox is not the moment when the Bahá'í celebration begins.

You may also be interested to know that the age-old practice in Iran of marking the start of the Iranian festival of Naw-Rúz according to the exact moment of the occurrence of the vernal equinox is not relevant to the implementation of the Badí' calendar.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

308

Appointment of the Members of the International Teaching Centre

15 May 2018

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

308.1With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of the members of the International Teaching Centre for the five-year term beginning 23 May 2018: Antonella Demonte, Andrej Donoval, Gloria Javid, Dinesh Kumar, Rachel Ndegwa, Albert Nshisu Nsunga, Navid Serrano, Mehranguiz Farid Tehrani, and Holly Woodard. We are profoundly grateful to Uransaikhan Granfar and Alison Milston for the outstanding contributions they have made during their years of service on this vital institution.

The Universal House of Justice

309

Conferred Infallibility

18 May 2018

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í friend,

309.1Your letter inquiring about certain issues being discussed among the friends pertaining to the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice was received…. We have been asked to respond as follows….

309.2As you are surely aware, there are many statements in the Bahá'í

writings that set out in broad and emphatic terms the assurance of divine guidance and protection provided to the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice and describe conferred infallibility in these terms. Among these statements are the following from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God….

* * *

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself.

* * *

Should that House of Justice decide, either unanimously or by a majority, upon a matter that is not explicitly recorded in the Book, that decision and command will be guarded from error. Now, the members of the House of Justice are not essentially infallible as individuals, but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and unerring guidance of God: This is called conferred infallibility.

* * *

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.

Say, O people: Verily the Supreme House of Justice is under the wings of your Lord, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, that is, under His protection, His care, and His shelter; for He has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.

Moreover, Shoghi Effendi states:

In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, in the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice, it should be borne in mind, are not, as Bahá’u’lláh’s utterances clearly imply, responsible to those whom they represent, nor are they allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass of the faithful, or of those who directly elect them. They are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates and promptings of their conscience. They may, indeed they must,

acquaint themselves with the conditions prevailing among the community, must weigh dispassionately in their minds the merits of any case presented for their consideration, but must reserve for themselves the right of an unfettered decision. “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s incontrovertible assurance. They, and not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them, have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.

309.3Beyond these and other such quotations, a number of passages from the writings describe the range of responsibilities invested in the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. First, it is evident that each has a separate and distinct sphere. As Shoghi Effendi explains in “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh”, “it is made indubitably clear and evident that the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings.” Thus, the Universal House of Justice does not engage in interpretation of the Text, and the Guardian did not enact legislation, although in some instances, as Head of the Faith, he made certain decisions to guide the actions of the friends until such time as the Universal House of Justice would be established.

309.4While interpretation and legislation are the exclusive spheres, respectively, of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, these functions in no way represent the full extent of their powers and responsibilities as set forth in the writings. For example, about these two institutions Shoghi Effendi writes: “Their common, their fundamental object is to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings. Acting in conjunction with each other these two inseparable institutions administer its affairs, coördinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions.” Further, concerning the Universal House of Justice, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in His Will and Testament, “By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved….” And He explains that it is incumbent upon the Universal House of Justice to deliberate upon “all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.”

309.5In response to questions about the scope of the Guardian’s infallibility, a letter written on his behalf explains: “The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.” Another such letter states: “The Guardian’s infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word, and its application. Likewise any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith, or its well-being, must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly reveals.” Thus, while there were indeed limits to

his conferred infallibility, it was not confined merely to authoritative interpretation of the Bahá'í Writings but extended to the range of his responsibilities as Guardian and Head of the Faith. "It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism", yet another letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states. These passages about the Guardian's conferred infallibility and authority can also serve to assist believers in understanding the scope of the conferred infallibility and authority of the Universal House of Justice.

309.6Finally, you ask whether it is possible to enact laws within the framework of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh without a thorough and accurate understanding of the meaning of each one of the Writings. In the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is no reference to the nature and extent of the information to which the Universal House of Justice should have access when making its decisions. The House of Justice itself determines what information it needs to reach a decision. Before legislating or deciding upon any vital matter, it studies carefully and exhaustively both the Sacred Texts and the writings of Shoghi Effendi on the subject. It also consults the views of experts as needed. The concept of conferred infallibility of the Universal House of Justice does not rest upon the power of authoritative interpretation nor access to perfect knowledge and understanding—it is an unqualified assurance of divine guidance and protection from error as described in the Bahá'í writings.

309.7A discussion on the concept of conferred infallibility that centers on the abundant guidance set forth in the Bahá'í writings and from the Universal House of Justice can contribute to firmness and faith. But the friends cannot be naïve or vacillate when it comes to a matter so fundamental to the protection of the Cause and the integrity of the teachings as the provisions of the Covenant. Those who oppose the Faith and regrettably, in a few instances, believers who wish to advance their own personal views may use such discussions as an opportunity to weaken the confidence of Bahá'ís in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. During the ministry of the Guardian, would his lack of omniscience have been grounds for the friends to question his protective action to expel someone from the Faith? Were the provisions of the Ten Year Crusade subject to the preferences of the generality of the friends? Were the temporary administrative measures he enacted, pending the formation of the Universal House of Justice, open to debate among individuals or institutions? Without the assurances of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to rely upon a designated and authoritative center, any individual could have insisted upon the correctness of his or her views on any matter, and the Faith would have been mired in endless quarrelling, chaos, and division.

309.8Thus, perhaps more important for Bahá'ís than a common understanding of the meaning of conferred infallibility is a common understanding of its purpose and the implications for how they should conduct themselves. The Covenant establishes a center to which all Bahá'ís turn, a center which is assured divine guidance and protection, and which ensures the continuity of the

divinely-appointed authority that flows from the Source of the Faith, safeguards the unity of its followers, and maintains the integrity and flexibility of its teachings. Shoghi Effendi explains that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have "in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors, destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world." This is the guarantee that the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh will ultimately be realized. "For nothing short of the explicit directions of their Book, and the surprisingly emphatic language with which they have clothed the provisions of their Will," Shoghi Effendi explains, "could possibly safeguard the Faith for which they have both so gloriously labored all their lives. Nothing short of this could protect it from the heresies and calumnies with which denominations, peoples, and governments have endeavored, and will, with increasing vigor, endeavor to assail it in future." In a statement in defence of the Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates:

Hath the Blessed Beauty instituted this Covenant and Testament in order to exact obedience from all, or to bring about disobedience? If the latter is intended, then we have nothing to say; but if obedience and compliance are the goal, then wavering will lead to utter loss, and disobedience and waywardness are grievous error.

Again He states:

Now one must either say that the Blessed Beauty erred and led the people astray, for He directed them to obey someone who ought not to have been obeyed, or else say that the least deviation from the Covenant and the Testament entaileth deprivation from the bounties of Him Who is the Luminary of the world. Of these two alternatives, one must be true; there is no third.

309.9It is evident that the purpose of the Covenant, the purpose of the divine guidance and protection vouchsafed to the Universal House of Justice, the purpose of the clear and emphatic language in which the assurance of this guidance is given, are all to establish and preserve the unity of the Faith. Without such a Covenant, as in past dispensations, everyone would insist upon the correctness of their own view, the Faith of God would be splintered, and the divine purpose—the unity of humanity—would be impossible to achieve.

309.10The friends would do well to ponder "this unique, this wondrous System" Bahá'u'lláh has bequeathed to the world. Shoghi Effendi explains: "An exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds"; yet, he assures us: "We can, however, and it is our bounden duty to seek to derive fresh inspiration and added sustenance as we labor for the propagation of His Faith through a clearer apprehension of the truths it enshrines and the principles on which it is based." To attempt to precisely define the workings of conferred infallibility, to attribute exaggerated powers to the Universal House of Justice such as omniscience or even authoritative interpretation, or to insist

that fallible human beings can use their own limited powers of reason to test the validity of divinely guided decisions and determine whether to challenge them would be futile and, ultimately, harmful. Rather, the friends are to strive to understand the guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice and thoughtfully apply it. They are free to share observations, information, or questions with the Universal House of Justice. But they should not allow themselves to be caught up in the divisive practices and intractable disputes that consumed religion in past dispensations. The collective interests of the Faith are fostered through consultation and cooperation, not conflict and contention.

309.11Rest assured of the supplications of the Universal House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that you may be confirmed in your services to the Cause of God.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

310

Preparations for the Bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb

1 June 2018

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

310.1The tremendous stimulus given to the work of the Five Year Plan by the celebration of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh is apparent in all parts of the world. Thoughts are naturally turning to the two hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb and what must be accomplished before this second bicentenary, so that "every seed so lovingly sown at the first" may be "nurtured patiently towards fruition". The Universal House of Justice has requested that we convey to you a number of points to assist your deliberations on this theme. You are welcome to share the contents of this letter with the friends in your communities in any manner you deem appropriate.

310.2The broad framework for understanding the Bahá'í world's approach to both bicentenaries has already been set out in the letter to you dated 18 May 2016, written on behalf of the House of Justice. This letter indicated, in particular, that the locus of activity was to be at the local level. It also described the eight cycles between the two anniversaries as the period during which the greatest share of the effort needed to fulfil the objectives of the Five Year Plan would be required. This, therefore, must be the main focus of the believers in their clusters. It is a season of intensive activity that is well under way, and less than a year and a half remains. Included in this precious period are the Twin Holy Days this year, due to be observed in only a few months' time. On these occasions, the friends will have a valuable opportunity to draw on the rich experience they gained last year by bringing people together in local celebrations that uplift hearts and kindle spirits.

310.3Preparations for the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb should be undertaken with a recognition that the festivities marking this anniversary have a special context. They will occur just two years after the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, and the Báb was of course the Herald of Bahá'u'lláh. Before and after the first bicentenary, the believers

engaged family, friends, and acquaintances of all kinds in conversations about the life and teachings of the Blessed Beauty, and the conversations which occur in connection with the upcoming anniversary will in many ways be an extension of these, centering on both of the Faith's Twin Founders. For the greatness of this Day, this "matchless Day" extolled by Bahá'u'lláh, is evident from the fact that its advent was announced by two divine Manifestations, Whose Birthdays are "accounted as one in the sight of God". In Himself, and in the break from the prevailing order which His Revelation brought about, the sacred figure of the Báb was an answer to the prayers and entreaties of the generations that awaited the One foretold by all the Holy Scriptures. With His coming, the eternal Faith of God was renewed and revitalized with extraordinary swiftness. Yet, in the very title He chose for Himself, He signalled that He was the portal to a superior Revelation of which, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "He considered Himself to be the humble Precursor." The endeavours of the Bahá'ís throughout the world to labour for the promotion of the Cause call to mind the exhortation of the Báb explicitly set down in the Bayan: "Well is it with him who fixeth his gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and rendereth thanks unto his Lord."

310.4As plans for the next bicentenary take shape, there will doubtless begin to emerge many examples of artistic expression arising from a profound reflection on the appearance above the horizon of the world, in quick succession, of two Manifestations of God, and the implications for the life of humanity. You will find it helpful to know that the House of Justice intends once again to commission both a film and a dedicated website for the occasion. It also anticipates preparing a special letter to mark the two-hundred-year anniversary. More details about these will become available in due course.

310.5A notable feature of the last bicentenary was the number of tributes to Bahá'u'lláh and messages of congratulation issued by dignitaries and prominent members of society, often in response to invitations they had received to offer thoughtful sentiments. However, the character of this occasion does not lend itself to attempts to seek public statements of this kind. Nevertheless, efforts to help such persons become more familiar with the teachings and fundamentals of the Faith, as well as the endeavours of the community, would, of course, continue in a natural manner.

310.6In this year's Ridván message, the House of Justice referred to the heroism of the Báb and His followers, the stirring accounts of whose lives are sure to be revisited and retold in the coming months. In keeping with the overall approach to this bicentenary, it will be important to reflect on the purpose of calling to mind these remarkable narratives, which possess a merit far beyond an exploration of history. They enable the friends, who are occupied with responding to the needs of the Cause in this day, to draw inspiration and courage from the sacrifices of the dawn-breakers. They assist the company of believers to realize that, by consecrating themselves to the acts of service required in this age, they are emulating the noble qualities of their spiritual forebears.

310.7The heights to which the Bahá'í community so recently soared, in its longing to befittingly honour "a Being peerless in creation", are still

vivid in the memory. The possibilities created by the celebration of this second bicentenary, following so closely upon the first and building upon what was learned then, appear boundless. Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines for all the friends of God, supplicating that heavenly bestowals may surround them at every stage of their deliberations and in every action they take for His sake.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

311

Passing of Flore Kavelin

11 June 2018

To the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United States

311.1We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of faithful handmaid of the Blessed Beauty Flore Kavelin. Her services to the Cause of God included nearly two decades of devoted labor at the Bahá'í World Centre where she made valuable contributions to the work of the Research Department. Her loving character and generosity of spirit are fondly remembered. Kindly convey our heartfelt condolences to the members of her family and assure them of our prayers at the Holy Threshold for the progress of her noble soul in the immortal realm.

The Universal House of Justice

312

Appointment of Six Continental Counsellors

14 June 2018

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

312.1We are delighted to announce the appointment of the following Continental Counsellors to fill the vacancies created by the recent appointments to the International Teaching Centre: in Africa Mr. Jean-Pierre Tshibangu Mbuyi, in the Americas Mrs. Natasha Bruss and Mrs. Ada Micheline Leonce-Ferdinand, in Asia Mrs. Bhavna Anbarasan, and in Australasia Dr. Vahid Saberi.

312.2We are also pleased to announce the appointment of Mrs. U'ileiuluwehi Pimental to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Australasia, filling a vacancy that was created by the relocation of Mrs. Nadia Fifita to the United States. The contribution Mrs. Fifita has made to the work of the Faith as a Counsellor has earned our deep gratitude, and we will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines that Bahá'u'lláh may surround her with His blessings as she continues her valuable endeavours in other fields of service to His Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

313

Dedication of the First House of Worship in Colombia

22 July 2018

To the Friends Gathered in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, for the Dedication of the House of Worship

Dearly loved Friends,

313.1It is with hearts brimming with joy that we greet you on this historic

occasion, when the doors of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in Colombia are opened to all. The Temple that has been built through strenuous effort over four years is now ready to assume its divinely-ordained function—a place "solely designed and entirely dedicated to the worship of God"; "a place of great happiness and joy"; "a collective centre for men's souls" which "forgeth bonds of unity from heart to heart"; "a means for the exaltation of the Word of God". What is being celebrated here today is not only the culmination of the construction of a physical edifice, but a significant milestone in a process of development that has unfolded in this region over the course of many decades.

313.2When the Bahá'í Faith entered this land, it took root in its fertile soil; a few pure souls with the courage to break through social barriers plunged into the living waters of this new Revelation from God and drank their fill. Without hesitation, they embraced the sublime vision of Bahá'u'lláh for the betterment of the world and endeavoured to illuminate heart after heart with the light of His Teachings. In the midst of powerful winds that acted to destabilize a society, they attended to the planting of seeds. Their humble efforts to nurture in the young those qualities characterizing a faithful follower of the Blessed Beauty and to imbue their family and community life with the divine teachings evolved into a process of education that would reach thousands upon thousands. While the fruits of the committed labours of growing numbers are witnessed across the whole of Colombia, the region of Norte del Cauca is blessed with the singular honour of being the site of the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the country.

313.3This House of Worship stands now as a symbol of the beauty inherent in the noble people of this region and its design evokes the generosity of their land. It is a manifestation of the power released through persistent collective action, a centre of attraction for all those longing to work for the renewal of their society, an oasis of hope for the spiritual and material upliftment of a population that has endured the trials of history and emerged with an indomitable spirit. Let all who gather within its walls occupy themselves with the remembrance of the One Creator so that "the melodies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár may rise at dawntide to the Concourse on high, and the songs of the nightingales of God may bring joy and ecstasy to the denizens of the All-Glorious Realm".

The Universal House of Justice

314

Shining Achievements of the Bahá'í Community in Iran

24 October 2018

To the Bahá'ís of Iran

314.1The order of the world has been disrupted, and severe and numerous convulsions have shaken its foundation. Conditions worsen daily, confusion and fear have gripped mankind, and the pain and difficulties experienced by the generality of peoples have greatly increased. The destructive forces of materialism dominate both the East and the West and have brought about a quagmire of injustice and prejudice that has sullied and rendered powerless the wings of society, whilst the human spirit, which is created to ascend towards

the divine realm, has been enslaved in the talons of greed and wilfulness and become deprived of the bounty of the light of true religion. The problems of the world—which are clearly evident in the arenas of politics, economics, social conditions, and the environment—confront humanity's future with inescapable dangers and yet its leaders remain unaware of their fundamental causes, are unable to remedy them, and are fearful of their consequences. The situation of the world calls to mind the following statement of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá: "Chaos and confusion are daily increasing in the world. They will attain such intensity as to render the frame of mankind unable to bear them. Then will men be awakened". The believers in Iran, who since the dawning of the Morn of Guidance in that land, have been robed in the vesture of Faith, are conscious of the admonitions and explicit warnings of the Ancient Beauty, have acquired the vision inspired by His Teachings, and are well aware of both the profound reasons for these crises and His guidance about them.

314.2One of the most pressing challenges afflicting multitudes of people across the globe is the disturbed economic situation. The lack of a necessary framework to ensure equity and justice in the distribution of wealth has led to an increase in unemployment and poverty to the extent that even providing life's basic essentials has become extremely difficult for many strata of society. The consequences of the vast divide between the rich and the poor, whether within or among the nations, are indescribable. Amidst all this, you—the long-standing and faithful followers of the Blessed Beauty—not only suffer the impact and hardship of the present condition of the world, as all others suffer, but have been subject over many years to unrelenting persecution and numerous cruelties. These persecutions and cruelties have been and are still being carried out in a systematic and planned way to weaken the Bahá'í community in Iran and to deplete its economic strength.

314.3In our message dated 11 June 2009 addressed to the Bahá'ís in Iran, about a year after the arrest and imprisonment of the members of the former Yárán, we reminded the friends that taking care of individuals and families who, despite their noble efforts, nevertheless stand in need of financial assistance, is among the sacred and indispensable duties of the people of Bahá, and we requested them to assist and collaborate with one another on this path. The actions that in the ensuing years the Bahá'í community of Iran has undertaken in response to this call are truly astonishing. Despite the absence of Bahá'í institutions and notwithstanding the countless injustices and limited resources, individuals and the community were able to arise with tenacity, sacrifice, abiding love, and matchless creativity to respond to critical needs and to assist one another. Through adherence to the command of consultation, which paves the way for humanity and resolves countless problems, and through reflection upon its diverse applications, you—the followers of the Threshold of the Almighty—have striven to strengthen the culture of mutual support and have arisen, to the extent possible, to address the challenges of obtaining employment, taking care of the elderly, and attending to the poor, and for the youth are facilitating apprenticeship, providing jobs, assisting those who wish to marry, and, of course, continuing with efforts to offer them higher education. What has caused even greater joy and won our still

greater admiration for you is that, even under these trying conditions, you have not limited yourselves to the affairs of your own community but in numerous instances and through various means, you have, with great endeavour, unsullied hearts, and pure intent, also striven to the extent possible to assist your neighbours and other fellow citizens who are in need. By your actions, you have become the embodiments of the exhortation of Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of Wisdom where He admonishes His followers not to let their endeavours be spent in promoting their personal interests. It is undoubtedly difficult, and at times beyond the limits of endurance, to bear the trials and tribulations heaped upon you. Yet, among the shining achievements of the Bahá'í community in Iran in these years are the deepening solidarity of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, their accompanying one another, the emergence of new dimensions of social collaboration, and the efflorescence of personal initiative. We are confident that future generations will look back with wonder and admiration upon your efforts and experiences during these times.

314.4Beloved friends: The sacred mission that the Abhá Beauty has laid upon the shoulders of the members of your sorely tried community is certainly not limited to solidarity within your community or to economic assistance and collaboration. At this time, when despair and fear have gripped humanity from every direction and led to hopelessness, especially among the young generations, praised be God that you are the embodiments of encouragement and assurance for the peoples of the world and are like unto radiant lamps in the circles of your compatriots and acquaintances; you are as signs of love and amity and in every assemblage, as symbols of forbearance and goodly intent. Inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, you participate in the constructive discourses of society and assist your fellow citizens to develop a vision that transcends the current difficulties, so that they can dedicate themselves to developing the capacities and talents necessary for the material and spiritual advancement of their communities and go forward with confidence and hope in building a vibrant and progressive society.

314.5Of course, the discharge of such a mission is not possible save through the power of the love of God and a firm belief in the fulfilment of Divine Purpose regarding the brilliant future of Iran and its people. A feeble candle is extinguished by a mere breeze, while the flame of love and faith that is ablaze in the hearts of His loved ones grows in intensity, light, and heat through the storms of persecution. Praised be God that you have been confirmed in service to His Sacred Threshold and are following in the footsteps of your heroic forbears. Consider, however, that many of those souls in the early years of the Cause did not live to see with their outer eyes the effects and results of their own sacrifices, while today, you witness with your very eyes the collective transformation taking place in your country and the removal of historic misunderstandings and suspicion about the Cause of God among many of your compatriots.

314.6Therefore, O loved ones of God, in these days of tests and trials, commit to the tablet of the heart this statement of the beloved Master: "Whosoever entereth the Kingdom of God is under the protection of Bahá'u'lláh. The

changes and chances of the material world, whether good or bad, are like the waves of the sea, which pass away and are no more. They are not worthy of attention.… The denizens of the Kingdom derive their joy from the bounties of God and set their hopes on His infinite grace. They exult in the outpourings of divine bounty and are gladdened by the favours of the Lord of Hosts. In the fire of tribulations they remain fresh and verdant, and in the tempest of trials and afflictions tranquil and at peace, for they rest their backs against a mighty mountain and take refuge in a ship wrought of steel."

314.7On every occasion when we present ourselves at the Sacred Threshold, we pray for those distinguished champions of the arenas of fidelity and steadfastness and ardently beseech God that His confirmations and assistance may be extended to every one of you, so that you may succeed in every aspect of your lives and in the fulfilment of your spiritual goals.

The Universal House of Justice

315

Establishment of the Bahá'í International Development Organization

9 November 2018

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

315.1As the process of the disintegration of a lamentably defective world order gathers momentum in all parts of the planet, engendering hopelessness, confusion, hostility, and insecurity, the hearts of the friends everywhere must be assured, their eyes clear-sighted, their feet firm, as they work patiently and sacrificially to raise a new order in its stead. The guidance of Bahá'u'lláh is the foundation upon which you build. His instruction is clear: "This servant appealeth to every diligent and enterprising soul to exert his utmost endeavor and arise to rehabilitate the conditions in all regions and to quicken the dead with the living waters of wisdom and utterance, by virtue of the love he cherisheth for God, the One, the Peerless, the Almighty, the Beneficent." His divine remedy has been prescribed: "God, the True One, beareth Me witness, and every atom in existence is moved to testify that such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth have been clearly set forth by Us and are revealed in the Holy Books and Tablets by the Pen of Glory." And His assurance is engraved on every faithful heart: "The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."

315.2During the ministries of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the first community of sufficient size that could begin to systematically apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to unite material and spiritual progress was that of the believers in the Cradle of the Faith. The steady flow of guidance from the Holy Land enabled the Bahá'ís of Iran to make tremendous strides in but one or two generations and to contribute a distinctive share to the progress of their nation. A network of schools that provided moral and academic education, including for girls, flourished. Illiteracy was virtually eliminated in the Bahá'í community. Philanthropic enterprises were created. Prejudices among ethnic and religious groups, aflame in the wider society, were

extinguished within the community's loving embrace. Villages became distinguished for their cleanliness, order, and progress. And believers from that land were instrumental in raising in another land the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár with its dependencies designed to "afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant." Over time, such efforts were augmented by scattered initiatives of other Bahá'í communities in various parts of the world. However, as Shoghi Effendi remarked to one community, the number of believers was as yet too small to effect a notable change in the wider society, and for more than the first half century of the Formative Age the believers were encouraged to concentrate their energies on the propagation of the Faith, since this was work that only Bahá'ís could do—indeed their primary spiritual obligation—and it would prepare them for the time when they could address the problems of humanity more directly.

315.3Thirty-five years ago, circumstances within and outside the community combined to create new possibilities for greater involvement in the life of society. The Faith had developed to the stage at which the processes of social and economic development needed to be incorporated into its regular pursuits, and in October 1983 we called upon the Bahá'ís of the world to enter this new field of endeavor. The Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá'í World Centre to assist us in promoting and coordinating the activities of the friends worldwide. Bahá'í activities for social and economic development, at whatever level of complexity, were at that time counted in the hundreds. Today they number in the tens of thousands, including hundreds of sustained projects such as schools and scores of development organizations. The broad range of current activities spans efforts from villages and neighborhoods to regions and nations, addressing an array of challenges, including education from preschool to university, literacy, health, the environment, support for refugees, advancement of women, empowerment of junior youth, elimination of racial prejudice, agriculture, local economies, and village development. The society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause has begun to be more systematically expressed in the collective life of the friends as a result of the acceleration of the process of expansion and consolidation, especially in advanced clusters. Beyond this, of course, countless believers, through their professional and voluntary efforts, contribute their energies and insights to projects and organizations established for the common good.

315.4Once again, then, we find that forces inside and outside the Faith have made possible a new stage in the work of social and economic development in the Bahá'í world. Therefore, on this sacred occasion of the Festivals of the Twin Birthdays, we are pleased to announce that the Office of Social and Economic Development now effloresces into a new world-embracing institution established at the World Centre, the Bahá'í International Development Organization. In addition, a Bahá'í Development Fund will be inaugurated, from which the new organization will draw to assist both long-standing and emerging development efforts worldwide; it will be supported by the House of Justice, and individuals and institutions may contribute to it.

315.5A five-member board of directors will be appointed which will function as a consultative body to promote and coordinate the efforts of the worldwide community in social and economic development. The directors will serve for a term of five years beginning on the Day of the Covenant. Operating at the spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith, the board will consult with the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre to ensure that the development work is coherent with the many endeavors of the Bahá'í world. The new institution will begin by assuming the functions and mandate previously carried out by the Office of Social and Economic Development and then gradually grow in capacity to discharge them on an expanding scale and at higher levels of complexity. It will reinforce the efforts of Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide to extend and consolidate the range of their activities. It will help to strengthen institutional capacity for social and economic development in national communities, including through the creation of new agencies and the emergence of advanced development organizations. It will promote, on an international scale, approaches to development and methodologies that have proven effective. It will keep abreast of findings in the development field and explore their application in consonance with spiritual principles with assistance from Bahá'ís with relevant training. It will form networks of resource persons and such institutional arrangements across continents as are necessary for carrying out its various lines of action. Above all, like the Office of Social and Economic Development before it, its primary purpose will be to facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the Teachings of the Faith.

315.6Upon the Arc on Mount Carmel that surrounds the resting places of members of the Holy Family, Shoghi Effendi anticipated both the raising of edifices and the establishment of international institutions—administrative, scientific, and social—that would flourish under the auspices of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. This new institution for social and economic development will grow and evolve over the decades and centuries ahead according to the needs of humanity and under the direction of the House of Justice until the material and spiritual civilization anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh is realized in this contingent world.

315.7Ultimately, of course, the work of Bahá'í social and economic development rests in the hands of the friends everywhere. To take full advantage of the opportunities emerging, one need look no further for encouragement and insight than to the perfect Exemplar of the Bahá'í teachings. Consider His words: "We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed

of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice.”
The Universal House of Justice
316
Appointment of the Members of the Board of Directors for the Bahá’í International Development Organization
12 November 2018
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
316.1With great joy we announce the appointment of the members of the Board of Directors for the Bahá’í International Development Organization, newly established at the Bahá’í World Centre, for the five-year term beginning 26 November 2018: Elisa Caney, Maame Brodwemaba Nketsiah, Lori McLaughlin Noguchi, Sina Rahmanian, and George Soraya.
The Universal House of Justice
317
Passing of Shapoor Monadjem, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre
16 November 2018
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
317.1The passing of Shapoor Monadjem, distinguished and greatly loved servant of the Blessed Beauty, has brought much sadness to our hearts. We call to mind, at this moment, his immense dedication to the teaching work, knowledge of the Faith, and insight into the application of its principles. These qualities were much in evidence when he was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil and during the decade he served as a Continental Counsellor in the Americas. As a member of the International Teaching Centre, his talents and energies were determinedly focused upon the worldwide propagation and protection of the Faith. The wide-ranging services he undertook in his lifetime also included the promotion of the Right of God as a Deputy Trustee of Huqúqu’lláh. A kindly and gentle soul, good-humoured and brimming with creative inspiration, he was also blessed with considerable administrative abilities, honed in many different settings, which he deployed with great effect in service to the Cause of God.
317.2To his dear wife, Bahareh, and to his children and grandchildren we extend our condolences and an assurance of our supplications in the Holy Shrines for his soul’s blissful passage into the realms of the eternal. We also ask that memorial gatherings be convened in his honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá’í communities across the world.
The Universal House of Justice
318
In Remembrance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
26 November 2018
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
318.1In this season, from the Day of the Covenant to the commemoration of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, every Bahá’í heart is stirred by remembrance of Him Who is the Mystery of God, the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s impregnable Covenant, the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the embodiment of every Bahá’í ideal, the Most Mighty Branch of

God whereunder all can find shelter. May His boundless love and tender solicitude give you reassurance and sustenance as you strive to fulfill the trust He bestowed upon you in His Testament and His Divine Plan. At night in that hallowed room in His home where He departed this life for reunion with His beloved Lord, we will testify to your fidelity to His call, evident in your tireless labors to create a refuge for humanity at this moment of increasing injustice and affliction.

318.2Three brief years remain until the centenary of the Master's passing, when Bahá'ís the world over will gather and take account of the distance traversed over the first century of the Formative Age. May His loved ones, individually and collectively, little by little and day by day, increasingly embody His counsels: to be united in the Cause and firm in the Covenant; to avoid calumny and never speak ill of others; to see no strangers but regard all as members of one family; to set aside divergent theories and conflicting views and pursue a single purpose and common goal; to ensure that the love of Bahá'u'lláh has so mastered every organ, part, and limb as to leave no effect from the promptings of the human world; to arise with heart and soul and in one accord to teach the Cause; to march in serried lines, pressed together, each supporting the others; to cultivate good character, perseverance, strength, and determination; to know the value of this precious Faith, obey its teachings, walk in this road that is drawn straight, and show this way to the people.

318.3That you may fulfill His highest expectations, we pray for each of you.

The Universal House of Justice

319

Humanity's Progress Towards World Peace

18 January 2019

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

319.1Half a century after Bahá'u'lláh summoned the kings and rulers to be reconciled among themselves and enjoined on them the establishment of peace on earth, the great powers of that era were plunged into war. It was the first conflict to be regarded as a "World War", and it is remembered as a conflagration of horrific severity; the unprecedented scale and ferocity of the bloodshed has seared it on to the consciousness of every succeeding generation. And yet, from out the ruin and suffering, possibilities blossomed for a new order to bring stability to the world—notably at the Paris Peace Conference, which opened a hundred years ago on this day. In the years that followed, despite the repeated crises into which international affairs were thrown, Shoghi Effendi could discern "the progress, however fitful, of the forces working in harmony with the spirit of the age". These forces have continued to move humanity towards an age of peace—not merely a peace which rules out armed conflict, but a collective state of being, manifesting unity. Notwithstanding, it remains a long journey, and it proceeds in fits and starts. We find it propitious, at this moment, to reflect on the progress made on that journey, the contemporary challenges to peace, and the contribution to its attainment that Bahá'ís are called to make.

319.2There have been at least three historical moments in the last one hundred years when it seemed as if the human race was reaching for real, lasting peace, albeit always falling short because of weaknesses it could not overcome. The first moment, as a result of the Paris Conference, was the establishment of the League of Nations, an organization intended by its founders to secure peace at the international level. It was the means by which, for the first time in history, the system of collective security enjoined on the world's rulers by Bahá'u'lláh was "seriously envisaged, discussed and tested". But ultimately the peace agreement that concluded the war was fatally flawed, and the League was not able to prevent a second World War, judged by historians to be the deadliest conflict in human history. Just as the first significant step towards world peace followed a period of appalling conflict, so did the second, when not only was the United Nations Organization formed from the ashes of the League, but a system of international economic institutions came into being, and historic advances were made relating to human rights and international law. In rapid succession, many territories under colonial rule became independent nations, and arrangements for regional cooperation grew markedly in depth and range. The post-war decades, however, were also characterized by an atmosphere of brooding and often open hostility between the world's two major power blocs. Known familiarly as the Cold War, it spilled over into actual wars in various regions of the world, and brought humanity perilously close to a conflict involving nuclear weapons. Its peaceful termination, towards the end of the twentieth century, was an occasion for relief, giving rise to explicit calls for the establishment of a new global order. This was the third moment when universal peace seemed to be within grasp. Efforts to put in place new systems for international cooperation and to strengthen existing ones received great impetus, as a series of world conferences on themes of importance to humanity's future were convened by the United Nations. New opportunities for consensus emerged, and the spirit of collaboration propelling progress also found expression in the mandates given to certain international institutions charged with administering justice. This purposeful, deliberative process culminated at the turn of the century in the Millennium Forum, a meeting of representatives of over a thousand civil society organizations from more than a hundred countries, followed by the Millennium Summit, an unparalleled gathering of world leaders which led to agreement on a set of objectives representing a shared ambition of humanity. Styled the Millennium Development Goals, they became rallying points for collective action in the ensuing years. These various advances—despite their many limitations and imperfections and the horrifying conflicts that continued to unfold during this time—stand nonetheless as signs of a widespread, gradual but inexorable rise in global consciousness on the part of the earth's peoples and their attraction to universal justice, to solidarity, to collaboration, to compassion, and to equality.

319.3As the present century opened, new challenges began to loom. With time, these intensified, leading to a retreat from the promising steps forward with which the previous century had closed. Today, many of the dominant currents in societies everywhere are pushing people apart, not drawing them together. Even

as global poverty of the most extreme form has decreased, political and economic systems have enabled the enrichment of small coteries with grossly exorbitant wealth—a condition that fuels fundamental instability in world affairs. The interactions of the individual citizen, governing institutions, and society as a whole are often fraught, as those arguing for the primacy of one or the other show more and more intransigence in their thinking. Religious fundamentalism is warping the character of communities, even nations. The failings of so many organizations and institutions of society have understandably led to a decline in public trust, but this has been systematically exploited by vested interests seeking to undermine the credibility of all sources of knowledge. Certain shared ethical principles, which seemed to be in the ascendant at the start of this century, are eroded, threatening the prevailing consensus about right and wrong that, in various arenas, had succeeded in holding humanity's basest tendencies in check. And the will to engage in international collective action, which twenty years ago represented a powerful strain of thinking among world leaders, has been cowed, assailed by resurgent forces of racism, nationalism, and factionalism.

319.4Thus do the forces of disintegration regroup and gain ground. So be it. The unification of humanity is unstoppable by any human force; the promises made by the prophets of old and by the Author of the Cause of God Himself testify to this truth. Yet the course humanity takes to achieve its destiny may very well be tortuous. The tumult raised by the contending peoples of the earth threatens to drown out the voices of those noble-minded souls in every society who call for an end to conflict and struggle. As long as that call goes unheeded, there is no reason to doubt that the world's current state of disorder and confusion will worsen—possibly with catastrophic consequences—until a chastened humanity sees fit to take another significant step, perhaps this time decisive, towards enduring peace.

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319.5Universal peace is the destination towards which humanity has been moving throughout the ages under the influence of the Word of God that has been progressively imparted by the Creator to His creation. Shoghi Effendi described humanity's advance towards a new, global stage in its collective life in terms of social evolution, "an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations." Now, with the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, the human race stands on the threshold of its maturity. World unity is finally possible. A global order that unifies the nations with the assent of humanity is the only adequate answer to the destabilizing forces that threaten the world.

319.6However, though world unity is possible—nay, inevitable—it ultimately cannot be achieved without unreserved acceptance of the oneness of humankind, described by the Guardian as "the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve". With what insight and eloquence did he expound upon the far-reaching implications of this cardinal principle! Plainly he saw, amidst the turbulence of world affairs, how the reality that humanity is one

people must be the starting point for a new order. The vast array of relations among nations—and within them—all need to be re-envisaged in this light.

319.7The realization of such a vision will require, sooner or later, an historic feat of statesmanship from the leaders of the world. Alas, the will to attempt this feat is still wanting. Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of “us” and “them” define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. Unity, in its Bahá’í expression, contains the essential concept of diversity, distinguishing it from uniformity. It is through love for all people, and by subordinating lesser loyalties to the best interests of humankind, that the unity of the world can be realized and the infinite expressions of human diversity find their highest fulfilment.

319.8Fostering unity, by harmonizing disparate elements and nurturing in every heart a selfless love for humankind, is the task of religion. Great possibilities to cultivate fellowship and concord are open to religious leaders, but these same leaders can also incite violence by using their influence to stoke the fires of fanaticism and prejudice. Writing of religion, Bahá’u’lláh’s words are emphatic: “… make it not”, He warns, “the cause of dissension and strife.” Peace, for “all who dwell on earth”, is one of “the principles and ordinances of God”.

319.9A heart that has embraced love for the whole of humanity will certainly be pained when confronted by the suffering that so many endure because of disunity. But the friends of God cannot shut themselves off from the increasing turmoil of the society that surrounds them; they must guard themselves, too, from becoming enmeshed in its conflicts or falling into its adversarial methods. No matter how bleak conditions may appear at any given time, no matter how dismal the immediate prospects for bringing about unity, there is no cause for despair. The distressing state of the world can only spur us to redouble our commitment to constructive action. “These are not days of prosperity and triumph” cautions Bahá’u’lláh. “The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.”

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319.10The establishment of peace is a duty to which the entire human race is called. The responsibility that Bahá’ís bear to aid that process will evolve over time, but they have never been mere spectators—they lend their share of assistance to the operation of those forces leading humanity towards

unity. They are summoned to be as leaven to the world. Consider Bahá'u'lláh's words:

> Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also emphasised the importance of the contribution that Bahá'ís are called on to make to the establishment of world peace:

> … peace must first be established among individuals, until it leadeth in the end to peace among nations. Wherefore, O ye Bahá'ís, strive ye with all your might to create, through the power of the Word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals. This is your task.

319.11"The Promise of World Peace", the message we addressed to the peoples of the world in 1985, set out the Bahá'í perspective on the condition of the world and the prerequisites of universal peace. It also offered the global Bahá'í community as a model for study that could reinforce hope in the possibility of uniting the human race. In the years since, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have been patiently refining that model and working with others around them to build up and broaden a system of social organization based on His teachings. They are learning how to nurture communities that embody those prerequisites of peace we identified in 1985. They cultivate environments in which children can be raised untainted by any form of racial, national, or religious prejudice. They champion the full equality of women with men in the affairs of the community. Their programmes of education, transformative in their effects and encompassing both the material and spiritual aspects of life, welcome everyone who wishes to contribute to the community's prosperity. In the stirrings of social action can be seen their desire to remedy the numerous ills afflicting humanity and to empower each person to become a protagonist in the building of a new world. Taking inspiration from the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, they invite to their devotional meetings followers of all faiths and none. Youth, distinguished for their commitment to a society founded on peace and justice, are engaging their like-minded peers in the work of building communities on this foundation. In the institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly exists the spiritual authority and the administrative capacity to govern in servitude, to resolve conflicts, and to build unity; the electoral process through which Assemblies are formed is itself an expression of peace, in contrast to the vitriol and even violence that often accompanies elections in the wider society. Implicit in all these dimensions of an open, expanding community is the foundational recognition that all of humanity are the children of one Creator.

319.12The friends are also developing their capacity for engaging those around them, regardless of creed, culture, class, or ethnicity, in conversations about how to bring about spiritual and material well-being through systematic application of the divine teachings. One gratifying result of this growing capacity is the community's increased ability to make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society; in certain

countries, leaders and thinkers striving to address the challenges confronting their societies increasingly show appreciation for the perspectives offered by Bahá'ís. These contributions articulate insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, draw on the experience being generated by the believers around the world, and aim to elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing. Further, the ideas and lines of reasoning advanced by Bahá'ís are reinforced by their practice of consultation. Sensitized as they are to the importance of harmony and the fruitlessness of conflict, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh seek to cultivate those conditions that are most conducive to the emergence of unity in any setting. We are heartened to see the believers expanding their efforts to participate in the discourses of society—especially those friends who, in their professional capacity, are able to contribute to discourses directly related to peace.

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319.13For Bahá'ís, the attainment of peace is not simply an aspiration to which they are sympathetic or a goal complementary to their other aims—it has always been a central concern. In a second Tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace in the Hague, He asserted that "our desire for peace is not derived merely from the intellect: It is a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith of God." He observed that for peace to be realized in the world, it was not adequate that people should be informed about the horrors of war:

Today the benefits of universal peace are recognized amongst the people, and likewise the harmful effects of war are clear and manifest to all. But in this matter, knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world.

"It is our firm belief", He continued, "that the power of implementation in this great endeavour is the penetrating influence of the Word of God and the confirmations of the Holy Spirit."

319.14Certainly, then, none who are conscious of the condition of the world can refrain from giving their utmost to this endeavour and seeking those confirmations—confirmations for which we too earnestly supplicate at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf. Beloved friends: The devoted efforts that you and your like-minded collaborators are making to build communities founded on spiritual principles, to apply those principles for the betterment of your societies, and to offer the insights arising—these are the surest ways you can hasten the fulfilment of the promise of world peace.

The Universal House of Justice

320

Review of Bahá'í Literature and Dealing with Questions of Historical Accuracy

29 January 2019

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

320.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 26 September 2018 enquiring about guidelines for your literature reviewing

committee which would assist it to identify material that is contrary to the teachings and asking whether the review process limits Bahá'í authors' freedom of expression. We have been asked to reply as follows.

320.2The House of Justice is of the opinion that the difficulties which arise in the review process come, not from a need for clarification of the guidelines, but from a need for good judgement and common sense in their application. The mandate of review is specific. Its purpose is to ensure that works about the Bahá'í Faith by its members represent the teachings and the history of the Cause in an accurate and dignified manner and that their publication is timely. Reviewers must keep assiduously to the task at hand, recalling that their duty is only to determine whether there are misrepresentations of the teachings: the rest is the author's responsibility. They should avoid entering into the domain of author and publisher by offering conceptual guidance or editorial recommendations. It is also not the purpose of review to offer critical comments on an argument put forward in a document except as they pertain to the accuracy or dignity of the Bahá'í content.

320.3In carrying out their task, reviewers are expected to use their knowledge of the fundamental teachings of the Faith, as well as their good taste and good judgement—good taste in assessing the level of dignity required for the particular work in view of its nature and intended audience; good judgement in assessing whether an inaccurate presentation is serious enough to be corrected, or whether even an accurate presentation could produce a distorted impression, or even dangerous repercussions, if published in the conditions prevailing at the time and location of publication.

320.4The approach taken by reviewers must be tailored to the case at hand. In a book written about the Faith there is some latitude for the author to explain the teachings in his own terms; review should then ensure that the representation of the teachings offered in the work is not inconsistent with the content of those teachings as found in the Sacred Writings and authorized texts. With respect to works of history, which deal with the lives of the Central Figures themselves, reviewers should pay much closer attention to ensure that the events that are related and words that are quoted, as well as the thoughts, intentions, and motivations that are ascribed to historical figures, have a sound historical basis. While it is not their responsibility to verify the accuracy of every detail or identify all historical errors in a manuscript, they should ensure that the work does not contain significant inaccuracies or unsubstantiated statements that would misrepresent events, or the behaviour and character of historical persons, and which would distort the historical record.

320.5Authors have a responsibility to support the statements they put forth—but a citation to another source is not necessarily sufficient support, for a single statement in a memoir, for example, does not always establish a fact. Competent historians evaluate the veracity and reliability of historical documents in light of all the information available to them, including established facts, other contemporary accounts, the reliability of the author, the general context and background, and so on. But a reviewer examining a manuscript need not be a professional historian to detect an assertion which

exceeds what the evidence offered can support, or which is inconsistent with other historical facts and reliable sources. The reviewing committee should not hesitate to ask authors to provide documentation to substantiate statements, particularly those which are speculative in nature or raise questions in the reviewers' minds because, for example, corroboration cannot be found in available histories, the statements are inconsistent with established facts or seem improbable or out of character, or the source cited cannot support the assertion or inference made, and the like. If, on initial examination of the manuscript, it appears that such problems are extensive in the work, the author may be advised at the outset to address the issue in general before the manuscript can undergo review. Authors of scholarly works that are based on materials that may not be known or available to those who must do the reviewing are at liberty to bring this situation to the attention of the responsible National Assembly. Should a difference of opinion arise between the author and the reviewing committee, and the National Spiritual Assembly is unable to find a resolution, the matter may be referred to the Universal House of Justice.

320.6If reviewers identify what they believe to be inaccuracies, or feel that the manuscript gives a false impression or is undignified in its representation of the Faith, they should raise these issues with the author, who should be enabled to respond. It is the reviewers' task to call the author's attention to any misrepresentations or factual errors in the work so that these may be corrected, but they should avoid telling authors what they must say: it is the author's prerogative to determine how to reconcile any contradictions or inconsistencies between his statements and the teachings of the Faith. However, the standard of accuracy that is to be upheld should not restrict the introduction of new insights into the teachings by a Bahá'í author, and there should be room for a cordial but nevertheless trenchant interplay of views as the friends explore the many implications and applications of the teachings.

320.7It should be evident from the above discussion that it is misleading to characterize review as restricting a Bahá'í author's freedom of expression. Any publisher naturally requires that a manuscript proposed for publication must meet certain standards and must submit to a process of fact checking, and this in no way can be considered restricting the author's freedom of expression. When conducted appropriately, the process of review can be considered to be comparable to that of peer review used by all reputable scientific journals—in other words, as an opportunity for any lapses in accuracy by the author to be identified, thereby avoiding possible embarrassment. In addition, it assists Bahá'í authors to avoid making erroneous representations that present a distorted image of the Faith which would be difficult to correct at a later time. The author for his part is, presumably, a loyal Bahá'í, equally interested in the accuracy and proper presentation of his work, and he has, if necessary, the right of appeal, even as far as the Universal House of Justice. Indeed, given that all those involved are concerned with safeguarding the vital interests of the Cause, the process of review provides an occasion for institutions and individuals to wholeheartedly collaborate in the promotion of those interests.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
321
Youth Conference in Germany
1 February 2019
To the Friends Gathered at the Youth Conference in Germany
321.1With joyous hearts, we extend our most loving greetings to each of you as you gather to consult on your response to the needs of the Faith in your country. We have watched with admiration the dynamism with which the youth in Germany have stepped into the vanguard of the work of the Cause, inviting an ever-widening circle of your contemporaries of whatever background—including those who have come to your society recently and whose hearts have been especially readied for the divine message in this day—to join you in weaving a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished for its commitment to service and worship. As you convene in the shadow of the magnificent edifice that permanently embodies the union of those inseparable aspects of Bahá’í life, we hope that you will draw inspiration from the sacrifice of those precious early believers, so many of them in the prime of their lives, whose heroic deeds in the path of peace and justice made possible the victories of future generations. May you dedicate your efforts to the memory of those spiritual forebears and prove yourselves worthy of the high destiny that is now yours to fulfil. You are assured of our ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf; we beseech Bahá’u’lláh to reinforce your efforts at every turn.
The Universal House of Justice
322
Publication of The Call of the Divine Beloved
6 February 2019
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
322.1The Universal House of Justice is pleased to announce the publication of a new volume of Tablets revealed by the Supreme Pen entitled The Call of the Divine Beloved: Selected Mystical Works of Bahá’u’lláh and to present you with a complimentary copy.
322.2The volume contains seven Tablets, all revealed before 1863, including the long-anticipated retranslation of the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys. Also included are the poem Rashh-i-‘Amá (The Clouds of the Realms Above), revealed in the Síyáh-Chál in Tihrán, and four other newly translated Tablets from the period of Bahá’u’lláh’s sojourn in Iraq which elucidate aspects of the mystic journey of the soul towards its divine Beloved….
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
323
Release of a Compilation on Prayer and Devotional Life
28 February 2019
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,

323.1As the friends intensify their efforts to pursue the last Plan of the series of Plans that end in 2021, a year that marks the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the inauguration of the Formative Age, signs of the enrichment of the devotional life of the community are manifest. Devotional activities are everywhere multiplying and are increasingly being integrated into the core of community life. To add further stimulus to this signal development and to help the friends take full advantage of the period of special potency during which the bicentennial anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Báb are commemorated, the Universal House of Justice has directed us to enclose a compilation of extracts on prayer and devotional life drawn from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and from the letters of the Guardian and the House of Justice.

323.2It is the hope of the House of Justice that this compilation, prepared by the Research Department at its request, will be studied widely and will be of assistance to individuals, families, and communities as they strive to evoke the spirit of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in the creation of occasions where any soul may inhale the divine fragrances, experience the elevating power of prayer, and be drawn together with others in fellowship and common cause.

323.3The compilation is now available in the compilation section of the Bahá’í Reference Library. National Spiritual Assemblies with Publishing Trusts are asked to consider producing printed editions.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

324

Nordic Youth Conference

13 April 2019

To the Friends Gathered at the Nordic Youth Conference

324.1As the Cause of God advances along the path traced out for it by its Divine Author, each stage of the process opens up to a new generation of youth challenges unique to that historical moment. Indeed, you convene at a time of unprecedented opportunity and need.

324.2In every part of the Nordic region are to be found a multitude of souls, young and old, who yearn for the spiritual values inherent in the Bahá’í teachings, the fountain from which flow enduring happiness and fulfilment. Blessed beyond measure with the bounty of being attracted by the life of the Manifestation of God for this Age, you have been assigned the responsibility to show forth these values in your lives, so that you can be a source of attraction and illumination to those seeking direction within the confusion of the world in which they find themselves. We hope that you will draw inspiration and courage from the heroic exploits of the dawn-breakers, in whose footsteps you are now walking, to give new vigour to the concept of service—being devoted to high ideals far removed from purely selfish interests, oriented to the advancement of society, and committed to the universal welfare of humanity. We assure you all of our abiding love and fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that you may fulfil the vital part you are destined to play in the upliftment of your peoples.

The Universal House of Justice
325
Ridván Message 2019
Ridván 2019
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
325.1As the Most Great Festival has drawn closer, we have been transported by feelings of gratitude and anticipation—gratitude for the wonders that Bahá’u’lláh has enabled His followers to accomplish, anticipation of what the immediate future holds.
325.2The momentum generated by the worldwide celebrations of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh has only grown since. The accelerated development of the Bahá’í community, its rising capacity, and its ability to draw on the energies of more of its members emerge vividly from a summary of its recent global attainments. Of these, an increase in community-building activities stands out in particular. The current Five Year Plan follows twenty years of effort by the Bahá’í world to systematically refine and multiply these activities—but remarkably, in the Plan’s first two and a half years, the number of core activities alone rose by more than half. The worldwide community has shown the capacity to engage, at any given time, over a million people in such activities, helping them to explore and respond to spiritual realities. In the same short period, the number of gatherings for prayer nearly doubled—a much-needed response to humanity’s growing estrangement from the Source of hope and bounty. This development holds special promise, for devotional meetings infuse a new spirit into the life of a community. Interwoven with educational efforts for all ages, they reinforce the lofty purpose of those efforts: to foster communities distinguished by their worship of God and their service to humankind. Nowhere is this more evident than in those clusters where the participation of large numbers in Bahá’í activities is being sustained and the friends have passed the third milestone in their community’s development. We are delighted to see that the number of clusters where the process of growth has advanced this far has already more than doubled since the beginning of the Plan and now stands at around five hundred.
325.3This brief survey cannot do justice to the scale of the transformation that is under way. The outlook for the remaining two years of the Plan is bright. Much has been achieved this last year by widely disseminating lessons learned from the stronger programmes of growth in clusters that, as we hoped, have become reservoirs of knowledge and resources. The International Teaching Centre, the Counsellors, and their tireless auxiliaries have stopped at nothing to ensure that friends in all parts of the world can benefit from this acceleration in learning and apply the insights being gained to their own realities. We rejoice to see that in a growing number of clusters, and in neighbourhoods and villages within them, a nucleus of friends has emerged who through action and reflection are discovering what is required, at a particular point, for the process of growth to advance in their surroundings. They are drawing on the potent instrument of the institute, through which capacity to

contribute to the spiritual and material prosperity of the community is enhanced, and as they act, the number of those joining them is increasing. Naturally, conditions vary greatly from place to place, as do the characteristics of growth. But through systematic striving, everyone can make a more and more effective contribution to the work at hand. In every setting, there is pure joy in engaging other souls in meaningful and uplifting conversations that lead, whether quickly or gradually, to the stirring of spiritual susceptibilities. The brighter the flame kindled within the heart of the believer, the greater will be the force of attraction felt by those exposed to its warmth. And to a heart consumed with love for Bahá'u'lláh, what more fitting occupation can be imagined than to seek out kindred spirits, to encourage them as they enter the path of service, to accompany them as they gain experience and—perhaps the greatest joy of all—to see souls become confirmed in their faith, arise independently, and assist others on the same journey. These are among the most cherished of all the moments that this transitory life affords.

325.4The prospects for advancing this spiritual enterprise are made the more thrilling by the approach of the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb. Like the bicentenary that preceded it, this anniversary is a moment incalculably precious. It provides all Bahá'ís with marvellous opportunities for awakening those around them to the great Day of God, to the extraordinary effusion of heavenly grace signalled by the appearance of two Manifestations of the Divine Being, successive Luminaries Who brightened the horizon of the world. The measure of what might be possible in the coming two cycles is known to all from the experience of the bicentenary two years ago, and all that was learned on that occasion must be channelled into the plans for the Twin Holy Birthdays this year. As the two-hundred-year anniversary draws near, we will offer frequent supplications on your behalf in the Sacred Shrines, praying that your efforts to befittingly honour the Báb will succeed in advancing the Cause He foretold.

325.5The close of the first century of the Formative Age is but two and a half years away. It will seal one hundred years of consecrated effort to consolidate and expand the foundation so sacrificially laid during the Faith's Heroic Age. At that time the Bahá'í community will also mark the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that moment when the beloved Master was released from the confines of this world to rejoin His Father in the retreats of celestial glory. His funeral, which occurred the following day, was an event "the like of which Palestine had never seen". At its conclusion, His mortal remains were laid to rest within a vault of the Mausoleum of the Báb. However, it was envisaged by Shoghi Effendi that this would be a temporary arrangement. A Shrine was to be erected, of a character befitting the unique station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, at the appropriate time.

325.6That time has come. The Bahá'í world is being summoned to build the edifice which will forever embosom those sacred remains. It is to be constructed in the vicinity of the Ridván Garden, on land consecrated by the footsteps of the Blessed Beauty; the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá will thus lie on the crescent traced between the Holy Shrines in 'Akká and Haifa. Work on

the architectural plans is advancing, and more information will be shared in the coming months.

325.7Feelings of surpassing joy now surge within us, as we contemplate the year ahead and all that it promises. We look to every one of you—those who are occupied with rendering service to Bahá'u'lláh, labouring in every nation for the cause of peace—to fulfil your high calling.

The Universal House of Justice

326

Passing of Donald Rogers, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre

28 April 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

326.1With deep sadness we mourn the passing of Donald Rogers, ardent teacher of the Faith whose attraction to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh as a young man shaped several decades lived in devoted service. He was a highly accomplished artist of international standing, and his work demonstrated a profound relationship to the sacred; his prodigious talents were often the means through which other souls became acquainted with the dawning of the new Day of God. The years he served as an Auxiliary Board member and then as a Continental Counsellor were followed by the decade he spent as a member of the International Teaching Centre. In his later years he continued his consecrated endeavours, including on the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. Unstinting in his efforts to serve the Faith and with great accomplishments to his name, he remained a man of humility and selflessness, gracious and gentle.

326.2We offer our heartfelt condolences to his dear wife, Barbara, and to his children Klee, Sasha, and Julie, and we assure them of our supplications in the Holy Shrines for the progress of his illumined soul throughout the eternal realms. All Bahá'í communities are asked to hold memorial gatherings in his honour, including in every House of Worship.

The Universal House of Justice

327

Appointment of the Architect for the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

7 May 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

327.1We are delighted to announce the appointment of Mr. Hossein Amanat of Canada as architect for the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

327.2We are also pleased to announce the inauguration of a Fund dedicated to the construction of the Shrine. It is our heartfelt desire that this sacred edifice will be raised up through the universal participation of the friends.

The Universal House of Justice

328

Appointment of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

19 May 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

328.1We are delighted to announce the appointment of the members of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh for a five-year term commencing on the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb, 24 May 2019: Ho Yuet Mee, Enos Makhele, Manijeh Reyhani, Adam Robarts, and William Wieties. We

are profoundly grateful to Marzia Rowhani Dalal for the exemplary service she has rendered to this institution.

The Universal House of Justice

329

The Bahá'í World Website

23 May 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

329.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to write to you concerning the publication The Bahá'í World. Established in 1926 during the time of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, the volumes were published until 2006, after which certain functions, such as conveying news and developments of the Bahá'í community and thoughtfully presenting to the world at large what Bahá'ís believe and do, started to be fulfilled by official national websites and the family of sites associated with Bahai.org, including the Bahá'í World News Service, and also by publications such as The Five Year Plan, 2011–2016: Summary of Achievements and Learning and For the Betterment of the World. The House of Justice feels, however, that there is value in collecting in one location a selection of thoughtful essays, as well as substantial articles and features on a range of subjects that would be of interest to the wider public. It has therefore decided that it is timely to establish The Bahá'í World as a website and envisions that the site, which is located at bahaiworld.bahai.org, will gradually be augmented with content that conveys advances at the levels of thought and action and reflects the Faith's purpose and mission in the world. In due course, consideration will also be given to the release of volumes of The Bahá'í World in book form.

329.2Given these developments, the House of Justice hopes that National Assemblies will, as they deem appropriate, inform their communities about this promising resource.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

330

Increase of Terms for Boards of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

16 June 2019

The International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

330.1We are delighted to welcome you to the Holy Land as newly-appointed members of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh for the first meeting of the current term. It is a measure of the advance made by the institution of Huqúqu'lláh and the promise for future progress that we have decided to increase the duration of your term to five years to allow you to operate according to long-term strategies and associated lines of action to further the implementation of the law of Huqúqu'lláh. Beginning with the next round of appointments, the term of the Regional and National Boards will also increase to five years.

330.2As described in our recent Ridván message, the development of the Bahá'í community is accelerating rapidly, its capacity is rising, and its

ability to draw on the energies of more of its members is increasing. A new reality is emerging as large numbers engage in community-building activities within neighbourhoods and villages and many among them subsequently embrace the Faith. This bodes well for a greater level of participation by the Bahá'í community in the marvellous law of Huqúqu'lláh.

330.3To assist you with your consultation on the responsibilities that lie before you as Trustees of the Right of God, we are attaching an extract from our letter to you dated 21 June 2016, which elaborates on concepts of fundamental importance to the further development and functioning of this institution. We hope that careful study of this extract and reflection on the experience of your institution will not only clarify the various aspects of your work but will also assist you as you seek to further enhance your sense of common purpose and collective effort at the start of your new term. No doubt, early in this new term you would wish to review the efficacy of your current organizational arrangements in light of the growing complexity of your functions. In view of the evident progress you have made, you are encouraged to continue giving thought to further enhancing your interaction with the Regional and National Boards of Trustees. It is our hope that your deliberations over the next days will be imbued with the creative forces present in these sacred precincts.

330.4Rest assured of our prayers in the Holy Shrines that your dedicated efforts may attract divine confirmations.

The Universal House of Justice

331

Translation and Dissemination of Dawn of the Light

21 June 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

331.1As you know from the letter dated 1 June 2018 concerning the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, the Universal House of Justice has commissioned the production of a film for that occasion. We have been asked to share the following information to assist you in making the necessary preparations for the wide dissemination of the film and its use during the bicentenary celebrations being organized across your communities. Naturally, the exact manner in which it is utilized by the friends will largely depend on local circumstances.

331.2The film, titled Dawn of the Light, will be approximately 45 minutes in duration. It portrays several friends from different continents as they relate their own personal search after truth and meaning. These individuals share their discovery that God has sent two Divine Manifestations—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh—Whose Teachings are revolutionizing human thought and behaviour. It is a discovery that is inspiring the efforts of many across the globe to serve humanity and to contribute to the movement of populations towards a new pattern of life.

331.3It is expected that by mid-August 2019 a low resolution version of the film, together with the full transcript in English and relevant technical information, will be made available to National Assemblies to enable the

preparation of subtitles and voice-overs in local languages. It would be advisable for you to determine in advance, in consultation with the Counsellors, the languages into which you will translate the film and to appoint a team of translators who can undertake this work immediately after you receive the transcript.

331.4The completed film, including the subtitled and voice-over versions prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, Spanish and Swahili, will be made available to view or download on the Bahai.org website before the end of September 2019. However, in order to allow sufficient time for the finalization of local-language versions of the film as well as for other preparations, the completed film and associated files will be made available to National Assemblies by mid-September. The House of Justice is aware that unreliable Internet access may prevent some Assemblies from downloading the film. Thus, arrangements will be made for these Assemblies to receive a copy of the film, and related files, on a flash drive….

331.5It is the hope of the House of Justice that copies of the completed film will reach the friends and local communities in all parts of the world in a timely manner. You are thus encouraged to create, early on, plans for the widespread distribution of the film. Where technical or other obstacles limit viewing or screening of the film, you are asked to consider creative means through which it can be made available to as wide an audience as possible….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

332

Portal on Bahai.org for the Twin Holy Days

6 September 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

332.1As was the case two years ago, a section of the Bahai.org website will provide information about the events unfolding in various countries during the upcoming Twin Holy Days. This online portal, available in all the languages of Bahai.org—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili—is now active, and it can be accessed by the friends at bicentenary.bahai.org. Some content related to the coming anniversary is already available on the site, and the film Dawn of the Light will be added by the end of September. During the hours when the believers and their friends will celebrate the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world, the site will offer glimpses of activities in several locations, including live streaming of services held at Houses of Worship, that will be illustrative of the wide array of initiatives being undertaken in localities everywhere. It is hoped that before, during, and after the Holy Days, this website will serve as a valuable resource upon which the friends may draw for inspiration and encouragement.

332.2You are warmly invited to share this information with the members of your communities.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat
333
Release of Dawn of the Light
13 September 2019
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
333.1It is with great joy that the Universal House of Justice makes available to you the final versions of Dawn of the Light.
333.2High-resolution subtitled and voice-over copies of the film in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili have been placed on a website, in a number of formats to suit different needs, for the use of National Spiritual Assemblies. Also online are the DVD cover artwork, technical instructions, and video and audio files that will allow National Assemblies, where required, to finalize versions of the film with subtitles or voice-over in local languages…. Once any local-language version of the film has been finalized, it would be appreciated if the relevant National Assembly would arrange for a copy to be sent to the World Centre….
333.3Questions may arise with regard to whether the film can be screened publicly in a given locality. There would be no objection to the friends arranging for such screenings, subject to any advice that you may wish to convey to your respective communities. With regard to whether the film may be shown on television, this is a matter for each National Assembly to decide, drawing on the advice of the Counsellors where necessary and having regard for the situation in each country and the likely nature of public reaction.
333.4It is hoped that on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, as well as in the years to come, this film will help to attract the hearts and minds of thousands upon thousands to the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
334
Design of the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
20 September 2019
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
334.1Further to the message of the Universal House of Justice dated 7 May 2019 announcing the appointment of the architect for the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we have been asked to share with you information about the design that has been approved for this holy edifice.
334.2The structure that is envisaged in the design seeks to honour ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unique position as the Centre of the Covenant, and to reflect at once His lofty station and His humility. It creates a space of immense sacredness, to which pilgrims and visitors will be drawn for the purpose of prayer and meditation.
334.3You are invited to share the contents of this letter, as well as the enclosed images showing the architect’s design concept, with all the friends in your communities. In addition, a brief video showing the design concept is

being made available for viewing in connection with a news story on the website of the Bahá'í World News Service at www.bwns.org.

334.4Preparations to commence the construction work for this historic undertaking are already well advanced. The House of Justice has every expectation that the unveiling of this design,

which has been so eagerly anticipated since Ridván, will bring tremendous joy to the friends and inspire them in all the efforts they are making for the progress of the Cause of God.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

335

Bicentennial Anniversary of the Birth of the Báb

October 2019

To all who have come to honour the Herald of a new Dawn

Dearly loved Friends,

335.1Consider with us. Whenever a divine Educator appears in the world, a Figure Whose teachings will come to shape human thought and action for centuries thereafter—at such a dramatic, seismic moment, what would we expect?

335.2The appearance of every such Educator, as recorded in the Sacred Texts of the world's great faiths, is a pivotal event that propels the advancement of civilization. The spiritual stimulus each has provided throughout history has enabled the radius of human cooperation to extend from the clan, to the tribe, to the city-state, and to the nation. And each of these great Teachers promised that, in time, another divine Figure would appear, Whose advent should be anticipated and Whose influence would reform the world. No wonder, then, that the coming of the Báb, Whose Birth two centuries ago we now honour, gave rise to unprecedented ferment in the country where He was born. The moment of His appearance, like the appearance of all such Figures, precipitated the release of powerful spiritual forces—but there was no accompanying spectacle. There was instead a late evening conversation, in a modest Persian dwelling, between a student of religion and his youthful Host, during which that Host revealed that He was the Promised One, the divine Educator His guest had been seeking. "Observe attentively," He remarked, "Might not the Person intended … be none other than I?" It is this Youth, the Báb, that we acclaim as the One Whose coming—after an interval of a thousand years—shed the light of divine guidance once again upon the human world.

335.3From this first moment unfolded all that has since come to pass. The Báb's Writings flowed profusely from His pen, disclosing profound truths, dismissing superstitions that held sway in His day, urging the people to recognize the significance of the times, castigating the hypocrisy of their leaders, and summoning the world to an exalted standard of conduct. "O peoples of the earth!" He declares in one of His major works, "Verily the resplendent Light of God hath appeared in your midst … that ye may be guided aright to the ways of peace and, by the leave of God, step out of the darkness into the light and onto this far-extended Path of Truth." His influence spread with extraordinary rapidity, reaching beyond the limits of

Persia. Observers were astonished alike by the fast-swelling numbers of His followers and by their deeds of unsurpassed bravery and devotion. Accounts of the Báb's life—the swift arc it traced and the tragic drama that ended it—induced curious souls to travel to Persia and investigate further, and inspired a range of artistic tributes to His Person.

335.4The brilliance of the light of the Báb seems the more dazzling when set against the darkness of the social milieu in which He appeared. Nineteenth-century Persia was far removed from its glory days when its civilization was the envy of the world. Ignorance now prevailed; senseless dogmas went unchallenged; inequality was fuelled by rampant corruption. Religion, the foundation of Persia's former prosperity, had become a body devoid of its animating spirit. Each succeeding year offered the subjugated masses only disillusionment and hopelessness. Oppression was complete. Then, like a spring storm, the Báb came to purge and purify, to uproot the withered and spent customs of a wayward age, and to wash away the obscuring dust from the eyes of those blinded by illusion. But the Báb had a special object in view. He sought to prepare people for the imminent appearance of Bahá'u'lláh—the second of the Twin Luminaries destined to bring new light to humankind. This was His most insistent theme. "When the Daystar of Bahá will shine resplendent above the horizon of eternity", He instructed His followers, "it is incumbent upon you to present yourselves before His Throne."

335.5Thus did the Báb and, with even greater splendour, Bahá'u'lláh illuminate a society and an age shrouded in darkness. They inaugurated a new stage in social evolution: the stage of the unification of the entire human family. The spiritual energies They released into the world infused a new life into every sphere of endeavour, the results of which are evident in the transformation that has occurred. Material civilization has advanced immeasurably; astounding breakthroughs in science and technology have been achieved; the gates to the accumulated knowledge of humanity have been flung open. And principles set out by Bahá'u'lláh for the upliftment and progress of society and for ending systems of domination and exclusion have come to be widely accepted. Consider His teaching that humanity is one people, or that women are equal with men, or that education must be universal, or that rational investigation of the truth must prevail over fanciful theories and prejudices. Across all nations, a large segment of the world's people now agrees with these fundamental values.

335.6Nevertheless, arguments against these values, previously confined to the margins of serious thought, are also resurgent in society—a reminder that ideals require the force of spiritual commitment to cement them. For it is one thing to acknowledge something in principle; it is quite another to embrace it with all of one's heart, and harder still to refashion society in ways that give collective expression to it. Yet this is the aim of communities emerging across the globe that are patterned on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. These communities are striving to focus the light of those teachings on the chronic problems that afflict the societies around them; they are devising programmes of practical action centred on spiritual precepts. These are communities that

champion the education of both girls and boys under all circumstances; that subscribe to an expanded conception of worship which includes work carried out in the spirit of service; that look to spiritual aspirations, rather than self-interest, as the ever-flowing springs of motivation; and that inculcate a resolve to advance individual and social transformation. They seek to bring about spiritual, social, and material progress simultaneously. Above all, these are communities that define themselves by their commitment to the oneness of humanity. They value the rich diversity represented by all the world's kindreds, while maintaining that one's identity as a member of the human race has precedence before other identities and associations. They affirm the need for a global consciousness, arising from a shared concern for the well-being of humankind, and they count all the peoples of the earth as spiritual brothers and sisters. Not content with simply belonging to such communities, Bahá'u'lláh's followers are making constant effort to invite like-minded souls to join them in learning how to put His teachings into effect.

335.7This brings us to the crux of our case. The matter at hand is a challenging one, and requires candour. There are many noble and admirable causes in the world, and they arise from particular perspectives, each with its own merit. Is the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh merely one amongst them? Or is it universal, embodying the highest ideals of all humanity? After all, a Cause that is to be the wellspring of enduring justice and peace—not for one place or one people, but for all places and all peoples—must be inexhaustible, must possess a heavenly vitality that allows it to transcend all limitations and encompass every dimension of the life of humanity. Ultimately, it must have the power to transform the human heart. Then let us, like the Báb's guest, observe attentively. Does not the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh possess these very qualities?

335.8If the teachings brought by Bahá'u'lláh are what will enable humanity to advance to the highest levels of unity, then one must search the soul for the right response. The multitudes who recognized the Báb were summoned to heroism, and their magnificent response is recorded by history. Let every one who is awake to the condition of the world, and to the persistent evils that warp the lives of its inhabitants, heed Bahá'u'lláh's call to selfless and steadfast service—heroism for the present age. What else will rescue the world but the efforts of countless souls who each make the welfare of humanity their principal, their dominating concern?

The Universal House of Justice

336

Passing of ʻAlí Nakhjavání, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice

11 October 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

336.1With sorrowing hearts we convey the news that in the early hours of this morning our deeply cherished, illumined, and illustrious former colleague ʻAlí Nakhjavání ascended to the worlds beyond.

336.2We mourn the loss of an extraordinary figure who leaves behind a

distinguished legacy of uninterrupted service to the Cause of God. In the course of a singularly remarkable life that began in the closing years of the Heroic Age and extended to the very fringes of the second century of the Formative Age, he shone in the firmament of selfless devotion to Bahá'u'lláh and was called upon to be involved in many a major development in the rise of the Administrative Order, whether as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, as an intrepid pioneer to Africa in the Ten Year Crusade, as a member of the African Auxiliary Board when it was first created, as a member of the Regional National Spiritual Assembly of Central and East Africa at its inception, and as a member of the International Bahá'í Council when it was first elected, a prelude to his membership on the Universal House of Justice when it was established in 1963. He brought to his decades of monumental service absolute fidelity to his beloved Guardian, an exceptional depth of knowledge of the Cause, leonine commitment to the defence of the Covenant, intense ardour for the teaching work, rare spiritual acuity, and a radiant heart brimming with love for everyone who crossed his path. His was a life of profound spiritual attainment lived at the hinge of history. May his utter consecration, his adamantine faith, and his unswerving dedication to duty inspire generations to come.

336.3We supplicate at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his noble soul, that it may be richly rewarded, and that it may be united with his valiant pillar of support, his beloved wife Violette. Our condolences are extended to his dear daughter and son, Bahiyyih and Mehran, and to their families, and we pray that their grieving hearts may be solaced. The friends are called upon to hold memorial meetings in his honour, including befitting gatherings in all Houses of Worship throughout the world.

The Universal House of Justice

337

Significance for Iran of the Bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb

24 October 2019

To the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the sacred land of Iran

337.1The Bahá'í world is astir and the lovers of God are in a state of joy and excitement. As we draw nearer to the commemoration of the Twin Birthdays of the Manifestations of God, the signs of the unprecedented flourishing of that blessed tree which those two Sacred Beings planted in the world become daily more evident, and the people of the world benefit more and more from its limitless fruits. Hearts are being transformed, thoughts are being illumined, children are learning the lessons of unity and equality, adults are walking the path of service, morals are being refined, deeds are becoming purified, societies are progressing, material life is advancing under the influence of spiritual principles, souls are becoming a new creation, and the call of divine civilization resounds louder at every turn.

337.2Although by now you will have read the message we recently addressed to all those throughout the world who have a share in the celebration of the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, we considered this an opportune moment to also address His compatriots and to remind you of the bounty that is yours, for that Sun of Truth dawned in the city of Shiraz, promising the world new

illumination, and its morn first stirred up your land, preparing the world for the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh.

337.3The light which the Manifestations of God in every age shed upon the material and spiritual life of humanity discloses truths, whose very conception is impossible before the appearance of those Manifestations. Those Teachers illumine the essential relationships on which the progress of the world and its inhabitants depends and create the instruments for the attainment of that progress. Their appearance makes manifest the treasures hidden in the world of being, and Their teachings bring with them the precious gift of a new stage of unity. They encourage humankind once again to acquire spiritual qualities and to attain human perfections, so that through the confirmations of God and its own endeavours, it can lay the foundations of its own felicity.

337.4The appearance of the Exalted One was an invitation to knowledge and rationality, to generosity and compassion, to truthfulness and social justice. The concepts and ideas that He brought breathed a new spirit into the tired body of the world. He fulfilled the prophecies of old and gave new form to the practices of the past. He discarded superstition and nurtured reason. He began a new stage in the progress and transformation of the world of humanity and, in the first instance, invited His own compatriots to participate in the process of renewal. The gentleness of His Being and the heavenly power of His words instantly attracted those who associated with Him, and the truth of His utterances and the appeal of His teachings led, with miraculous speed, to the awakening and consciousness of the people. In a short while, His Cause spread throughout Iran and the fire of the love of God was kindled within diverse strata of that society. A great many souls from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds—men and women, young and old, rich and poor, merchants and traders, thinkers and writers, clerics and even royalty, in cities and in villages—joined the company of His followers and took to heart His call to build a society founded on justice and free from tyranny and oppression. The number of sincere leaders of religion and divines who accepted His Cause and embraced His truth is astounding, and included Vahíd, who was among the most learned men of the country and the confidant and representative of the King commissioned to investigate the truth about the new Revelation. According to the scholars and orientalists of the time, large multitudes among the people of Iran became the Báb's followers and devotees and evinced matchless valour in their commitment to their newfound faith.

337.5The tumult caused by the new Faith shook the pillars of the old order, aroused consternation and envy among the wielders of position and power, and led them to nurse the idle hope that by creating terror they would negate the Báb's Word and extinguish His light, and so they mercilessly opposed Him. Influential fanatics, one and all, raised aloft the standard of denial and urged the authorities and the populace to commit acts of cruelty on an unprecedented scale. Truly, contemporary history has seldom witnessed the like of the bloodshed and pillage that, at the hands of the rulers or at their instigation, befell the Báb and His followers. Yet, such atrocities, which were often carried out in public, in the street and in the marketplace, so as to become object lessons for others, would time and again, as a result of the

steadfastness of those innocent souls, become the cause of the awakening of a new wave of pure-hearted people. In a few instances, when surrounded by the forces of the malevolent and subjected to their ceaseless cruelty, those wronged ones defended themselves valiantly, but they ultimately fell victim to deception and were brutally massacred. The antagonists then endeavoured to obliterate the traces of the new Faith and tried systematically to eradicate from the hearts and minds of Iranians the memory of the astonishing influence of the Báb's appearance. For a time they banned any mention of Him in the land of His birth, and when that approach proved ineffective, they loosed their tongues in curse and abuse, and began fabricating stories, falsifying history, and denying the truth. The friend they called an enemy, and they depicted events in distorted fashion. The sublime gift they called "the sedition of the Báb", and they relegated the Exalted Beloved to the lowest depths of silent darkness, thus committing a great injustice against future generations. But they were heedless of the fact that countless Iranian families were in some way related to His movement, and numberless spots in that vast country were reddened by the blood of His persecuted followers. The traces of that spiritual renaissance will forever endure in that land, and its mystic effects will become evident at last.

337.6One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Cause of the Báb was the prominent role of the youth who in an astonishing way entered its vanguard, who demonstrated a profound understanding of the implications of the new era, and who taught everyone the lessons of courage and valour. The Báb Himself was twenty-five when He declared His mission. Quddús was twenty-two when he became adorned with the mantle of faith; Táhirih was in her twenties when she accepted the Cause of her Lord; and Anís was a young man of tender age when he became a believer. Recall the fearless Zaynab, who in the prime of youth became a legend, a heroine in both this world and the next. The names of the Iranian heroes of this new movement are today immortalized throughout the world, and the courage of those deathless souls is an example for all. The young standard-bearers of the community of the Greatest Name in every land serve humanity in memory of those courageous souls and make sacrificial efforts for the betterment of the world and the progress of society, endeavouring to acquire spiritual characteristics and engaging in the education of children and junior youth. In Iran too, despite countless hardships, the apple of our eyes are, with pure hearts free from resentment or enmity, valiantly arising in the discharge of their spiritual obligations, acquiring knowledge and the sciences and arts, earning a livelihood, establishing families, laying the foundations of future society upon the strong pillars of faith, and placing service to humanity at the centre of their lives.

337.7Briefly, after the setting of that resplendent Daystar, His prophecies were eventually fulfilled and the dawn of a new Sun became visible. Bahá'u'lláh appeared and renewed the law of God. He gathered together that scattered and oppressed company and prepared for them—and for all of humanity—the means of everlasting glory. He taught them principles to elevate the government and uplift the people, He categorically forbade conflict and contention, and He raised a new creation throughout the world, drawn from every

population and speaking in every tongue, that they might serve humanity with sincerity and love, strengthen the unity of the world, lay the foundations of fellowship, and through collaboration with others in their own society, propagate divine civilization.

337.8Beloved friends: At this moment in time, when the followers of the Greatest Name throughout the world are welcoming friends, acquaintances, neighbours, co-workers, and like-minded souls to the celebration of the Twin Birthdays and are inviting them to consider the meaning of the marvellous anniversary of the Herald and Summoner of this illumined cycle, you must know of a truth that for the people of Iran, the significance and auspiciousness of this occasion is two hundredfold. Assure everyone that the time for the fulfilment of the unfailing promises of those Twin Lights shall come, the turmoil in the world will be eased, permanent peace and harmony among the peoples of the earth will appear, and the unity of humankind will be manifested.

The Universal House of Justice

338

Results of the Worldwide Celebration of the Birth of the Báb

8 November 2019

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

338.1The measure of what you have achieved—not only in the last few weeks, but during a two-year period of remarkable advance now brought to a stunning climax—compels us to address you who are the visible hosts of a movement that has proved itself irrepressible. Far from being merely a memorable event, the celebration of the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb was the fruit of eight cycles of devoted effort, carried out in unity and with a sense of undaunted initiative. We rejoiced to see the friends so assured in their response to the call to service. Local communities, neighbourhoods, and villages became arenas for intensified activity of all kinds, as the knowledge of what the community could accomplish—witnessed at the last bicentenary—prompted a release of tremendous energy and enterprise, supported by a sound process of preparation and reflection. There are so many highlights to acknowledge. Celebrations within families and among families featured prominently; gatherings organized by youth for their peers were likewise a strength. Opportunities for animated retellings of the lives of the Báb and His early disciples were eagerly seized. Festivities were given added depth through conversations on the needs of society, often begun by the parents of young children. The bicentenary elicited artistic works of beauty and feeling, creative expressions of devotion too numerous and diverse to describe. And the way that each avenue of activity became a natural invitation to engage with the institute was especially noticeable. We were much encouraged by the capacity shown to bring the broadest possible spectrum of people into the embrace of the community’s activities. Surely, this illustrates how moments sacred in human history and commemorated at Holy Days have immense power to uplift individual souls and to weld a people together through shared experience. What great promise for advances at the level of culture lies in the universal celebration of such Festivals in place

after place in the years to come!
338.2The reality that there is abundant receptivity in the world at large is not in doubt. Progress depends on developing the capacity to extend the community-building process further still. And so all eyes turn to the months ahead. The devotion to the Twin Divine Luminaries and to the well-being of humanity which inspired your noble exertions thus far must sustain you in the coming six cycles. We urge everyone who worked to bring about this success to hasten now and gather again to reflect and to consult, and to determine how best to apply, in each unique setting, all that your experience has taught you: how an expanding nucleus of friends can cultivate a growing pattern of activity; how children can advance to the next grade and junior youth to the succeeding text, further developing their moral and spiritual qualities; how institute courses can yield much-needed skills and capacities; how the path of service can widen to accommodate large numbers; how real hope for the betterment of society can be demonstrated in action; and how all of God's peoples can be enabled to take inspiration from His new Revelation, and souls who are receptive can be invited to identify with the Cause of the Abhá Beauty. In this continuing period of special potency, at an hour when the world seems powerless in the face of overwhelming peril and souls have succumbed to dismay and despair, Bahá'u'lláh has shown us another glimpse of what the community that bears His name can accomplish through courage—even heroism—in the discharge of its God-given mission. We will pray earnestly in the Holy Shrines for His unfailing confirmations to surround every child and every youth, every woman and every man, every family and every community that treasures His love in their hearts.
The Universal House of Justice
339
Non-involvement in Partisan Politics
1 December 2019
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
339.1The troubling conditions facing the world's peoples and the persistent problems caused by disunity within and between nations have, as you know, been a prominent theme in the messages of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'ís, of course, are ever mindful of the state of the world. The well-being of humanity and its peace and tranquillity are the constant desire of all those who have taken to heart Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to "be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in". It is abundantly clear, moreover, that the longing of the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world and to participate constructively in the life of society is in no way contradicted by their non-involvement in politics. While consciousness of the hardships afflicting so many strengthens a commitment to fundamental social change, political activity by Bahá'ís would only dissipate the community's energies and fail to bring about this change. It must arise from the spiritual transformation of society. These concepts were explored by the House of Justice much more fully in its message dated 2 March 2013 to the Bahá'ís of Iran, a message which many communities have found it

useful to revisit from time to time. We have been asked to convey to you some additional points on a closely related topic, and this letter may be shared with the friends in whatever manner you deem most appropriate.

339.2One conspicuous symptom of society's deepening malaise is the steady descent of public discourse into greater rancour and enmity, reflecting entrenched partisan points of view. A prevalent feature of such contemporary discourse is how political disagreements rapidly degenerate into invective and ridicule. However, what particularly differentiates the present age from those that preceded it is how so much of this discourse occurs in full view of the world. Social media and related communication tools tend to give the greatest exposure to all that is controversial, and the very same tools allow individuals, in an instant, to disseminate more widely whatever catches their attention and to register their support or opposition to various sentiments, whether explicitly or tacitly. The unparalleled ease with which a person can join in such public debate and the nature of the technology make momentary lapses of judgement and incautious actions more likely and their residue more enduring.

339.3This holds particular implications for Bahá'ís, who know well that the principles of their Faith require them to refrain from involvement in political controversies and conflicts of all kinds. "Speak thou no word of politics" was the counsel of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to one believer, adding, "Except to speak well of them, make thou no mention of the earth's kings, and the worldly governments thereof." Shoghi Effendi warned against allowing our vision of the Cause to be clouded "by the stain and dust of worldly happenings, which, no matter how glittering and far-reaching in their immediate effects, are but the fleeting shadows of an imperfect world". While the importance of keeping at a distance from all politically divisive issues is well known to the friends, their engagement with pressing social issues, motivated by a commendable and sincere wish to be of service to those around them, can present them with difficult situations. An unexpected development can turn an uncontroversial issue into one that divides people along partisan lines, and some of the same unhealthy modes of expression that are common to the political sphere can transfer into other areas of discourse. Especially in the uninhibited realm of social media, wrongs—both real and imagined—are quickly magnified, and a variety of feelings are easily stirred: righteous indignation perhaps, or a desire to promote one's point of view, or an eagerness to be seen as the source of new information. Much that is taken to be harmless, or even well-intentioned, is, on closer examination, serving to deepen social divides, fuel differences between opposing groups, and perpetuate disagreements, driving away possibilities for consensus and the search for solutions. If one person's contribution seems provocative or objectionable, reacting to it may have the effect of unwittingly strengthening and increasing the exposure of the original sentiment, and exacerbating matters. The followers of the Blessed Beauty must be conscious and conscientious users of any technology they decide to utilize and must apply insight and spiritual discipline. They should look to the lofty standards of the Cause to guide them at all times in the way they express themselves. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world.

It will be apparent that the precepts the friends observe in the course of their general interactions with those around them must also characterize, sometimes even more scrupulously, their communication carried out via social media. These precepts include the prohibition on backbiting, the counsel to see the world with their own eyes and not through the eyes of others, the need to uphold the oneness of humanity and avoid a mind-set of "us" and "them", and the principles of consultation and the necessary decorum associated with it.

339.4The friends will occasionally come across instances when their fellow believers have made comments or circulated the comments of others in ways that seem unwise, or imprudent, when judged against the standards set out in the Bahá'í Writings. It would be wrong, when encountering postings of this kind, to conclude that such behaviour must therefore be unobjectionable, condoned, or even encouraged. Not infrequently, Bahá'í institutions have had to counsel individuals about their actions online, although wherever possible they do so with discretion, out of respect for the dignity of the persons in question.

339.5One example among many areas in which the considerations set out above are relevant is the discussion on social media of matters pertaining to Iran. As will be readily appreciated, this is an area of particular sensitivity, and therefore the friends need to be especially on their guard. Rash statements made online could endanger the believers in that land or unwittingly provide the enemies of the Cause with the means to misrepresent the Bahá'ís. Observing strict caution in this respect is essential for the protection of the sorely tried community in Iran.

339.6In this connection, the House of Justice has asked us to convey an additional point to the Persian believers who reside outside the Cradle of the Faith. It is understandable that these friends feel a strong personal concern for the well-being of their fellow Bahá'ís in Iran and for the future of that sacred land. Nevertheless, they are urged to bear in mind that, regardless of their land of origin, their primary obligation ought to be to the progress of the Faith in the land in which they now dwell. Indeed, over the course of the Faith's history, the contributions made by Persian Bahá'ís to the teaching work on every continent are too many to recount, and the House of Justice rejoices when these friends direct their efforts towards advancing the Five Year Plan in the places where they reside. This must be their chief object; striving for such a goal is what will bring joy to their spiritual brothers and sisters in Iran and properly honour the sacrifices being made by those steadfast servants.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Two-Stage Electoral Process for Electing Local Spiritual Assemblies
16 January 2020
The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India
Dear Bahá'í Friends,
340.1You will no doubt recall that in its letter of 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice anticipated the establishment of a two-stage electoral process for the election of Local Spiritual Assemblies in certain local communities where the size of the Bahá'í population and other circumstances would warrant this development. Indeed, such a two-stage election had its historical precedent in the system established at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's direction for the election of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tihrán. The introduction of this approach in the context of communities that are experiencing significant growth will, it is hoped, provide a means by which believers, especially those newly enrolled, can be more effectively connected to administrative processes within the community in general, and to their Local Assembly in particular.
340.2The House of Justice has been following with great interest the steady acceleration of the process of growth in your country, and it feels that in a number of communities in India it would now be possible to institute a two-stage election of Local Assemblies. However, in order to allow for the necessary experience to emerge gradually, the House of Justice has decided that the first efforts would start, at Ridván 2020, in only two local communities, Delhi and Hathwan Panchayat. In this way, lessons learned in both an urban and a rural setting will facilitate the future introduction of this approach more widely in India, and indeed elsewhere in the world. You are asked to now begin, in close consultation with the Counsellors and with the help of the State Bahá'í Council of Bihar and the Regional Bahá'í Council of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Delhi, to prepare these two communities for this development.
340.3The election of a Local Spiritual Assembly using a two-stage process will be conducted in a manner similar to that of a National Spiritual Assembly, that is, the believers in a designated unit will elect delegates who, in turn, will elect members of the Local Assembly from among all the adult believers in the entire locality. For now, the number of delegates will be 19, which would be assigned in proportion to the adult Bahá'í membership of each unit. In Delhi, the city should be divided into electoral units, preferably in a way that would allow two delegates to be assigned to each, wherever this is possible. In Hathwan Panchayat, the village should be the primary basis upon which units are decided. A village with a sufficient number of adult Bahá'ís to elect at least one delegate would be one unit. However, in some cases you might deem it necessary to combine two or more nearby villages with very small Bahá'í populations to form a unit. A village with a very large Bahá'í population may need to be divided into multiple units; as in Delhi, each such unit would preferably be assigned two delegates. In the latter case, as far as possible, the units may follow naturally existing sections of the village.
340.4The election of the delegates can take place in the days preceding

Ridván, starting from the first day of the month of Jalál, and the believers would be invited to attend a unit gathering to vote for the number of delegates assigned, from among the adult believers who reside in the unit. Drawing on the relevant Bahá'í principles and existing practices, and depending on circumstances, your Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors, can decide the manner of conducting these unit gatherings, including such details as how absentee ballots are treated, how ballots are counted, how ties are broken, how the result of the voting in each unit is announced, how delegates are informed of the process by which they will elect the Local Spiritual Assembly, and how results are announced to the whole community. An important determination with regard to the voting by the delegates is whether they will send their ballots to a place or person designated by the Local Assembly, or whether it would be preferable for them to gather in one place to discharge their spiritual prerogative. Should you decide that the holding of a gathering would be advantageous, it is of paramount importance to ensure that a spiritual atmosphere prevails throughout the course of the event; however, there would be no need to have consultative sessions, such as those that take place during the National Convention. Whatever procedures are put in place, the entire process should be completed by the first day of Ridván, at which time an announcement would be made to the community of the nine believers elected to the Local Assembly.

340.5Beyond assisting the friends in the community to become familiar with the various procedural aspects of a two-stage election, you will no doubt wish to give thought as to how they can be helped to develop a deep appreciation for those spiritual imperatives that characterize Bahá'í elections. For many new believers, their understanding of the word "election" derives from the political elections that take place in the country, and the various ideas and practices associated with them, most of which are, in profound ways, at variance with the Bahá'í approach. The movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a New World Order demands a major shift in how the believers view authority within the community and how those who will exercise this authority are chosen. A point of departure is the fact that the believers do not seek positions on an institution by putting themselves forward and attempting to solicit votes; rather, free from any trace of ambition, they understand election to such a role as a call to service. Taking active part in the life of the community throughout the year, they use every opportunity to become thoroughly acquainted with one another; thus they are able to consider prayerfully the range of believers for whom they can vote, and then select those who best combine the necessary qualities. Other important factors, such as age distribution, diversity, and gender, also need due consideration, so that the membership of the Assembly will be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements of the community. As the believers are assisted to develop a more profound understanding of Bahá'í elections, they will, when the time comes for them to vote at both stages, approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, "they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the

elections.”
340.6Following the elections, the House of Justice would appreciate receiving from you a report on the details of procedures instituted and any comments on the conduct of the elections in these two localities. You are encouraged to consult with the Counsellors in the preparation of this report.
340.7As you embark on this significant enterprise, you may be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines on your behalf, that Bahá’u’lláh may guide your steps and ever sustain you in your devoted labours for His Cause.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

341
Suspension of Pilgrimage and Brief Visits
12 March 2020
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
341.1The Universal House of Justice has been following closely the evolving global health crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), and for some time the Department of Pilgrimage has been advising prospective pilgrims and visitors about the rapidly changing restrictions being imposed on travellers by the government of Israel. The current situation and the escalating measures being taken by governments and airlines have now necessitated the suspension of pilgrimage and brief visits to the Holy Land until such time as circumstances permit them to resume.
341.2The House of Justice regrets that many friends who were planning to visit the World Centre of the Cause will be affected by this suspension, but it hopes that they will, before long, be able to fulfil their hearts’ desire.
341.3Kindly assure the friends in your communities of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that Bahá’u’lláh’s unfailing assistance and strengthening grace may surround them as well as their compatriots and that all those affected by this outbreak may be sheltered beneath the canopy of His watchful care.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

342
Naw-Rúz Message 2020
Naw-Rúz 177
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
342.1We feel compelled by current events to write to you at this time and not wait until Ridván. As you will be all too aware, over recent weeks and months, an apprehensive world has been coming to terms with a rapidly evolving health crisis affecting the people in many countries, the consequences of which for society cannot yet be estimated with any certainty. We are sure that you, like us, have felt great concern for the well-being of humanity, especially for those who are most vulnerable. Seldom has it been more evident that society’s collective strength is dependent on the unity it can manifest in action, from

the international stage to the grassroots, and we know that you are giving your support to the essential efforts being made in this regard to protect the health and welfare of all.

342.2Inevitably, the current situation will have an impact on the administration of the Cause of God in many places, and in every case the relevant National Spiritual Assembly will advise on the appropriate measures to be taken. In some countries this will include cancelling National Convention, with arrangements being made for the National Assembly to be elected by other means. Similar arrangements might also need to be made, in certain places, for the election of Local Spiritual Assemblies. However, in circumstances where even this proves unfeasible, it would be permissible this year for the existing membership of a Local or National Assembly to continue on into the next administrative year. Naturally, any National Assembly giving thought to approving such a step will seek the advice of the Counsellors at an early stage.

342.3At a time of another crisis, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered these words of counsel: “In a day such as this, when the tempests of trials and tribulations have encompassed the world, and fear and trembling have agitated the planet, ye must rise above the horizon of firmness and steadfastness with illumined faces and radiant brows in such wise that, God willing, the gloom of fear and consternation may be entirely obliterated, and the light of assurance may dawn above the manifest horizon and shine resplendently.” The world stands more and more in need of the hope and the strength of spirit that faith imparts. Beloved friends, you have of course long been occupied with the work of nurturing within groups of souls precisely the attributes that are required at this time: unity and fellow feeling, knowledge and understanding, a spirit of collective worship and common endeavour. Indeed, we have been struck by how efforts to reinforce these attributes have made communities especially resilient, even when faced with conditions that have necessarily limited their activities. Though having to adapt to new circumstances, the believers have used creative means to strengthen bonds of friendship, and to foster among themselves and those known to them spiritual consciousness and qualities of tranquillity, confidence, and reliance on God. The elevated conversations that have occurred as a result, whether remotely or in person, have been a source of comfort and inspiration to many. Such efforts on your part provide a valuable service at this hour when many souls are perplexed and dismayed, unsure of what will be. However difficult matters are at present, and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of societies are brought, humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence.

342.4This is not the moment in which to describe in any detail the accomplishments of the Bahá’í world over the past year, or the extraordinary progress made in multiplying community-building activities worldwide and strengthening programmes of growth, work which continues in earnest wherever circumstances permit. Suffice it to say that, four years into the current Plan, the tireless supporters of the Cause have brought the Faith

of Bahá’u’lláh to the strongest position in which it has ever been in its history. Everything you have done and are now doing is preparing the global Bahá’í community for the next stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.
342.5For now, our thoughts and our prayers are focused on the health and well-being of all the friends of God and all those among whom you dwell. We pray earnestly, also, for the Almighty to bestow upon you assurance, stamina, and staunch spirits. May your minds be ever bent upon the needs of the communities to which you belong, the condition of the societies in which you live, and the welfare of the entire family of humanity, to whom you are all brothers and sisters. And in your quiet moments, when no course of action other than prayer seems possible, then we invite you to add your supplications to our own and ardently pray for the relief of suffering. We turn to these words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Whose whole existence was an example of selfless commitment to the well-being of others:
O Thou Provider! Assist Thou these noble friends to win Thy good pleasure, and make them well-wishers of stranger and friend alike. Bring them into the world that abideth forever; grant them a portion of heavenly grace; cause them to be true Bahá’ís, sincerely of God; save them from outward semblances, and establish them firmly in the truth. Make them signs and tokens of the Kingdom, luminous stars above the horizons of this nether life. Make them to be a comfort and a solace to humankind and servants to the peace of the world.
The Universal House of Justice
343
Naw-Rúz 2020 Message to the Bahá’ís of Iran
Naw-Rúz 177
To the sorely tested and steadfast friends of the Divine Beloved in the sacred land of Iran
343.1Every awakened heart is saddened and filled with great pain and anguish at beholding the condition of the world and the ills that afflict its inhabitants. We feel it necessary, at this time and on the occasion of this blessed day, to share, besides the message we have today addressed to all the Bahá’ís of the world, the following words with you who are intimates of the Threshold of the All-Merciful.
343.2In the course of the year now ending, in addition to bearing the numerous difficulties that the peoples of the world and your fellow citizens experienced, you, the wayfarers in the path of faith, whose principal purpose in life is to promote unity and concord and to ameliorate suffering in human society, were once again subject to discrimination, new machinations, and severe tests. “… From time immemorial even unto eternity”, writes Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, “the Almighty hath tried, and will continue to try, His servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns.” Praised be God that you, roses of the garden of the Ancient Beauty, His compatriots that have been reared by the hands of His bounty, in this year demonstrated yet again your true identity and character. And your adherence to the principles of truthfulness and honesty—foundations of all human virtues—aroused once more the admiration

of all.
343.3O friends of the Abhá Beauty! Although the horizon of the world appears dark, and uncertainty and chaos alarm and agitate its people, yet the arrival of the season of spring and of the inexhaustible bounties of God every new year is a reminder of the truth that the cold winds of winter, however severe, are ultimately stilled through the warmth of the vernal sun. The gloom of night is followed by the brightness of day, and autumn dust is washed away by the showers of spring. Therefore, through reliance on the boundless spiritual powers latent within you, strive to become the embodiment of reassurance and hope to family and friends, the essence of confidence to every heart, a healing balm to all who suffer, and a secure torch for the flame of the love of the true Friend. We express our sympathy and fellow feeling for all the people of the world and the noble people of Iran and assure you, our loved ones, of our sincere and heartfelt prayers in the Holy Shrines for removal of the difficulties. With these words of supplication from the pen of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we beseech the Almighty for the health and well-being, tranquillity and freedom, of every soul: “Open Thou the portals of hope, and from the bounties of heaven bestow upon them a share. Turn this gloomy night into day, and cause the day of Naw-Rúz to become blessed.”
The Universal House of Justice
344
Ridván Message 2020
Ridván 2020
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
344.1Two emerging realities have prompted us to address these words to you. The first reality is the growing consciousness around the world of the looming and appalling dangers carried by the coronavirus pandemic. In many countries, despite valiant and determined collective efforts to avert disaster, the situation is already grave, creating tragedies for families and individuals and plunging whole societies into crisis. Waves of suffering and sorrow are breaking over one place after another, and will weaken different nations, at different moments, in different ways.
344.2The second reality, one that is daily more apparent, is the resilience and undiminished vitality of the Bahá’í world in the face of a challenge which has no likeness in living memory. Your response has been outstanding. When we wrote to you a month ago at Naw-Rúz, we were keen to stress the impressive qualities being demonstrated by communities whose normal pattern of activity had been disrupted. All that has transpired in the intervening weeks, during which many friends have had to comply with increasingly stringent restrictions, has only deepened our feelings of admiration. Learning from the experience gained in other parts of the world, some communities have found safe and creative ways to raise awareness of public health requirements within populations. Special attention is being paid to those who are most at risk from the virus and the economic hardship arising from its spread; the initiatives featured on the Bahá’í World News Service in this regard are but a mere handful of the countless number under way. These are being complemented by

efforts to examine, promote, and cultivate those spiritual qualities which are most needed at this time. Many such efforts are necessarily taking place in family units or in solitude, but where conditions allow or communication tools make it possible, a sense of extraordinary solidarity is being actively nurtured among souls sharing similar circumstances. The dynamics of community life, so important for collective progress, will not be subdued.

344.3Our spirits have been lifted by seeing how capably National Spiritual Assemblies, the unflagging generals of the Army of Light, have guided their communities and shaped their response to the crisis. They have been strongly supported by the Counsellors and their auxiliaries who, as always, have heroically raised aloft the standard of loving service. While staying well informed about the often rapidly changing conditions in their countries, Assemblies have made the necessary arrangements for administering the affairs of the Cause, and in particular for conducting elections, where these remain feasible. Through regular communications, institutions and agencies have offered wise counsel, comforting reassurance, and constant encouragement. In many instances, they have also started to identify constructive themes that are emerging from the discourses opening up in their societies. The expectation we expressed in our Naw-Rúz message that this test of humanity's endurance would grant it greater insight is already being realized. Leaders, prominent thinkers, and commentators have begun to explore fundamental concepts and bold aspirations that, in recent times, have been largely absent from public discourse. At present these are but early glimmerings, yet they hold out the possibility that a moment of collective consciousness may be in view.

344.4The comfort we take at seeing the resilience of the Bahá'í world manifest itself in action is tempered by our sadness at the consequences of the pandemic for humanity. Alas, we are conscious that the believers and their associates also share in this suffering. The distance from friends and relations that, owing to the requirements of public safety, so many people in the world are now maintaining will, for some, give way to permanent separation. At each dawn it seems certain that more agonies will be endured before the set of sun. May the promise of reunion in the eternal realms offer solace to those who lose loved ones. We pray for the relief of their hearts, and for the grace of God to surround those whose education, livelihoods, homes, or even their very means of sustenance are being put at risk. For you, and for those you cherish, and for all your compatriots, we supplicate Bahá'u'lláh and beseech His blessings and favour.

344.5However long and arduous the road that must be travelled, we are supremely confident in your fortitude and your determination to see the journey through. You draw from stores of hope, faith, and magnanimity, putting the needs of others before your own, enabling those who are deprived to be spiritually nourished, those who increasingly thirst for answers to be satisfied, and those who long to work for the betterment of the world to be offered the means. From the devoted followers of the Blessed Perfection, how could we expect less?

The Universal House of Justice

345

Service of Women on the Elected and Appointed Institutions

23 April 2020
To an individual Bahá’í
Dear Bahá’í Friend,
345.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 11 February 2020 requesting recent statistical data in relation to the number of women currently serving on the elected and appointed institutions of the Faith. We have been asked to share with you the following information which was obtained in February 2020:
Continental Counsellors: 47%
Auxiliary Board members: 52%
National Spiritual Assemblies: 42%
Regional Bahá’í Councils: 43%
345.2You may also be interested to know that five out of the nine members of the International Teaching Centre and three out of the five members of the Bahá’í International Development Organization are women. Furthermore, the Principal Representative of the Bahá’í International Community and the majority of the representatives of the Offices of the Bahá’í International Community are women.
345.3Kindly note that no information is available at the Bahá’í World Centre in relation to the percentage of women serving on Local Spiritual Assemblies.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
346
Global Health Crisis
9 May 2020
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dearly loved Friends,
346.1As will by now be all too apparent, the Five Year Plan’s final year has brought challenges different to those of the preceding four. The world is caught in the grip of a fast-spreading virus that has claimed many thousands of lives and severely disrupted a large share of humanity’s social and economic activity. Yet the Bahá’í community has remained composed and has acted swiftly to meet the immediate demands that confronted it. It has found ways to ensure the continuity of community life, while also striving to play its part in meeting spiritual and material needs in society more widely—a fitting response to an emergency situation. We commend all the action that has been taken so far. Now, however, we wish to explore more fully what the coming year might entail. Your efforts to stimulate the advancement of the Plan in its final months will inevitably be shaped by your pressing responsibility to guide the friends in their response to an evolving global crisis. These unique circumstances require that we address you directly; you may share this letter with your communities, in whole or in part, as you deem appropriate.
346.2When we expressed our desire to see five thousand intensive programmes of growth established by the end of this Five Year Plan, we were keenly aware of the magnitude of the undertaking this implied, but the condition of the world demanded it. We called for the work of strengthening programmes of growth to

accelerate everywhere. We were gratified to see how the supporters of the Cause were galvanized into action, exerting unprecedented levels of effort. In the space of four years the Bahá'í community doubled both the number of core activities occurring worldwide and the number of their participants. To have brought hundreds of thousands of individuals into the embrace of the community's activities in such a short period is an advance in capacity that has no parallel in any of the previous Plans in the present series.

346.3Much, then, has been accomplished, and this is a clear indicator of the strength and confidence of the Bahá'í community. But, as you already appreciate, the current crisis has altered the context in which the Plan is being pursued. We have been impressed by how many communities have taken great strides in adapting to this new reality. Far from viewing the present period as simply a hiatus to be endured with patience, they have recognized that the state of the world has made the need to render meaningful service to humanity more urgent. Naturally, the activities undertaken must suit the prevailing conditions, but there should be no doubt that this is a time for noble aims, high resolve, and intense endeavour. As is well known, the activities of the Plan are intended to cultivate a thriving community spirit, through which resilience to mighty challenges is also strengthened. Educational efforts aim to raise up a growing number of souls who can contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of a community; devotional meetings nurture the spirit of service as it blossoms, rooting it in a culture of collective worship. In short, the promotion of the Plan implies building capacity to walk the path of service in every time and season—which must surely include moments of acute peril in the life of humanity, such as now. It is essential, then, that the steps being taken to learn how to apply the Plan's framework for action to the current circumstances of the world continue in earnest; in all likelihood, the global health crisis will have a direct impact on Bahá'í activities, to a greater or lesser degree, for months or even years, and the task of adapting to the situation cannot be postponed. In this regard, the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, ably guided by the International Teaching Centre, have shown impressive determination in their efforts to spur on the friends and orient them in their approach to the work at hand; they will doubtless do the same over the coming four cycles and beyond.

346.4We appreciate, of course, that some activities have had to be suspended, and particular strategies or methods that are unsuited to current conditions have had to be set aside for a time. However, while certain possibilities have been temporarily closed, others have opened up, and new means have emerged for strengthening existing patterns of activity. Flexibility has proven to be an asset, but so has vigilance in ensuring that the primarily local character of community activities is not diluted; efforts to nurture flourishing communities within neighbourhoods and villages and across clusters must continue. In some cases, present conditions have created unexpected opportunities for widening community participation in devotional meetings and study circles, conducted with safety in mind. Many parents whose families have been confined to home surroundings have welcomed support that has helped them to move from the position of observer to protagonist in the spiritual education of their

children. Junior youth and groups of youth have discovered the power of simple acts of compassionate service carried out with wisdom. Nevertheless, it would be understandable if you determine, in some instances, that plans that require the movement of pioneers, mobile tutors, or visiting teachers will have to be postponed, and this should not give you cause for concern; you can re-evaluate the situation in the months ahead. The coming One Year Plan could afford an opportunity to fulfil any goals or objectives that may in the end remain out of reach during the present Plan.

346.5We recognize that continuing to function in the course of this crisis will, in many cases, put you under financial strain, and the economic hardship being experienced by many in the community may limit the resources upon which you can draw. Be assured that we stand ready to support you. Let there be no doubt or equivocation in this regard: it is essential that the institutions of the Faith maintain their operations throughout this period and not be obstructed by lack of resources in the discharge of their core duties. Unquestionably, the whole company of the faithful in each country will rally around you, and in particular, we are confident that believers with means will come forward to aid you.

346.6As you are aware, there is considerable unevenness in the ways that different societies are coping with the difficulties arising from this crisis; consequently, the challenges that confront different National Assemblies are not the same. And these challenges will change over time. This will call for tremendous agility as local, regional, and national institutions seek to read their reality and stay alert to new developments. We wish to impress upon you that your collaboration with the Counsellors will be of paramount importance: it should be committed and sustained, an almost constant exchange of information and insight, to ensure that you are responding swiftly to the needs of your community, anticipating problems before they emerge, seizing opportunities that open up, and supporting promising initiatives. Exactly what measures should be taken by Bahá’í institutions will naturally depend on the relevant circumstances. But in every place, the friends will need clear and timely guidance; special attention must be given to those who are most at risk from the virus itself, or from the economic impact of its spread; and creative approaches will be required to sustain the collective spirit of the community during difficult times. Networks of various kinds comprising families, neighbouring households, or other groupings are offering valuable support to many; you should be confident in the resourcefulness of your communities, and seek to draw on their talents and energies to the fullest. As grave as conditions have already become in some places, National Assemblies in countries that have so far been spared the more severe consequences of the pandemic must keep in mind that there is the potential for worse to occur, and any preparations that can be made now for that eventuality, before the introduction of further restrictions hampers such efforts, should commence at once—without alarm, but without delay. Local Spiritual Assemblies in particular should consider what means might be within their power to prevent, relieve, or mitigate suffering in the wider society of which they are an integral part.

346.7When society is in such difficulty and distress, the responsibility of the

Bahá’ís to make a constructive contribution to human affairs becomes more pronounced. This is a moment when distinct but interrelated lines of action converge upon a single point, when the call to service rings aloud. The individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—inseparable protagonists in the advancement of civilization—are in a position to demonstrate the distinctive features of the Bahá’í way of life, characterized by increased maturity in the discharge of their responsibilities and in their relationships with each other. They are summoned to a fuller expression of the Faith’s society-building powers. Agencies and projects dedicated to social action may have to adapt their approaches in order to meet expanded needs; efforts to do this are sure to infuse ongoing programmes with deeper meaning and purpose. Further, Bahá’í contributions to discourses newly prevalent in society are generating heightened interest, and there is a responsibility to be discharged here too. At a time when the urgency of attaining higher levels of unity, founded on the incontestable truth of humanity’s oneness, is becoming apparent to larger and larger numbers, society stands in need of clear voices that can articulate the spiritual principles that underlie such an aspiration.

346.8You are of course ever conscious that your responsibilities reach beyond those of administering the affairs of the community and channelling its energies towards the fulfilment of noble goals: you seek to raise awareness of those spiritual forces that are available to every confirmed believer and which must be marshalled at the hour of need. It is these forces which endow the community with resilience, ensure its integrity, and keep it focused on its divine mission to serve humanity and elevate its vision of the future.

346.9It is not possible to foresee the extent to which this pandemic will influence the movement towards unity among the nations. But there is no doubt whatsoever that, for the endeavours of the Bahá’í community, the months ahead will be consequential. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise. This final year, of the final Plan, in a series spanning the final quarter of the opening century of the Formative Age, will seal the foundation upon which will rest the next series of global undertakings. It is the concluding act in a captivating drama whose end is yet unwritten.

346.10Not a moment passes when you are not in our thoughts. All our trust and confidence in your capacity to face this challenge comes from our knowledge that your ultimate supporter and helper is the Abhá Beauty Himself. In our entreaties at the Sacred Threshold, we implore Him to make you pure channels for the flow of His grace to humankind.

The Universal House of Justice

347

Eradication of Prejudice in America

22 July 2020

To the Bahá’ís of the United States

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

347.1A moment of historic portent has arrived for your nation as the conscience of its citizenry has stirred, creating possibilities for marked social change. It holds significance not only for the destiny of America anticipated in the

Sacred Writings, but also for the mission entrusted to your community by the hand of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who cherished you dearly and called you to a path of sacrifice and high endeavor. We are pleased to see that, led by your National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, you are seizing opportunities—whether those thrust upon you by current circumstances or those derived from your systematic labors in the wider society—to play your part, however humble, in the effort to remedy the ills of your nation. We ardently pray that the American people will grasp the possibilities of this moment to create a consequential reform of the social order that will free it from the pernicious effects of racial prejudice and will hasten the attainment of a just, diverse, and united society that can increasingly manifest the oneness of the human family.

347.2Sadly, however, your nation’s history reveals that any significant progress toward racial equality has invariably been met by countervailing processes, overt or covert, that served to undermine the advances achieved and to reconstitute the forces of oppression by other means. Thus, whatever the immediate outcome of contemporary events, you need not be deterred, for you are cognizant of the “long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls” described by the Guardian that still lies ahead. Your commitment to tread this road with determination and insight, drawing upon what you have learned in recent years about translating Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings into reality, will have to be sustained until the time, anticipated by Shoghi Effendi, when you will have contributed your decisive share to the eradication of racial prejudice from the fabric of your nation.

347.3The principles and exhortations that guide your steps are well known to you from the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the current series of Plans that can be utilized to promote race unity in the context of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society have been set out in our messages. Every believer, as the promulgator of Bahá’u’lláh’s central principle of the oneness of humanity, should deeply meditate upon it and weigh its demanding implications for the profound alteration of thought and action required at this time. “The American Bahá’í Community, the leaven destined to leaven the whole,” the Guardian admonished, cannot hope “to either escape the trials with which this nation is confronted, nor claim to be wholly immune from the evils that stain its character.” “A tremendous effort is required by both races if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh,” he also stated.

“Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved.” “Each one should endeavor to develop and assist the other toward mutual advancement,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained. “Love and unity will be fostered between you, thereby bringing about the oneness of mankind.”

347.4Racism is a profound deviation from the standard of true morality. It deprives a portion of humanity of the opportunity to cultivate and express the full range of their capability and to live a meaningful and flourishing life,

while blighting the progress of the rest of humankind. It cannot be rooted out by contest and conflict. It must be supplanted by the establishment of just relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions of society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as “other”. The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual. Within the context of the framework governing your activities, it is necessary to carefully examine the forces unfolding around you to determine where your energies might reinforce the most promising initiatives, what you should avoid, and how you might lend a distinctive contribution. It is not possible for you to effect the transformation envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh merely by adopting the perspectives, practices, concepts, criticisms, and language of contemporary society. Your approach, instead, will be distinguished by maintaining a humble posture of learning, weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines.

347.5Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. Infuse it into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. There can be no rest until the destined outcome is achieved.

347.6Ahead of you lie times of trial and promise, of hardship and progress, of anguish and joy. Under all conditions, the Master is your solace and support. For those who aspire to lasting change, His example guides the way—tactful and wise in His approach, penetrating in utterance, indiscriminating in fellowship, unfailing in sympathy for the downtrodden, courageous in conduct, persevering in action, imperturbable in the face of tests, unwavering in His keen sense of justice. And to all who arise to emulate Him, He offers this unfailing assurance: “that which is confirmed is the oneness of the world of humanity. Every soul who serveth this oneness will undoubtedly be assisted and confirmed.”

The Universal House of Justice

348

Release of a Compilation on Social Action

10 August 2020

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

348.1We are pleased to share with you, at the request of the Universal House of Justice, the enclosed compilation on social action, which is drawn from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the writings and letters of Shoghi Effendi, and the messages

of the Universal House of Justice and letters written on its behalf. The compilation, prepared by the Research Department at the request of the House of Justice, contains 253 extracts, thematically arranged, several of which appear in English translation for the first time. It is the hope of the House of Justice that this new compilation will enhance the friends' understanding of the distinctive Bahá'í approach to this important field of endeavor.

348.2The compilation is now available in the compilations section of the Bahá'í Reference Library. National Spiritual Assemblies with Publishing Trusts are asked to consider producing printed editions.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

349

Passing of Violette Haake, Former Member of the International Teaching Centre

24 September 2020

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

349.1Our hearts sorrow at the passing of dearly loved Violette Haake. Reared in a distinguished family tracing its roots to the early history of the Faith, she served the Cause of God with utter dedication over many decades, first in her native Iran, and later in the United States and Australia. Whether when pioneering, or during her time as an Auxiliary Board member, or as a Continental Counsellor in Australasia, and most especially in the ten years she served as a member of the International Teaching Centre, her intrepid spirit and radiant enthusiasm for teaching were ever in evidence as she rallied the friends, particularly the youth; poured out encouragement; and fanned the flame of love for Bahá'u'lláh in the hearts. Violette possessed a character that blended extraordinary resilience, steadfastness, and inner strength with unfailing kindness, a nurturing instinct, and true joy. To the last, hers was a life devoted to the service of the Lord.

349.2To her husband, Roderic, and her daughter, Susanne, we extend our heartfelt condolences, with an assurance of our supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of Violette's luminous soul as it plunges into the sea of light in the world of mysteries. The believers in every land are asked to arrange memorials in her honour, including in all Houses of Worship, as circumstances permit.

The Universal House of Justice

350

Passing of Farzam Arbab, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice

26 September 2020

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

350.1With grief-stricken hearts we mourn the sudden passing of our former colleague, our dearly loved brother Farzam Arbab, news of which has brought us fresh sorrow. His brilliant mind, loving heart, and vibrant spirit were ever turned towards the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, seeking to draw from it insights that, through the process of education, could build spiritual and intellectual capacity within entire populations. Born in Iran, he studied in the United States before settling in Colombia as a pioneer. His outstanding gifts fitted him, it seemed, for a distinguished career in the physical

sciences—but Providence had determined otherwise. His rigorous scientific training was instead applied to the work of the Faith. He recognized that the verities contained in the Bahá'í writings concerning spiritual and social transformation and the entry into the Faith of the masses of humanity demanded persistent effort to learn how to bring them about; the investment of his whole being in this great enterprise was complete and constant. Throughout his time as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia, as a Continental Counsellor, as a member of the International Teaching Centre, and finally as a member of the Universal House of Justice for two decades, his unshakeable belief in the capacity of all of God's children, especially of young people, was the hallmark of his service to the Cause. Always insightful, always discerning, always attuned to spiritual reality, this man of exceptional vision lived a life shaped by the harmony between scientific truth and true religion.
350.2To Sona, his beloved wife, and to Paul, his cherished son, as well as to other family members, we extend our heartfelt condolences at this unexpected loss. We supplicate in the Sacred Shrines for the progress of his illumined soul as it commences its journey into the eternal realms of God. May it be lovingly welcomed to its heavenly home. All Bahá'í communities are urged to arrange memorials, as circumstances permit, including in all Houses of Worship, to mark the passing of much-loved, illustrious Farzam Arbab.
The Universal House of Justice

351
Passing of Douglas Martin, Former Member of the Universal House of Justice
29 September 2020
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
351.1With mournful hearts already brimming with sorrow, we announce the passing of our muchloved, muchadmired former colleague, Douglas Martin. Having embraced the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh as a young man, he with all his heart dedicated his life to the Cause of God over successive decades of outstanding service. The special gifts he possessed for presenting the Faith with clarity and vision shone through as much in his scholarly writings as in his public presentations, including in vigorous defence of the Bahá'í community in Iran. Much of this work was undertaken while he simultaneously discharged weighty responsibilities in the administration of the Faith. This included a quarter century spent as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, most of that time as its Secretary. His scintillating intellect and uncommon grasp of the grand forces of history, combined with his formidable powers of expression, were much in evidence during the years he spent as directorgeneral of the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information, a prelude to the twelve years he served as a member of the Universal House of Justice. Resolute, ingenious, and blessed with piercing insight, he will be immensely missed.
351.2We pray ardently that dear Douglas, now reunited with his beloved wife, Elizabeth, may be received with joy in the Abhá Kingdom, and that his illumined soul may ever soar in the limitless realms above. The friends in every community are called upon to honour his memory by convening memorials, including through devotions at every House of Worship, as circumstances permit.
The Universal House of Justice

352
Extension of the Suspension of Pilgrimage and Brief Visits
8 October 2020
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
352.1Further to the letter dated 12 March 2020 written to you on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the suspension of pilgrimage and brief visits, the House of Justice has asked us to convey to you the following information.
352.2In the intervening months since this decision was communicated to you, little has changed to make it possible for friends to visit the Holy Land. The coronavirus pandemic continues to grow worldwide; government restrictions on movement and travel change constantly; flights are rescheduled or cancelled at short notice; in many countries, including Israel, quarantine requirements are in place and can change from day to day; hotels decline bookings by people from countries they perceive to have high infection rates; and social distancing regulations make it difficult to organize group activities and gatherings.
352.3Regrettably, as a consequence of the uncertainties outlined above, which render it very difficult for pilgrims to make plans without undue risk of disruption or financial loss, it has become necessary to extend the suspension of nine-day pilgrimage until the start of the 2021–2022 season in October 2021. Should circumstances make it possible at any point before that to allow brief visits to resume, you will be informed.
352.4The House of Justice is aware that the believers will share its disappointment but fervently hopes that they can be welcomed to the Holy Land in the not too distant future.
352.5Kindly assure the friends in your communities that the House of Justice will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines that they may be surrounded by the tender mercies of Bahá’u’lláh and protected under His sheltering wing.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
353
Appointment of Continental Counsellors and Increase in Number of Continental Counsellors
29 October 2020
To the Bahá’ís of the World
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
353.1The Day of the Covenant, 25 November 2020, marks the commencement of a new five-year term of service for the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith. We have decided to increase the number of Counsellors from eighty-one to ninety, and it gives us great pleasure to announce the names of those now appointed.
AFRICA (20 Counsellors): Mélanie Bangala, Mariama Ousmane Djaouga, Alain Pierre Djoulde, Agatha Sarinoda Gaisie-Nketsiah, Augustino Ibrahim, Mati Issoufou, Hamed Javaheri, Jacques Tshibuabua Kabuya, Musonda Kapusa-Linsel (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Linnet Sifuna Kisaka, Townshend Lihanda, Izzat Abumba Mionda, Maina Mkandawire, Judicaël Mokolé, Amélia Mujinga

Ngandu, Nsika Mutasa, Michael Okiria, Nancy Oloro Robarts, Djamila Tchakréo, Jean-Pierre Tshibangu

THE AMERICAS (21 Counsellors): José Luis Almeida, Ayafor Temengye Ayafor, Louis Boddy, Natasha Bruss, Beatriz Carmona, Brígida Carrillo, Ingrid Umpierre Conter, Blas Cruz Martínez, Daniel Duhart, Farah Guchani-Rosenberg, Sonlla Heern, Badí Hernández, Irene Iturburo, Nwandi Ngozi Lawson, Ada Micheline Leonce Ferdinand, Borna Noureddin (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Arthur Powell, Pejman Samoori, Bernardino Sánchez, William Silva, Margarita Valdez Martínez

ASIA (27 Counsellors): Yam Prasad Acharya, Jamil Aliyev, Bhavna Anbarasan, Walid Ayyash, Marjini Deraoh, Gulnara Eyvazova, Shareen Farhad, Nadera Fikri, Kam Mui Fok Sayers, Rahul Kumar, Nicholas Loh, Parimal Mahato, Tarrant Matthew Mahony, Uttam Mitra, Myint Zaw Oo, Faris Naimi, Sokuntheary Reth, Foad Reyhani (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Artin Rezaie, Hesham Saad, Niroshani Saleh, Omid Seioshanseian, Dregpal Singh, Zebinisso Soliyeva, Ircham Sujadmiko, Fang Jung Tseng Chung, Ozoda Zoidova

AUSTRALASIA (10 Counsellors): Bob Ale, Latai ‘Atoa, Ritia Kamauti Bakineti, Kirk Johnson, Jalal Rodney Mills, Taraz Nadarajah, Daniel Pierce, Kessia Ruh, Vahid Saberi, Tessa Scrine (Trustee of the Continental Fund)

EUROPE (12 Counsellors): Raffaella Capozzi Gubinelli, Aiste Elijio, Orlando Ravelo Hernández, Varqá Khadem, Shirin Youssefian Maanian, Sabà Mazza, Veranika Medvedeva, Hedyeh Nadafi-Stoffel, Yevgeniya Poluektova, Mehdi Rezvan, Amir Saberin (Trustee of the Continental Fund), Paul Verheij

353.2The following believers, who have earned our abiding gratitude for their self-sacrificing contributions to the progress of the Cause, are being relieved of the duties of membership on the Boards of Counsellors:

Vugar Alizadeh, Naisan Azimi, Ronny Brenes, Olga Daradur, Jabbar Eidelkhani, Clément Thyrrell Feizouré, Shirin Fozdar-Foroudi, Zoraida García Garro, Bernard Lo Cascio, Lee Lee Loh Ludher, Sehla Masunda, Nibras Sarmad Moqbel, Aggrey Zeyazi Munubi, Delafruz Nassimova, Ahmad Parsa, U’ileiuluwehi Pimental, Iharinirina Rakotomavo, Carmen Elisa de Sadeghian, Rajan Sawant, Mark Sisson, Christopher Kiprotich Songok, Raúl Taboada, Henry Tamashiro, Shabnam Tashakour

353.3We are confident that these dear friends will remain a source of inspiration and strength to the believers as they continue their dedicated efforts for the advancement of the Faith in the coming years. We shall offer supplications in the Holy Shrines on their behalf, that divine blessings may surround their every endeavour in the path of service to Bahá’u’lláh.

353.4Only a few months separate us from the conclusion of the current Five Year Plan, indeed, of a series of Plans spanning twenty-five years, during which the Bahá’í world has remained focused on a single aim, namely, a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. As the friends continue their valiant exertions through these final months and prepare to enter a new stage in the development of the Cause with the launch of the One Year Plan, the leadership and inspiration that the Counsellors bring to communities will remain vital to their efforts to respond to the exigencies of the hour. The Counsellors in all continents will be called to the Bahá’í World Centre in

December 2021 to take part in deliberations on the general features of the Plan to be launched the following Ridván. At the conclusion of that gathering, they are to be joined by members of the Auxiliary Boards for Protection and Propagation to consult on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead and on the decisive role that the Counsellors and their auxiliaries are to play in meeting them.

353.5We will offer fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold for these ninety souls that their consecrated labours for the Cause may be guided and confirmed by the boundless grace and abundant favours of the Abhá Beauty.

The Universal House of Justice

354

The One Year Plan, 2021–2022

25 November 2020

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

354.1We greet you with immense affection on this special day, an occasion for calling to mind the power of the Covenant, that power which "pulsateth in the body of the contingent world" and forges enduring bonds of love among the believers. In the months since Ridván, we have seen the evidences of this dynamic power in the unified activity of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, led so ably by the institutions of the Cause in each continent and country, as the friends everywhere have sought with characteristic creativity and determination to minister to the needs of an ailing world. Your resilience and your unwavering commitment to the well-being of those around you, persistent through all difficulties, have filled us with tremendous hope. But it is no wonder that, in some other quarters, hope has become a depleted resource. There is a mounting realization on the part of the world's people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face. The current global health crisis is but one such challenge, the ultimate severity of whose cost, both to lives and livelihoods, is yet unknown; your efforts to succour and support one another as well as your sisters and brothers in society at large will certainly need to be sustained, and in places expanded.

354.2It is against this background of furious storms lashing humanity that the ark of the Cause is about to embark upon a series of Plans that will carry it into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and significantly strengthen the Bahá'í community's capacity for realizing the society-building powers of the Faith. As you are aware, the first Plan to commence this new series will last but one year. In places where circumstances prevent national communities from establishing as many intensive programmes of growth before Ridván 2021 as they intended, these twelve months will extend the time available to them to do so. Meanwhile, wherever the process of growth has already been intensified, the year will be an opportunity to consolidate the achievements made during the current Plan, while cultivating the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community recognized for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation. At the national, regional, and cluster levels, we look to communities of proven strength to help those in

which less experience has accrued. In this year-long effort, every community must draw on whatever untapped potential it may possess and seek to overcome any obstacles that are impeding its growth, thereby preparing it for the demands to come. For it is within the context of a flourishing community, especially a centre of intense activity in a village or neighbourhood, and when each element of the Plan's framework is given the attention it requires, that those elements most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community's powers in the field of action.

354.3Besides providing for advances within clusters everywhere, the coming Plan will be a year for profound reflection on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre, as the community prepares to commemorate the centenary of His Ascension. The observance of this anniversary will undoubtedly prompt individuals and communities alike to contemplate the significance of that infinitely poignant moment when He Who was the Mystery of God departed from this world. His passing took from the Bahá'ís of that era a Figure Who was the object of their ardent love and loyalty; to the faithful of this age, He remains without parallel: a perfect embodiment in word and deed of all that His Father taught, the One through Whom the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh was "proclaimed, championed and vindicated". We are conscious that the coming year will also mark a century since His Will and Testament—that "momentous", "historic", "immortal" Document—"called into being, outlined the features and set in motion the processes" of the Administrative Order, "the very pattern of that divine civilization which the almighty Law of Bahá'u'lláh is designed to establish upon earth". This "unique" and "divinely-conceived" Order, this "mighty administrative structure", had been fashioned by its Architect to perpetuate the Covenant and channel the spiritual powers of the Cause. It will be apparent, then, that the Day of the Covenant next year, exactly twelve months from now, will be especially meaningful. We ask National Spiritual Assemblies to determine how these two dates, occurring so close together, may each be observed, taking into account prevailing conditions in their countries.

354.4All the while, earnest preparations continue to be made in the Holy Land for the commemoration of the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a gathering at which, it is hoped, representatives of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils will be present. Similarly, plans are already being made for the conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members, which will coincide, in January 2022, with the lapse of one hundred years since the first public reading of the Will and Testament of the Master. Conditions in the world may, of course, require the plans being made for these gatherings at the Bahá'í World Centre to change. But come what may, we have no doubt that the efforts made in local communities worldwide to befittingly commemorate the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to honour the Day of the Covenant in this coming centennial year will provide the impetus needed to launch the succeeding stage in God's Minor Plan, even as Providence propels the unfoldment of His Major Plan in accordance with His incontestable decree.

354.5The momentum that is sure to build with each successive cycle of the One Year Plan will be further augmented by the release of two films. The first of these, which will become available in time for the centennial commemoration, will be a portrait of the Person of ‘Abdu’lBahá. Besides being a tribute to His life and work, it will explore how, by championing the oneness of humanity through His words and deeds, He offered a challenge to the stale assumptions and prejudices of the age, and gave stimulus to a process of unification which continues to this day. A second film, following soon after the first, will reflect on the expiration of the first hundred years of the Formative Age from the vantage point of the heights to which the Bahá’í community has climbed, and from where it can now gaze upon new horizons.
354.6The significance of the occasions being marked during the One Year Plan will lend it a unique character, enhancing the work being undertaken in clusters and making this single year the ideal preparation for the global endeavour that is to follow. With a sense of joyful anticipation, we announce that the Bahá’í world will, at Ridván 2022, begin a Nine Year Plan. Its requirements and provisions will be set out at a later date, but its duration already gives an unmistakable indication of the expansive prospect it will present. God willing, it will be heralded by the convocation of a series of conferences held over a span of months across the globe.
354.7This, so far as it can be foreseen, is the course the Bahá’í community will seek to tread. For the present hour, we urge you to recommit your energies, keeping your focus on the mission immediately before you. We are immensely gratified to see the assured composure with which the community of the Greatest Name has sought to offer the divine remedy under all conditions, especially during this period when society’s established patterns of life have been disrupted and risks of different kinds are being faced by so many. Withal, the friends must guard against being drawn into the ultimately futile conflict and strife that characterizes so much of the discussion of the affairs of society, or—heaven forbid—allowing interaction of this type to permeate, even fleetingly, the conversations of the community. Yet such vigilance on your part in avoiding discord and in not becoming entangled in society’s controversies should under no circumstances be construed as aloofness from the many pressing concerns of this time. Far from it. You are among the most active and earnest of humanity’s well-wishers. But, whether through deeds or words, the merit of your every contribution to social well-being lies, first, in your resolute commitment to discover that precious point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce.
354.8Less than two full cycles remain of the present Five Year Plan—indeed, of the current series of Plans inaugurated in 1996. In these closing months, we will be sure to offer ardent prayers on your behalf in our supplications at the Sacred Threshold. May you succeed in giving hope to those who know not where to find it in a world disoriented and adrift, sorely lacking the unity which you, through your heart-pledged devotion to the Covenant, so conspicuously manifest.
The Universal House of Justice

355

Parental Consent for Marriage

6 December 2020
To an individual Bahá'í
Dear Bahá'í Friend,
355.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of … raising a number of questions about the process by which parents may discharge their responsibilities under the Bahá'í law of parental consent for marriage. We have been asked to convey the following….
355.2Since the specific guidance in the authoritative text pertaining to consent is quite limited, the friends should not transform it into an elaborate process. It may be helpful, instead, to consider the overall purpose of and approach to the law. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh declared:
It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes.
355.3As this text makes clear, the law of parental consent for marriage is directly linked to the principle of unity. The House of Justice suggests that the questions you have raised largely resolve themselves if there were a greater appreciation on the part of Bahá'í parents of unity's centrality in family life. The objective of parents should be to raise their children in an environment wherein love for the Faith and its teachings, and of the children for their parents would naturally emerge—which are obviously influenced by the parents' own devotion to the Cause and love for their children. Characterized by care, courtesy, and respect, the relationship between parents and children should continue to grow as the children reach the age of maturity. In such a milieu, parents and children would develop a deep understanding of the standards of the Faith and would be guided by them. Naturally, the topic of marriage and preparation for it would be part of the conversation that parents and children would have over time. Through such dialogue, a child can develop an appreciation of what makes a strong marriage and what qualities he or she would look for in a potential marriage partner, and the parents would welcome their child's eventual choice.
355.4Bahá'u'lláh has clearly emphasized both the choice of the couple and the purpose of establishing love, unity, and harmony. The House of Justice has been concerned about a tendency among some parents to use consent in a manner, often involving increasingly elaborate measures, that is not in keeping with this spirit and intent in an attempt to exercise control over their child or to impose an intrusive check on the judgement of the child in his or her choice of marriage partner.
355.5If issues do arise after the child asks for consent to marry, the child and the parents would, because of their loving relationship, be able to engage in consultation that would illuminate the way forward. Like so many aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the Bahá'í teachings on family life summon believers to strive to attain new levels of spiritual maturity. As parents and the family environments they create move towards such a goal, the multitude of problems that many currently face in the parent-child relationship

would naturally melt away, including in connection with questions about consent for marriage.

355.6You, …, and your children are assured of the supplications of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh may surround your family.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

356

The Humanitarian Relief Fund

11 January 2021

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

356.1The Universal House of Justice has received the letter from your Treasurer dated 24 November 2020 in which you seek clarity regarding the most efficient process by which you can contribute financially to assist communities in other countries that have experienced natural disasters. We have been asked to convey the following.

356.2The House of Justice appreciates that in the wake of a natural disaster in a country, the friends elsewhere in the world would naturally wish to lend their share of assistance to alleviate the suffering. In 2010 the House of Justice established a fund at the Bahá'í World Centre as part of an overall strategy for the Bahá'í community to assist countries that have experienced major natural disasters. The institutions of the Faith and the believers in all parts of the world may direct their contributions to this fund—now referred to as the Humanitarian Relief Fund—at any time and, if they wish, earmark them accordingly if they are intended for a specific country. The Bahá'í International Development Organization is charged with the responsibility for the process of learning in the Bahá'í world about relief, reconstruction, and associated development efforts. It is also responsible for working directly with National Spiritual Assemblies, providing financial assistance from this fund as and when needed, and sharing relevant principles and insights drawn from experience.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

357

Making Decisions on Medical Matters When Faced with Conflicting Information

11 February 2021

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

357.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 9 December 2020 seeking guidance regarding what you observe to be the tendency of some Bahá'í friends to rely on unsound sources of information for scientific or medical questions and to insist upon such perspectives in discussions within the community. While the House of Justice appreciates your suggestion to share the views of Bahá'í experts with the community, it does not feel that this will resolve the fundamental problem you perceive. Further, we have been asked to convey the following.

357.2One of the unfortunate features of the present age is the difficulty of attaining truth, which seems to be an inherent characteristic of the process of disintegration that is assailing humanity in its transition to a new order. "In these days truthfulness and sincerity are sorely afflicted in the clutches of falsehood," Bahá'u'lláh lamented, "and justice is tormented by the scourge of injustice." Of course, there are a number of Bahá'í teachings that directly bear on this dilemma. To the extent to which the friends imbibe and hold fast to these teachings, they can guard themselves and their communities from the tumult buffeting society and contribute to its protection and transformation.

357.3The independent investigation of reality is a fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, through which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, "the world of humanity may be saved from the darkness of imitation and attain to the truth". In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh called the individual to observe justice, by whose aid "thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor." An essential method for the attainment of truth is consultation—"the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."

357.4Furthermore, the Bahá'í writings stress the importance of science. "Great indeed is the claim of scientists … on the peoples of the world", Bahá'u'lláh observed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the "sciences of today are bridges to reality" and repeatedly emphasized that "religion must be in conformity with science and reason". Significantly, on an occasion when a scientific question was asked of Shoghi Effendi, he responded in a letter written on his behalf that "we are a religion and not qualified to pass on scientific matters". And in reply to scientific issues raised on a number of occasions, he consistently advised Bahá'ís that such matters would need to be investigated by scientists.

357.5In light of the foregoing, when faced with issues of a scientific or medical nature, Bahá'ís should seek out and rely on the best expert advice available. For example, in connection with medical matters, believers should bear in mind Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: "Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning-place of His shining and glorious Cause." In relation to the coronavirus pandemic, the friends should follow the counsel of medical and other scientific experts on the advisability and efficacy of the various vaccination options that are becoming available and the wisdom of particular public health measures. They should not be concerned merely with their own personal choices and well-being, but in reaching their decisions, they should also consider their social responsibilities and the common good.

357.6Of course, with a new outbreak of a previously unknown disease, available information may change rapidly. If an individual believer is unclear as to what may be reputable sources on a given issue, he or she may seek the recommendations of Bahá'í institutions or friends who have scientific training. In rare instances when experts appear to be providing inconsistent

opinions, then one would do well to pursue the prevailing or majority expert opinion. Responding through his secretary to a believer who had received conflicting medical advice, Shoghi Effendi once advised: “you should refer to other doctors, and follow the majority vote.” It is scientific consensus arrived at through the sound methods of science, rather than a particular opinion from an individual expert, that should be sought. In this regard, there are reputable national and international health agencies created for the purpose of assessing circumstances that impact public health and well-being, and of determining what can be considered the established scientific consensus.

357.7Through adherence to the above principles, Bahá’ís can offer a much-needed example of respect for science and truth. Yet, while these principles are straightforward and no doubt generally known to the friends, in recent years, the challenges associated with finding the truth pertaining to various issues in the wider society have grown more acute, creating greater opportunities for confusion and misdirection. In particular, one aspect of this breakdown that exacerbates the confusion is the systematic misuse of media and communication technologies—whether traditional or Internet-based. While the advancement of such technologies has had many positive effects and offers promise as yet unrealized, regrettably those same instrumentalities are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and too often can have socially destructive consequences. Through these vehicles, the uninformed, the self-interested, and the malicious can easily disseminate rumours, conspiracy theories, and outright falsehoods regarding just about any conceivable issue, including important scientific and medical ones. As these erroneous statements circulate and are repeated many times through different means, especially through social media—supported in some instances by isolated voices who may present themselves as experts—they take on the status of authoritative views in the minds of some. Information surrounding the current global pandemic is a prime example, with the consequences of such misinformation being potentially catastrophic. In the search for truth and understanding, the friends should therefore weed out those sources of information that prove to be biased and unreliable, which are attempting to offer unsubstantiated views for partisan purposes, in order to determine where consensus lies among reliable sources.

357.8There, of course, remain scientific or medical matters about which experts have legitimate differences of opinion. Believers may, thus, come to various conclusions about such matters, and there is no obligation for the friends to have uniformity of thought about them. However, they should not allow differing opinions to become a point of contention among themselves and should act in ways that demonstrate their care for the welfare of others. If specific questions arise in relation to the activities of the Bahá’í community, the friends should turn for resolution to the institutions of the Faith.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

358

Progress on the Construction of the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

21 February 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

358.1Despite numerous obstacles arising from the current global health crisis and its inevitable impact on all operational matters, impressive progress has already been made on the construction of the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá since it began in earnest at the start of 2020. The preparation of the site is complete, and the extensive foundations required have now been laid. Permits for construction have been obtained, and the portal walls and folding walls surrounding the main edifice of the Shrine are now under construction. The design detail for the large intricate formwork for the marble-cladded trellis, consisting of eighty pieces, is close to being finalized. Before long, the Shrine itself and its associated structures will begin to take form. The friends will continue to be kept informed of the progress of each stage through the periodic reports of the Bahá’í World News Service which have included photographs and videos.

358.2Soon after the announcement of the intention to build the Shrine, the Universal House of Justice informed you in May 2019 of the inauguration of a Fund dedicated to this sacred objective and expressed the hope that this endeavour would be characterized by universal participation; it has been delighted by the response of the believers as they have seized the unique chance to contribute to the project. The House of Justice has now asked that we share with you the following information.

358.3Certain important milestones—including the preparation of detailed drawings, the selection and procurement of materials, the signing of major contracts, and preliminary construction work—have been reached, making it possible now to estimate with confidence that this endeavour will require around seventy-five million dollars. Believers have for years donated sums for the eventual construction of the Shrine of their beloved Master. These funds have been substantially augmented by the generous contributions of believers which began to flow immediately following the announcement about the Shrine at Ridván 2019. To these amounts, the House of Justice has itself added a significant contribution on behalf of the Bahá’ís in Iran. Thus, altogether, nearly half of the estimated cost of the project has been raised so far. As the construction work proceeds, the friends will continue to have the opportunity to contribute to this monumental undertaking in the course of the expected two years that remain before its completion.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

359

Release of a Compilation on the Universal House of Justice

28 February 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

359.1The Universal House of Justice has asked us to send to you the enclosed compilation on the Universal House of Justice. The compilation, prepared by the Research Department, comprises extracts from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the writings and letters of Shoghi Effendi. Also included are excerpts from the Constitution of the

Universal House of Justice as well as from the messages of the House of Justice and letters written on its behalf. It is particularly befitting that the release of this compilation comes shortly before the one hundredth anniversary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of the inauguration of the Administrative Order.

359.2The compilation is now available in the compilations section of the Bahá’í Reference Library. National Spiritual Assemblies with Publishing Trusts are asked to consider producing printed editions. The French, Russian, and Spanish Translation Panels will prepare translations in their respective languages and will make them available in due course.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

360

Release of Translations of Twenty-Six Prayers Revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

9 March 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

360.1We are pleased to send to you, at the direction of the Universal House of Justice, the English translations of twenty-six prayers revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. These new translations have been prepared by the Research Department at the request of the House of Justice to mark the forthcoming commemoration of the centenary of the Master’s passing. You will no doubt wish to arrange for their translation into local languages. The French, Russian, and Spanish Translation Panels will prepare translations in their respective languages and will make them available in due course. Both the English and original-language versions of the prayers are now available on the Bahá’í Reference Library. These prayers augment the growing number of prayers which have been added to the Bahá’í Reference Library and which are available to you for consideration for inclusion in future editions of any compilation of prayers that you produce for publication.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

361

Naw-Rúz 2021 Message to the Bahá’ís of Iran

Naw-Rúz 178

To the friends of God in the sacred land of Iran

361.1At the threshold of the new year and the Festival of Naw-Rúz, we remember you in this luminous and sacred Spot and recall how from the beginning of the appearance of the Sun of Truth, you have, with love and certitude, and with inexhaustible constancy and steadfastness, shone like brilliant stars in the firmament of Iran, and how, in the face of oppression and injustice, you have acted with such sincerity and patience as to become a source of pride and glory for the company of the faithful and an example to all the peoples of the world. Even in the midst of the current health crisis—with the many challenges to livelihoods it has created and the social problems it has caused, entangling the world and its peoples in numerous trials and afflictions—and despite the fact that the persecution and discrimination directed towards your community

did not relent in the course of this past year or give you a moment's respite, you continued with your service, never ceased your endeavours for the good of humanity, and remained a flame of hope and a source of love and friendship for all. How fortunate you are to have added another golden page to the illustrious history of your community and to have won the good pleasure of God.

361.2The Festival of Ridván this year coincides with the end of the Five Year Plan and the conclusion of the twenty-five-year period during which the Bahá'í world was called upon to make a significant advance in the scope of its activities and human resources. In response to the call to that spiritual enterprise, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh arose in an unprecedented and determined manner such that, notwithstanding natural and inevitable ebbs and flows, their endeavours ultimately resulted in countless advances, effected a profound transformation, brought forth new capacities, and propelled the Bahá'í community to a new stage. To describe the nature of the victories and achievements of the community of the Greatest Name throughout the world in this historic period is beyond the scope of the present discussion, and we will attend to it at another time soon. The focus of our thoughts at this time, however, is the devoted undertakings of the community of the valiant followers of the Ancient Beauty in His sacred homeland who, during the course of this same period and inspired by the framework for action of the Bahá'í world, likewise brought about a significant transformation in their community and who, notwithstanding countless limitations and unfavourable conditions, once again fulfilled the requirements of fidelity. Despite myriad difficulties and problems, each one of which could reduce a mountain to a heap of dust, they raised aloft the banner of firmness and constancy and charged forth in the arena of servitude and built new capacities for service to the world of humanity. The spirit of learning born of action, reflection, and consultation became the axis of endeavours. Systematically and earnestly the younger generation was made the focus of special attention by the community. Children learned virtues and spirituality, and junior youth developed spiritual and moral attributes and eagerness for service. The youth, through the acquisition of a deep appreciation of their spiritual mission and a broad vision of the implications of the divine teachings for this new age, rushed to the fields of service and attained their rightful place in the vanguard of a vibrant and purposeful community. The unity and solidarity of all the members of the community was, through the pulsating force of the Covenant and Testament, increased, and cooperation and mutual support reached a high level. Through profound reflection on the Writings, attention to the guidance, and adherence to the foundational principle of consultation, perspectives became harmonized, the different endeavours of the community became coherent, and the various labours of the believers in the path of service yielded abundant fruit. The outward-looking culture of the community was strengthened to a considerable degree and led to a level of participation, greater than ever before, by the believers in the constructive discourses of their society. The valuable lessons acquired by those much-loved friends in the course of an entire century of determined endeavour in the path of building a dynamic community were with

great sincerity shared selflessly with others. The experience gained as a result of efforts to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in this radiant age for the achievement of the equality of women and men, social justice, the eradication of extremes of wealth and poverty, unity among different ethnicities, the empowerment of younger generations, and the refinement of character was offered to interested individuals without making any claims to perfection or superiority. And the friends, to the extent possible, became involved in consulting and collaborating with their fellow citizens in order to address various social ills. In sum, this significant transformation is worthy of profound admiration and represents a firm and secure foundation for future efforts.

361.3Praised be God that the certain confirmations of the Concourse on high were vouchsafed and developments that at one time could scarcely be imagined came to pass. The widespread and extensive support for the rights of the Bahá'ís of Iran provided by governments and international organizations on behalf of the peoples of the world—which in recent decades has been constantly expressed and which has now reached such a height that the officials of two governments have independently called for the recognition of the Faith in Iran—in the course of the same period, gradually and in different ways, also became apparent on the part of the noble people of that land and was increasingly evident day by day. The veils were removed from the eyes, and through the efforts of scholars and others, and by the aid of new modes of communication, correct and accurate information became more widely available than at any other time. And in the minds and thoughts of many enlightened and unprejudiced souls, the truth of this precious Cause replaced the baseless calumnies of the prejudiced. The community's rectitude of conduct, long established, gained new recognition, your honesty and truthfulness astounded the world, and your complete innocence, pure intent, and lofty ideals were confirmed and proven in the eyes of countless souls. Such is the testimony of the Supreme Pen: "Absolute meekness yieldeth many a result and beareth many a fruit." Appreciate, then, this bounty, and look to the future with the eyes of hope.

361.4Dear friends, in our message to the Bahá'ís of the world on the Day of the Covenant we conveyed the glad tidings of the launching of a Nine Year Plan which will begin after the conclusion of the One Year Plan, and we referred to the importance of the year ahead. As you are aware, this year is distinguished by the commemoration of the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Orb of the Covenant, the perfect Exemplar of the people of Bahá. The spiritual inheritance bequeathed by that peerless and distinguished Being, Whose words transformed the hearts and Whose ways magnetized the souls, belongs, of course, to all humanity, yet it holds a special significance and implications for the people of Iran. Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá in childhood departed for exile in the company of His distinguished Father, He was never forgetful of His sacred and much-loved homeland. Throughout His life, even in the course of His travels to the Western world, He was ever occupied with the thought and mention of His compatriots, that perchance, with the aid of the teachings of God for this new Day and through the promotion of those qualities

that are worthy of this age, the essential relationships of society in that land might be transformed, justice and fairness be manifested, the power of the intellect shine forth, learning and education become the principal axis of all affairs and, through the fundamental transformation of morals, every kind of progress and advance be made possible and lead ultimately to the exaltation of Iran. Therefore, through exposition of the divine teachings and encouragement to apply the insights they contain in order to remedy the problems and deficiencies of society, He addressed the people of that country generally, and the Bahá'ís specifically, counselling, advising, and urging them to sacrifice themselves in service to that sacred land, and repeatedly and emphatically assuring everyone of the bright future of Iran.

361.5In one of His blessed Tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "The future of Iran is of the utmost greatness, majesty, and glory, for it is the native land of the Blessed Beauty. All the nations of the earth will turn to and regard Iran with high esteem. Know of a certainty that it will make such progress as to dazzle the eyes of the mighty and the learned throughout the world." And in another instance He writes, "'This house of sorrows will become a rose-garden one day; grieve not!' Exert the utmost effort and sincerity in service to Iran and its people, and sorrow no more."

361.6We greet every one of you on this blessed day and from the depths of our hearts ardently beseech, at the Threshold of Him Who is the Desire of the world, your health and well-being, your freedom and prosperity, and the descent of limitless confirmations upon you and all your compatriots.

The Universal House of Justice

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Appointment of Continental Counsellor

28 March 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

362.1We are pleased to announce the appointment of Mrs. Annie Yohari Kingombe to the membership of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa for the remainder of the present term, to fill the vacancy which resulted from the passing of Jean-Pierre Tshibangu Mbuyi.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

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Completion of the Restoration of the House of 'Abbúd

2 April 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

363.1We are delighted to announce that, despite the various restrictions and limitations caused by the current global health crisis, a significant undertaking aimed at the comprehensive conservation of the House of 'Abbúd at the heart of the ancient city of 'Akká has been successfully concluded. The two-year project included a major programme for the structural reinforcement of the building for seismic resistance; replastering of some 5,000 square metres of internal and external walls; conservation of the

original painted ceilings; restoration of marble and stone; and substantial waterproofing.

363.2That haven of immeasurable sanctity and immensely significant history for all peoples—the place where the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Charter of a new civilization, was revealed by the Pen of the Most High—has now been restored to a standard that aims at preserving the building in a befitting condition for centuries to come. We look forward eagerly to the moment when the easing of public health restrictions will allow the flow of pilgrims to the Holy Land to resume and the visits to this sacred building to begin again.

The Universal House of Justice

2021–2022

The One Year Plan

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Ridván Message 2021

Ridván 2021

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

364.1The final words in a most memorable chapter in the history of the Cause have now been written, and the page turns. This Ridván marks the conclusion of an extraordinary year, of a Five Year Plan, and of an entire series of Plans that began in 1996. A new series of Plans beckons, with what promises to be a momentous twelve months serving as a prelude to a nine-year effort due to commence next Ridván. We see before us a community that has rapidly gained strength and is ready to take great strides forward. But there must be no illusions about how much striving was required to reach this point and how hard-won were the insights acquired along the way: the lessons learned will shape the community’s future, and the account of how they were learned sheds light on what is to come.

364.2The decades leading up to 1996, rich with advances and insights of their own, had left no doubt that large numbers of people in many societies would be ready to enter under the banner of the Faith. Yet, as encouraging as instances of large-scale enrolment were, they did not equate to a sustainable process of growth that could be cultivated in diverse settings. Profound questions faced the community which, at that time, it had insufficient experience to answer adequately. How could efforts aimed at its expansion proceed hand in hand with the process of consolidation and resolve the long-standing, seemingly intractable challenge of sustaining growth? How could individuals, institutions and communities be raised up that would be capable of translating Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings into action? And how could those who were attracted to the teachings become protagonists in a global spiritual enterprise?

364.3So it was that, a quarter of a century ago, a Bahá’í community that could still count three Hands of the Cause of God in its front ranks embarked on a Four Year Plan, distinguished from those that came before it by its focus on a single aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This aim came to define the series of Plans that followed. The community had already come to understand that this process was not just the entry into the Faith of

sizeable groups, nor would it emerge spontaneously; it implied purposeful, systematic, accelerated expansion and consolidation. This work would require the informed participation of a great many souls, and in 1996, the Bahá'í world was summoned to take up the vast educational challenge this entailed. It was called to establish a network of training institutes focused on generating an increasing flow of individuals endowed with the necessary capacities to sustain the process of growth.

364.4The friends set about this task aware that, notwithstanding their previous victories in the teaching field, plainly they had much to learn about which capacities to acquire and, crucially, how to acquire them. In many ways, the community would learn by doing, and the lessons it learned, once they had been distilled and refined by being applied in diverse settings over time, would eventually be incorporated into educational materials. It was recognized that certain activities were a natural response to the spiritual needs of a population. Study circles, children's classes, devotional meetings, and later junior youth groups stood out as being of central importance in this regard, and when woven together with related activities, the dynamics generated could give rise to a vibrant pattern of community life. And as the numbers participating in these core activities grew, a new dimension was added to their original purpose. They came to serve as portals through which youth, adults and whole families from the wider society could come into an encounter with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. It was also becoming apparent how practical it was to consider strategies for the work of community building within the context of the "cluster": a geographic area of manageable size with distinct social and economic features. A capacity for preparing simple plans at the level of the cluster began to be cultivated, and out of such plans, programmes for the growth of the Faith arose, organized into what would become three-month cycles of activity. An important point of clarity emerged early on: the movement of individuals through a sequence of courses gives impetus to, and is perpetuated by, the movement of clusters along a continuum of development. This complementary relationship helped the friends everywhere to assess the dynamics of growth in their own surroundings and chart a path towards increased strength. As time went on, it proved fruitful to view what was occurring in a cluster both from the perspective of three educational imperatives—serving children, junior youth, and youth and adults—as well as from the perspective of the cycles of activity essential to the rhythm of growth. Part-way into a twenty-five-year endeavour, many of the most recognizable features of the growth process we see today were becoming well established.

364.5As the efforts of the friends intensified, various principles, concepts and strategies of universal relevance to the growth process began to crystallize into a framework for action that could evolve to accommodate new elements. This framework proved fundamental to the release of tremendous vitality. It assisted the friends to channel their energies in ways that, experience had shown, were conducive to the growth of healthy communities. But a framework is not a formula. By taking into account the various elements of the framework when assessing the reality of a cluster, a locality, or simply a neighbourhood, a pattern of activity could be developed that drew on what the

rest of the Bahá’í world was learning while still being a response to the particulars of that place. A dichotomy between rigid requirements on the one hand and limitless personal preferences on the other gave way to a more nuanced understanding of the variety of means by which individuals could support a process that, at its heart, was coherent and continually being refined as experience accumulated. Let there be no doubt about the advance represented by the emergence of this framework: the implications for harmonizing and unifying the endeavours of the entire Bahá’í world and propelling its onward march were of great consequence.

364.6As one Plan succeeded another, and engagement with the work of community building became more broadly based, advances at the level of culture became more pronounced. For instance, the importance of educating the younger generations became more widely appreciated, as did the extraordinary potential represented by junior youth in particular. Souls assisting and accompanying one another along a shared path, constantly widening the circle of mutual support, became the pattern to which all efforts aimed at developing capacity for service aspired. Even the interactions of the friends among themselves and with those around them underwent a change, as awareness was raised of the power of meaningful conversations to kindle and fan spiritual susceptibilities. And significantly, Bahá’í communities adopted an increasingly outward-looking orientation. Any soul responsive to the vision of the Faith could become an active participant—even a promoter and facilitator—of educational activities, meetings for worship and other elements of the community-building work; from among such souls, many would also declare their faith in Bahá’u’lláh. Thus, a conception of the process of entry by troops emerged that relied less on theories and assumptions and more on actual experience of how large numbers of people could find the Faith, become familiar with it, identify with its aims, join in its activities and deliberations, and in many cases embrace it. Indeed, as the institute process was strengthened in region after region, the number of individuals taking a share in the work of the Plan, extending even to those recently acquainted with the Faith, grew by leaps and bounds. But this was not being driven by a mere concern for numbers. A vision of personal and collective transformation occurring simultaneously, founded on study of the Word of God and an appreciation of each person’s capacity to become a protagonist in a profound spiritual drama, had given rise to a sense of common endeavour.

364.7One of the most striking and inspiring features of this twenty-five-year period has been the service rendered by Bahá’í youth, who with faith and valour have assumed their rightful place in the forefront of the community’s efforts. As teachers of the Cause and educators of the young, as mobile tutors and homefront pioneers, as cluster coordinators and members of Bahá’í agencies, youth on five continents have arisen to serve their communities with devotion and sacrifice. The maturity they have demonstrated, in the discharge of duties upon which depends the advancement of the Divine Plan, is expressive of their spiritual vitality and their commitment to safeguarding humanity’s future. In recognition of this increasingly evident maturity, we have decided that, immediately following this Ridván, while the age at which a believer

becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly shall remain twenty-one, the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections shall be lowered to eighteen. We have no doubt that Bahá'í youth everywhere who are of age will vindicate our confidence in their ability to fulfil "conscientiously and diligently" the "sacred duty" to which every Bahá'í elector is called.

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364.8 We are conscious that, naturally, the realities of communities differ greatly. Different national communities, and different places within those communities, began this series of Plans at different points of development; since then, they have also developed at different speeds and have attained different levels of progress. This, in itself, is nothing new. It has always been the case that conditions in places vary, as does the degree of receptivity found there. But we perceive, too, a swelling tide, whereby the capacity, confidence and accumulated experience of most communities are rising, buoyed by the success of their sister communities near and far. As an example, while souls who arose to open a new locality in 1996 lacked nothing for courage, faith and devotion, today their counterparts everywhere combine those same qualities with knowledge, insights and skills that are the accumulation of twenty-five years of effort by the entire Bahá'í world to systematize and refine the work of expansion and consolidation.

364.9 Regardless of a community's starting point, it has advanced the process of growth when it has combined qualities of faith, perseverance and commitment with a readiness to learn. In fact, a cherished legacy of this series of Plans is the widespread recognition that any effort to advance begins with an orientation towards learning. The simplicity of this precept belies the significance of the implications that follow from it. We do not doubt that every cluster, given time, will progress along the continuum of development; the communities that have advanced most quickly, relative to those whose circumstances and possibilities were similar, have shown an ability to foster unity of thought and to learn about effective action. And they did so without hesitating to act.

364.10 A commitment to learning also meant being prepared to make mistakes—and sometimes, of course, mistakes brought discomfort. Unsurprisingly, new methods and approaches were handled inexpertly at first because of a lack of experience; on occasion, a newly acquired capacity of one kind was lost as a community became absorbed in developing another. Having the best of intentions is no guarantee against making missteps, and moving past them requires both humility and detachment. When a community has remained determined to show forbearance and learn from mistakes that naturally occur, progress has never been out of reach.

364.11 Midway through the series of Plans, the community's involvement in the life of society began to become the focus of more direct attention. The believers were encouraged to think of this in terms of two interconnected areas of endeavour—social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. These, of course, were not alternatives to the work of expansion and consolidation, much less distractions from it: they were inherent within it.

The greater the human resources a community could call on, the greater became its capacity to bring the wisdom contained in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to bear upon the challenges of the day—to translate His teachings into reality. And the troubled affairs of humankind over this period seemed to underline how desperate was its need for the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician. Implied in all this was a conception of religion very different from those holding sway in the world at large: a conception which recognized religion as the potent force propelling an ever-advancing civilization. It was understood that such a civilization would also not appear spontaneously, of its own accord—it was the mission of Bahá'u'lláh's followers to labour for its emergence. Such a mission demanded applying the same process of systematic learning to the work of social action and engagement in public discourse.

364.12Viewed from the perspective of the last two and a half decades, the capacity for undertaking social action has risen markedly, leading to an extraordinary efflorescence of activity. Compared with 1996, when some 250 social and economic development projects were being sustained from year to year, there are now 1,500, and the number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations has quadrupled to surpass 160. More than 70,000 grassroots social action initiatives of short duration are being undertaken each year, a fifty-fold increase. We look forward to a continued rise in all these endeavours resulting from the dedicated support and stimulus now provided by the Bahá'í International Development Organization. Meanwhile, Bahá'í participation in the prevalent discourses of society has also grown immensely. Besides the many occasions when the friends find they can offer a Bahá'í perspective in conversations that occur in a work or personal context, more formal participation in discourses has significantly advanced. We have in mind not only the much-expanded efforts and increasingly sophisticated contributions of the Bahá'í International Community—which in this period added Offices in Africa, Asia and Europe—but also the work of a vastly augmented, greatly fortified network of national Offices of External Affairs, for whom this area of endeavour became the principal focus; in addition, there were insightful and notable contributions made by individual believers to specific fields. All this goes some way towards explaining the esteem, appreciation and admiration which leaders of thought and other prominent figures at all levels of society have again and again expressed for the Faith, its followers and their activities.

364.13In reviewing the entire twenty-five-year period, we are awed by the many kinds of progress the Bahá'í world has made concurrently. Its intellectual life has thrived, as demonstrated not only by its advances in all the areas of endeavour already discussed, but also by the volume of high-quality literature published by Bahá'í authors, by the development of spaces for the exploration of certain disciplines in the light of the teachings, and by the impact of the undergraduate and graduate seminars systematically offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, which, in collaboration with the institutions of the Cause, now serves Bahá'í youth from well over 100 countries. Efforts to raise up Houses of Worship have very visibly accelerated. The last Mother Temple was erected in Santiago, Chile, and projects to build

two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs were initiated; the Houses of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia, and Norte del Cauca, Colombia, have already opened their doors. Bahá'í Temples, whether newly dedicated or long established, are increasingly occupying a position at the heart of community life. The material support offered by the rank and file of the believers for the myriad endeavours undertaken by the friends of God has been unstinting. Simply viewed as a measure of collective spiritual vitality, the generosity and sacrifice with which, at a time of considerable economic upheaval, the critical flow of funds has been maintained—nay, invigorated—is most telling. In the realm of Bahá'í administration, the capacity of National Spiritual Assemblies to manage the affairs of their communities in all their growing complexity has been considerably enhanced. They have benefited in particular from new heights of collaboration with the Counsellors, who have been instrumental in systematizing the gathering of insights from the grassroots across the world and ensuring they are widely disseminated. This was also the period in which the Regional Bahá'í Council emerged as a fully fledged institution of the Cause, and in 230 regions now, Councils and those training institutes they oversee have proved themselves indispensable for advancing the process of growth. To extend into the future the functions of the Chief Trustee of Huqúqu'lláh, the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh was established in 2005; today it coordinates the efforts of no less than 33 National and Regional Boards of Trustees that now compass the globe, which in turn guide the work of over 1,000 Representatives. The developments which occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during this same period are many: witness the completion of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb and two buildings on the Arc and the commencement of the construction of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not to mention a host of projects to strengthen and preserve the precious Holy Places of the Faith. The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Shrine of the Báb were recognized as World Heritage sites, places of inestimable significance for humanity. The public flocked to these sacred locations in their hundreds of thousands, approaching one and a half million in some years, and the World Centre regularly welcomed hundreds of pilgrims at once, sometimes more than 5,000 in a year, along with a similar number of Bahá'í visitors; we are delighted as much by the raised numbers as by the scores of different peoples and nations represented among those who partake of the bounty of pilgrimage. The translation, publication and dissemination of the Sacred Texts has also been greatly accelerated, in parallel with the development of the Bahá'í Reference Library, one of the most notable members of the growing family of websites associated with Bahai.org, which itself is now available in ten languages. A variety of offices and agencies have been established, situated at the World Centre and elsewhere, charged with supporting the process of learning unfolding across multiple areas of endeavour throughout the Bahá'í world. All this, our sisters and brothers in faith, is but a fraction of the tale we could recount of what your devotion to Him Who was the Wronged One of the World has brought forth. We can but echo the poignant words once voiced by the beloved Master when, overcome with emotion,

He cried out: “O Bahá’u’lláh! What hast Thou done?”

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364.14From the panorama of a pivotal quarter century, we now direct our focus to the most recent Five Year Plan, a Plan quite unlike any that has gone before in a variety of ways. In this Plan we urged the Bahá’ís of the world to draw on all that they had learned in the previous twenty years and put it to full effect. We are delighted that our hopes in this regard were more than met, but while we would naturally expect great things from the followers of the Blessed Beauty, the character of what was achieved through their herculean efforts was truly breathtaking. It was the capstone to an accomplishment twenty-five years in the making.

364.15The Plan was especially memorable for being trisected by two sacred bicentenaries, each of which galvanized local communities the world over. The company of the faithful demonstrated, on a scale never previously witnessed and with relative ease, a capacity to engage people from all sections of society in honouring the life of a Manifestation of God. It was a powerful indicator of something broader: the ability to channel the release of tremendous spiritual energies for the advancement of the Cause. So magnificent was the response that in many places the Faith was propelled out of obscurity at the national level. In settings where it was unexpected, perhaps unlooked for, marked receptivity to the Faith became apparent. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands were transported by their encounter with a devotional spirit that is today characteristic of Bahá’í communities everywhere. The vision of what is made possible by observing a Bahá’í Holy Day was immeasurably expanded.

364.16The achievements of the Plan, simply in numerical terms, quickly eclipsed those of all the Plans that had preceded it since 1996. At the start of this Plan, the capacity existed for conducting just over 100,000 core activities at a given time, a capacity that was the fruit of twenty years of common endeavour. Now, 300,000 core activities are being sustained at once. Participation in those activities has risen above two million, which is also close to a threefold increase. There are 329 national and regional training institutes in operation, and their capacity is evidenced by the fact that three-quarters of a million people have been enabled to complete at least one book of the sequence; overall, the number of courses completed by individuals is now also two million—a rise of well over a third in five years.

364.17The increased intensity with which programmes of growth around the world are being pursued tells an impressive story of its own. In this five-year span, we had called for growth to be accelerated in every one of the 5,000 clusters where it had begun. This imperative became the impetus for earnest endeavour throughout the world. As a result, the number of intensive programmes of growth more than doubled and now stands at approximately 4,000. Difficulties involved in opening up new villages and neighbourhoods to the Faith in the midst of a global health crisis, or expanding activities that were at an early stage when the pandemic began, prevented an even higher total from being reached during the Plan’s final year. However, there is more to tell than this. At the outset of the Plan, we had expressed the hope that the number of clusters where the friends had passed the third milestone along a continuum of growth, as a

consequence of learning how to welcome large numbers into the embrace of their activities, would grow by hundreds more. That total then stood at around 200, spread across some 40 countries. Five years on, this number has risen to an astonishing 1,000 in nearly 100 countries—a quarter of all the intensive programmes of growth in the world and an achievement far surpassing our expectations. And yet even these figures do not reveal the loftiest heights to which the community has soared. There are over 30 clusters where the number of core activities being sustained exceeds 1,000; in places, the total is several thousand, involving the participation of more than 20,000 people in a single cluster. A growing number of Local Spiritual Assemblies now oversee the unfoldment of educational programmes that cater to practically all the children and junior youth in a village; the same reality is beginning to emerge within a few urban neighbourhoods. Engagement with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has, in notable instances, transcended individuals, families and extended kinships—what is being witnessed is the movement of populations towards a common centre. At times, age-old hostilities between opposing groups are being left behind, and certain social structures and dynamics are being transformed in the light of the divine teachings.

364.18We cannot but be overjoyed at advances so impressive. The society-building power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is being manifested with ever more clarity, and this is a firm foundation upon which the coming Nine Year Plan will build. Clusters of marked strength, as had been hoped, have proven to be reservoirs of knowledge and resources for their neighbours. And regions where more than one such cluster exist have more easily developed the means to accelerate growth in cluster after cluster. We feel compelled to stress again, however, that progress has been near universal; the difference in progress between one place and another is of degree. The community's collective understanding of the process of entry by troops and its confidence in being able to stimulate this process under any set of circumstances have risen to levels that were unimaginable in decades past. The profound questions that had loomed for so long, and which were brought into sharp focus in 1996, have been convincingly answered by the Bahá'í world. There is a generation of believers whose entire lives bear the imprint of the community's progress. But the sheer scale of what has occurred in those many clusters where the frontiers of learning are being extended has turned a significant advance in the process of entry by troops into a momentous one of historic proportions.

364.19Many will be familiar with how the Guardian divided the Ages of the Faith into consecutive epochs; the fifth epoch of the Formative Age began in 2001. Less well known is that the Guardian also made specific reference to there being epochs of the Divine Plan, and stages within those epochs. Held in abeyance for two decades while local and national organs of the Administrative Order were being raised up and strengthened, the Divine Plan conceived by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was formally inaugurated in 1937 with the commencement of the first stage of its first epoch: the Seven Year Plan assigned by the Guardian to the North American Bahá'í community. This first epoch closed after the conclusion of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963, which had resulted in the banner of the Faith being planted across the world. The opening stage of the second epoch

was the first Nine Year Plan, and no less than ten Plans have followed in its wake, Plans that have ranged in duration from twelve months to seven years. At the dawn of this second epoch, the Bahá'í world was already witnessing the earliest beginnings of that entry into the Faith by troops that had been foreseen by the Author of the Divine Plan; in the succeeding decades, generations of devoted believers within the community of the Greatest Name have laboured in the Divine Vineyard to cultivate the conditions required for sustained, large-scale growth. And at this glorious season of Ridván, how abundant are the fruits of those labours! The phenomenon of sizeable numbers swelling the activities of the community, catching the spark of faith and swiftly arising to serve at the leading edge of the Plan has moved from being a forecast sustained by faith to a recurring reality. Such a pronounced and demonstrable advance demands to be marked in the annals of the Cause. With elated hearts, we announce that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan has begun. Stage by stage, epoch after epoch shall His Plan unfold, until the light of the Kingdom illumines every heart.

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364.20Beloved friends, no review of the five-year enterprise that concluded the second epoch of the Divine Plan would be complete without special reference to the upheavals that accompanied its final year and which persist still. The restrictions on personal interaction that waxed and waned in most countries over this period could have dealt the community's collective efforts a severe blow, recovery from which might have taken years, but there are two reasons why this was not the case. One was the widespread consciousness of the duty of Bahá'ís to serve humanity, never more so than in times of peril and adversity. The other was the extraordinary rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world to give expression to that consciousness. Accustomed over many years to adopting patterns of systematic action, the friends brought their creativity and sense of purpose to bear on an unforeseen crisis, while ensuring that the new approaches they developed were coherent with the framework they had laboured in successive Plans to perfect. This is not to overlook the serious hardships being endured by Bahá'ís, like their compatriots in every land; yet throughout severe difficulties, the believers have remained focused. Resources have been channelled to communities in need, elections went ahead wherever possible, and in all circumstances the institutions of the Cause have continued to discharge their duties. There have even been bold steps forward. The National Spiritual Assembly of São Tomé and Príncipe will be re-established this Ridván, and two new pillars of the Universal House of Justice will be raised up: the National Spiritual Assembly of Croatia, with its seat in Zagreb, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Timor-Leste, with its seat in Dili.

364.21And so the One Year Plan begins. Its purpose and requirements have already been set out in our message sent on the Day of the Covenant; this Plan, though brief, will suffice to prepare the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan that is to follow. A period of special potency, which opened one hundred years after the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, will soon close with the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, marking the

conclusion of the first century of the Formative Age and the start of the second. The company of the faithful enter this new Plan at a time when humanity, chastened by the exposure of its vulnerability, seems more conscious of the need for collaboration to address global challenges. Yet, lingering habits of contest, self-interest, prejudice and closed-mindedness continue to hinder the movement towards unity, despite growing numbers in society who are showing in words and deeds how they, too, yearn for greater acceptance of humanity's inherent oneness. We pray that the family of nations may succeed in putting aside its differences in the interests of the common good.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties that shroud the months ahead, we entreat Bahá'u'lláh to make the confirmations that have sustained His followers for so long more abundant still, that you may be carried forward in your mission, your composure undisturbed by the turbulence of a world whose need for His healing message is ever more acute.

364.22The Divine Plan enters a new epoch and a new stage. The page is turned.

The Universal House of Justice

365

Further Information on Lowering the Voting Age to Eighteen

21 April 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

365.1As stated in the Ridván 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice, immediately following this Ridván the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections is to be lowered to eighteen. The House of Justice has directed us to write to you with some further information relating to this change.

365.2As you are already aware, the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly is to remain twenty-one; this shall also remain the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Regional Bahá'í Council. While a Bahá'í who has turned eighteen becomes eligible to vote at a unit convention, the age at which a believer becomes eligible for election as a delegate to National Convention shall remain twenty-one as well.

365.3It is appreciated that for National and Local Spiritual Assemblies that are incorporated this change is likely to have implications for their incorporation documents, given that the existing model By-Laws for both a National and Local Spiritual Assembly refer to twenty-one as the age at which a Bahá'í becomes eligible to vote. The House of Justice is considering making a number of changes to these model documents to take account of this most recent development, among others, and more information will be provided to you about these changes in due course.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

366

Publication of Light of the World

30 April 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

366.1The Universal House of Justice is most pleased to announce, as we draw closer to the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the publication of a new volume of Tablets in English translation titled Light of the World: Selected Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and to present you with a complimentary copy. The seventy-six selections chosen for this book cover the entire period of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry. They describe aspects of the life of Bahá’u’lláh—the tribulations He suffered, events in His homeland, the purpose and greatness of His Cause, and the unparalleled nature and significance of His Covenant, as well as the relentless but futile efforts to undermine and destroy it. Many of these Tablets reflect parallels between Bahá’u’lláh’s sufferings and those that the Master Himself endured during His lifetime….

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

367

Dedication of the First House of Worship in Kenya

23 May 2021

To the Friends Gathered in Matunda Soy, Kenya, for the Dedication of the House of Worship

Dearly loved Friends,

367.1We greet you on this day of immense historic significance when the first Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in Kenya, a “dawning-place of lights”, “wherein the spirits are gladdened”, now opens its doors. The dedication of this lofty edifice, the first local House of Worship on the continent of Africa, at the beginning of a new epoch in the Divine Plan is a momentous step in the spiritual journey of your people. From the seeds of love and unity that were sown in the early days of the Cause in your country by a small band of steadfast believers, we see a tree bearing abundant fruit, as reflected in the coming together of diverse peoples for the praise and remembrance of the Ancient Beauty. We give thanks that, by the grace of the Almighty and at a time when the world is caught in the midst of uncertainty, the efforts of the friends throughout Matunda Soy and beyond have culminated in the raising of this beacon of hope, a cause for jubilation and great joy.

367.2The participation of numerous friends in collective worship has led to the strengthening of the devotional life of your community and now to the establishment of its first local Mashriqu’l-Adhkár. This structure of elegant simplicity will surely become a focal point for the life of so many individuals and families as they strive to serve their communities. That the House of Worship has been constructed in just three years and under extremely challenging circumstances is a testament to the vitality, resourcefulness, and determination of the Kenyan people. Throughout this time, drawing on the power of the Word of God, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the area, particularly the youth, have been making a marked contribution to the material and spiritual advancement of their society. No doubt, they will be inspired and spurred on in their endeavours by the emergence of the Temple which promises a bright future for that land.

367.3May the inhabitants of Matunda Soy be the recipients of divine favour and

confirmations as they gather to praise and glorify the Lord in this Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. May the light emanating from this prayer-filled place cast out the shadows, uplift the hearts, and draw the souls closer to the Beloved. On this day, as you gather at the House of Worship, we call to mind these words of the beloved Master: "O ye beloved of God! Behold how abundant shall be the freshness, tenderness, spirituality, and radiance that are attained when ye assemble in that gathering place of the spirit, occupy yourselves at dawn with the remembrance of God, and, after reciting prayers, make mention together of the Most Bountiful Lord in sweet melodies. These melodies shall reach unto the Kingdom of Glory, and these songs shall cheer and gladden the Concourse on high."

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The Universal House of Justice

368

45th Edition of Reflections on Growth

3 June 2021

To National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

368.1Enclosed is the 45th edition of the newsletter Reflections on Growth, which, as you know, has been prepared under the auspices of the International Teaching Centre for the institution of the Counsellors and is being sent to you at the request of the Universal House of Justice. This edition—the third in a series—shares accounts of how groups of friends, arising to meet the challenges associated with the current global health crisis, are working alongside families around them to find creative ways to establish a thriving community life that fosters the spiritual education of children and the well-being of the entire family.

368.2As in the case of earlier editions, you may wish to send it by email to those friends and agencies involved in promoting the process of growth at the various levels of your communities. However, the newsletter is not intended for general distribution on the Internet; it should not, therefore, be made accessible to a large number of friends through general email distribution lists that would result in its widespread circulation and posting on sites of various kinds. You may, of course, publish extracts from Reflections on Growth in your national newsletters, if so desired.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

369

Amendments to the Model By-Laws of Spiritual Assemblies

18 June 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

369.1As you were informed in our letter dated 21 April 2021, the Universal House of Justice has been considering amendments to the model documents of Spiritual Assemblies to take into account recent developments, such as the change in the voting age for Bahá'í elections. The House of Justice has asked that we convey to you that it has now approved certain amendments to the

model By-Laws of the National Spiritual Assembly and of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Copies of the amended documents as well as marked-up versions highlighting the amendments are enclosed.

369.2Review of these documents will reveal changes in Articles II, III, VII, and VIII of the By-Laws of the National Assembly and changes in Articles V, VI, VIII, and XI of the By-Laws of the Local Assembly. No changes have been made to the Declaration of Trust of the National Assembly. You are encouraged to carefully review these amendments to consider their implications for the administration of the Faith in your communities. For example, as a result of an amendment to Article VIII of the By-Laws of the National Assembly, the numerical strength of each electoral unit, for purposes of electing delegates to the National Convention, should be determined by counting the number of believers who are eligible to vote—that is, are aged eighteen and over. You will also observe that Article II of the same document refers to voting or holding elective office upon attaining "such age as is determined by the National Assembly in conformity with the principles of Bahá'í Administration", and Article VIII refers to the "number of delegates … as decided by the National Assembly in conformity with the principles of Bahá'í Administration." The purpose of these amendments is to provide for flexibility in the By-Laws should the House of Justice make any decisions in the future related to these matters; they are not intended to introduce changes to current practices beyond what has already been announced by the House of Justice.

369.3You are requested to take steps, when you deem timely, to integrate the amendments identified into your by-laws and to ask incorporated Local Assemblies to do the same based on the new model By-Laws for that institution. Amendments should be made in consultation with legal counsel, as needed. If in the process of effecting these changes, you decide to consider other changes, kindly seek the approval of the House of Justice before submitting the documents to the government authorities. Once your by-laws have been amended and submitted to the authorities, a copy should be forwarded to the Bahá'í World Centre for its files.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

370

Conflict in the Holy Land

24 June 2021

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

370.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 12 May 2021 inquiring about its perspective on the conflict in the Holy Land. We have been asked to share the following with you.

370.2The concerns that have prompted you to write are warmly acknowledged. Indeed, the heart of a Bahá'í cannot but be distressed when contemplating the suffering of so many people in the world who are caught up in human conflicts. The friends must remember, however, that the conflicts, injustices, and suffering they observe are symptoms of the disintegration of the old world

order. Ultimately, political affairs must be reordered and the lesser peace established, for humanity is a single entity and the best interests of any part are inextricably bound up with the best interests of the whole. Yet, so long as particular nations, peoples, and political factions pursue their own interests—whether by political, economic, or military means and often at the expense of others—the great challenges facing humanity will remain insoluble. While each side portrays its position in terms of what is just and right, using whatever means available—especially the media and global forums—to gain public favor, Bahá'ís must be careful not to be drawn into such arguments, for they are the well-wishers of all peoples and nations. "Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions", Shoghi Effendi stated. "In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that world-wide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster."

370.3In general, the tendency to take sides and fight about issues is at the heart of the intractable problems afflicting humanity at this time. Therefore, to wade into such disputes by taking one side or another ultimately exacerbates, rather than resolves, the problem; the challenge, instead, is to find a way to rise above the specific conflict and unite people in the search for just and lasting solutions.

370.4The Palestinian issue is a political one and should be solved at the political level. Bahá'ís have no advice to give and do not believe that political declarations by them will resolve the fundamental issues involved. The attitude of the Bahá'í community is succinctly stated by Shoghi Effendi in a letter dated 14 July 1947 to the chairman of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, which may be found on pages 287–288 of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum's The Priceless Pearl (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969, 2017 printing). This position, quoted below, is in keeping with the general principle of non-involvement in politics.

The Bahá'í Faith is entirely non-political and we neither take sides in the present tragic dispute going on over the future of the Holy Land and its peoples nor have we any statement to make or advice to give as to what the nature of the political future of this country should be. Our aim is the establishment of universal peace in this world and our desire to see justice prevail in every domain of human society, including the domain of politics.

370.5It is hoped that the foregoing comments will be helpful to you in your consideration of this matter. May your endeavors in the path of service to the Cause and to humanity be blessed and confirmed.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

371

Resumption of Pilgrimage and Brief Visits

8 July 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

371.1Further to the letter dated 8 October 2020 written to you on behalf of the Universal House of Justice extending the suspension of brief visits for an indefinite period and the suspension of pilgrimage to the start of the 2021–2022 pilgrimage season, we have been asked to convey to you the following information.

371.2The House of Justice has been closely monitoring the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in the world at large, on travel to and from Israel, and on the public health measures that have, so far, prevented pilgrims and visitors from coming to the Holy Land. We are able to inform you that conditions are improving at a pace that, God willing, makes it possible for brief visits to the Holy Land to resume as early as this summer. A further communication confirming the date of resumption of brief visits will be sent in due course.

371.3While the flexible character of brief visits may make it possible for these visits to resume in the near future, the more structured and complex nature of the pilgrimage programme prevents the pilgrimage season from restarting in October of this year, as had been hoped. However, indications are that the world-wide efforts to bring the pandemic under control may well create conditions that once again make it possible for friends to receive the bounty of pilgrimage to the Holy Land as early as January 2022, following the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members.

371.4It is essential that friends who intend to visit the Holy Land regularly review the entry requirements of the State of Israel and their chosen airlines prior to travelling. Some information will be available on the pilgrimage website at pilgrimage.bwc.org, but in addition, friends are strongly advised to monitor the travel advisories issued by authorities in their own countries. Visitors should also be forewarned that their flights may be rescheduled by the airlines either before travelling or while in the Holy Land and that they should be prepared for the possible consequences. It is anticipated that all visitors entering the Holy Land will require evidence of COVID-19 immunity, either resulting from vaccination or recovery from the disease. Negative PCR tests, prior to initiating travel and again upon arrival, may also prove essential to avoid the requirement to quarantine. PCR tests performed in Israel may also be required by airlines and the countries to which the friends travel upon departure from the Holy Land.

371.5Kindly assure the friends in your communities of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Sacred Shrines that they may be surrounded by the tender mercies of Bahá’u’lláh and protected under His sheltering wing.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

372

Series of Global Conferences

15 September 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

372.1As first announced by the Universal House of Justice in its Ridván 2018 message, there will be a sequence of events beginning with two significant gatherings in the Holy Land: one in November marking the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, to be attended by representatives of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá’í Councils; and the other bringing together the Continental Counsellors and members of the Auxiliary Boards in early January. Immediately following these gatherings, a series of conferences are to be held throughout the world over a span of months, concluding by Ridván or soon thereafter. We have been asked to provide you with further details about the nature of this series of conferences and how they will be convened.

372.2The conferences will aim at carrying to the friends in every land the spiritual energy released by the gatherings in the Holy Land, as the community prepares for a dynamic thrust forward with the launch of the Nine Year Plan. These conferences, then, will give the participants an opportunity to gain greater insight into the nature of the spiritual enterprise in which they are engaged, a sense of the distance traversed thus far, and a deeper understanding of the exigencies of the current stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. They will strive to enhance appreciation of the privilege of being part of a community that has set its gaze upon the spiritual and material transformation of society, and of the bounty of being connected by bonds of love and camaraderie with brothers and sisters in a global effort, each one labouring within the same framework for action, all united under the sheltering shadow of the Covenant.

372.3Given that millions of people at the grassroots across the globe are engaged in a collective pattern of activity that fosters a vibrant community life in villages and cities, the conferences should be organized such that as many of these friends as possible are able to attend. Varying circumstances of communities will require that the conferences be organized differently from place to place in response to local conditions. In locations where the community-building process is embracing large numbers, a conference could be held for one or several adjacent neighbourhoods or villages. In other places, a conference for a cluster, a group of adjoining clusters, or a region would be more suitable. In yet other situations, several regions or countries may have a single conference. In addition, the duration of each of these gatherings may differ depending on what is deemed necessary to achieve the aim of the conferences. Naturally, restrictions in place due to the pandemic will influence your planning for the conferences. In this regard, it will be important to have contingency plans ready to cover various eventualities that may affect logistical arrangements, require provisions to be made for holding sessions online, or call for other adjustments.

372.4It is envisaged that in preparing the programme for the conferences you will draw from the Sacred Writings as well as guidance contained in relevant messages of the House of Justice, in particular the message to be released at the forthcoming Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors delineating the provisions of the Nine Year Plan. It would be advisable for a general

format for the programme to be prepared as soon as possible, which can be refined later in light of that message. Early consideration of the artistic and creative components to be incorporated into the programme would allow for some of the preparations for these to be made well in advance. In many places, whole families will participate, and special programmes for children and junior youth will be necessary. Where Regional Bahá'í Councils exist, it will be important for them to be fully involved in the organization of the conferences.

372.5You are encouraged to consult with the Counsellors as soon as possible regarding the details of the programme and logistical arrangements. In addition to providing assistance throughout the planning and preparation phase, the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will naturally extend their support during the full course of these gatherings. Besides the conferences, it is anticipated that national and regional institutional meetings will need to be organized, as has been the case in connection with the launch of previous Plans. Since such institutional meetings may occur during the same period as the conferences, the scheduling of the various events will need to be carefully considered.

372.6You may be assured that the House of Justice will offer its prayers at the Sacred Threshold that the efforts made in preparation for this series of worldwide conferences may attract the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

373

Release of Exemplar

24 October 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

373.1We are pleased to inform you that the film commissioned by the Universal House of Justice to mark the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has now advanced to a stage where a provisional copy can be shared with you. The film, titled Exemplar, will have a running time of 56 minutes and, as was mentioned in the message dated 25 November 2020 from the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, is a portrait of the Person of 'Abdu'lBahá. It will be released up to a week prior to the Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for use on that occasion or during the activities associated with the centennial event. It is envisaged that, following the Centenary Commemoration, this film may continue to be used on an individual and collective basis for a wide range of purposes, including during the upcoming series of conferences to be held throughout the world. Of course, the film will have an enduring utility in many endeavours of the community into the future.

373.2Translation of the film can now commence for those National Spiritual Assemblies that wish to prepare a subtitled version, use the voice-over technique to dub the film, or both. In order to assist with the preparation of local-language versions, a low-resolution version with English subtitles, together with the full transcript in English and relevant technical information, has been made available through a website…. Over the next two weeks, the official translation of the full transcript in Arabic, French,

Persian, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili will be made available through the same website. High-resolution, subtitled, and voice-over copies of the film as well as a file with a design for the DVD cover will also be uploaded to the website once they become available; kindly check the website periodically.

373.3A week before the Commemoration, the completed film, including all of the language versions prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre, will be made available for National Assemblies to view or download on the Bahai.org website, in a number of formats to suit different needs. At that point, versions in other languages will need to be finalized by relevant National Assemblies and steps immediately taken to prepare for the widespread dissemination of the film, for example through copies on DVDs or flash drives….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

374

Resumption of Pilgrimage and Brief Visits

29 October 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

374.1In the letter dated 8 July 2021 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, the hope was expressed that brief visitors would before long be invited to the Holy Land and that the new pilgrimage season would begin in January 2022. In this regard, the House of Justice has asked us to convey the following.

374.2Although the world-wide coronavirus pandemic continues to be a source of considerable concern, the increasing availability of effective vaccines and testing in many parts of the world means that it is now possible for immunized individuals to travel to and gain entry to the Holy Land. Furthermore, the health regulations currently in place in Israel are not expected to have an impact on the free movement of visitors and the scheduled activities of pilgrims. Accordingly, the House of Justice is happy to once again welcome pilgrims to the Holy Land starting from Monday, 17 January 2022.

374.3Before then, however, the friends will be able to pay brief visits to the Bahá'í World Centre in the period from Wednesday, 1 December 2021 to sunset on Sunday, 26 December 2021 and then from Saturday, 8 January 2022 onward; that is, from after the end of the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá up until the arrival of participants for the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board Members and again, indefinitely, after the close of the Conference.

374.4Information regarding immunization requirements and any future changes to conditions and restrictions will be available on the pilgrimage website at pilgrimage.bwc.org and will be communicated to pilgrims and visitors who may be affected. In addition, friends are strongly advised to monitor the entry requirements of the government of Israel and the travel advisories issued by authorities in their own countries.

374.5Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that the friends of God will, once again, have the possibility of visiting the Holy Shrines.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
375
Restoration of the Mansion of Mazra‘ih
8 November 2021
To all National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
375.1Developments at the Bahá’í World Centre aimed at preserving the precious Holy Places associated with the Central Figures of our Faith continue apace, and we are happy to announce the progress being made at Mazra‘ih, that serene and sacred spot, the first residence of Bahá’u’lláh after nine years’ confinement within the walls of the prison-city of ‘Akká.
375.2The room of Bahá’u’lláh in the Mansion of Mazra‘ih has been restored to reflect more closely its original style—the painted flower designs adorning the walls, which had been plastered over many years ago, have been revived, and the original windows on each wall, through which Bahá’u’lláh Himself looked out over the orchards, hills, and sea, have been reinstated. In the courtyard, the garden and surrounding walls have been made new, and a portion of the aqueduct has now been restored, the very one that was repaired at the suggestion of Bahá’u’lláh in response to an offer of service by the governor of ‘Akká. Other changes have also been made in the approaches to the Mansion and the surrounding farmland.
375.3In the coming years, conservation work will be carried out on the other rooms of the Mansion, and the surrounding area will be landscaped to provide a large, open space for visitors to walk around and enjoy, intending to capture the tranquil spirit of this blessed spot. While construction work remains ongoing, it is our hope that soon pilgrims will be able to visit this Holy Site once again.
The Universal House of Justice
376
Dedication of the House of Worship in Vanuatu
13 November 2021
To the Friends Gathered in Tanna, Vanuatu, for the Dedication of the House of Worship
Dearly loved Friends,
376.1With hearts filled with unbounded love, we greet you one and all on this day of great jubilation as you gather to witness the opening of the doors of the first local Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in the Pacific. This is a resounding victory, further fulfilling the vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed in the Tablets of the Divine Plan for the establishment of the community of the Greatest Name in Vanuatu. Dedicated in the centennial year of the Master’s Ascension, this glorious institution invites people of all persuasions to gather in fellowship and harmony and engage in the praise and glorification of God.
376.2The work of laying the spiritual foundation of this House of Worship began long before its construction. We recall with profound admiration the self-sacrificing endeavours of the friends who first introduced the Faith to

Vanuatu, and those first radiant believers native to the land who took the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh to their countrymen, tribes, and families. This is truly a moment to give thanks that the Blessed Beauty has raised up a community distinguished by a spirit of selfless service, devotion, and love of God. Drawing on the power of prayer, you have placed complete trust in God, and directing your energy to the service of others, you have overcome challenges through cooperation and mutual support. Indeed, we have witnessed that in times of adversity you have demonstrated extraordinary resilience.

376.3The emergence of this Temple is an outward expression of a community life that has transformed through the union of worship and service, and it will undoubtedly exert a profound spiritual effect on the lives of those who reside on the island of Tanna, throughout your country, and beyond. The dearly loved friends of Vanuatu will now surely intensify their efforts to contribute to the spiritual and material prosperity of their communities and to foster within their society higher levels of unity, founded on the incontestable truth of the oneness of humankind.

376.4This sacred edifice shines out as a beacon of light. May it become a centre from which spiritual forces radiate, may it diffuse the illumination of the Lord, and like unto the resplendent rays of dawn, may it brighten the horizon before you. We call to mind at this historic moment the words of the Beloved Master: "When the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is completed, when the lights are emanating therefrom, and the righteous assemble therein, when prayers are offered to the Kingdom of divine mysteries and the voice of glorification is raised to the Supreme Lord, then shall the believers rejoice, and their hearts be dilated, overflowing with the love of the ever-living and self-subsisting God."

The Universal House of Justice

377

Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

25 November 2021

To the Friends Gathered in the Holy Land to Mark the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

377.1Our hearts are filled with wonder as we contemplate the significance of this momentous occasion: the close of one hundred years since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one hundred years since the inception of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation, and one hundred years since the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh was entrusted to His Administrative Order, whose institutions you here represent. How marvellous is His Covenant, through which "this unique, this wondrous System" has been established in your nations and its processes made to operate. We bow our heads in gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh that, despite the numerous and severe obstacles of a world in turmoil, He has opened the doors and facilitated the means for you—including, for the first time, representatives of Regional Bahá'í Councils—to be here during these soul-stirring days.

377.2A period of special potency which began in 2016 with the centenary of the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan and included the bicentennial anniversaries of the Birth of the Twin Manifestations of God is now, a hundred

years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, drawing to a close. The advancements the Bahá’í community has made during this time have been nothing less than extraordinary. These have prepared the believers everywhere to meet the demands and fulfil the requirements of the next stage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan, which is to commence just months from now and will last nine years. The accelerating decline of the current social order, and the growing need for constructive processes that will lead to the emergence of a new world society, are daily more evident. A century after the Master bequeathed to the followers of the Greatest Name a document which contains priceless elements for building a divine civilization, we are reminded of the words of the beloved Guardian: “The champion builders of Bahá’u’lláh’s rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension and distress.”

377.3Beloved friends, on this Day of the Covenant we all look to its Centre and recall the life and Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a Figure Whose very being was the embodiment of the Covenant, that pivotal centre of unity for all humankind, binding together the multitudinous peoples of the earth. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that Mystery of God, “a sign of His greatness”, and “the most perfect bounty”, Who is treasured in the pure hearts of countless children, youth, and adults, is surely watching over and aiding His loved ones, ever casting His eye of protection over them. In these uncertain times, the friends turn with hope and longing to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that “shelter for all mankind”, “a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth”, beseeching His assistance from the realms above as they endeavour to follow His example in the path of service. During the coming days, when the thoughts of the believers all around the world are focused on “this sacred and glorious Being”, you have the blessing and privilege of paying homage to Him on behalf of your communities in those very spots where He laboured day and night for the promotion of the Cause of God and for the betterment of humankind.

377.4Tomorrow night, on the eve of the centenary of His passing, we will hold His loved ones throughout the world in our hearts as we pray in the sacred room where the final moments of His earthly life were spent. We will ardently supplicate that the healing message for which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lived and sacrificed His all may, before long, find a home in the hearts and souls of all humanity and that the efforts of the friends of God to this end may be acceptable in His sight.

The Universal House of Justice

378

Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the Centenary of His Passing

27 November 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

378.1The Universal House of Justice has instructed us to send you the text of its tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which was read a few hours ago at the commemoration of the centenary of His Ascension held at the Bahá’í World Centre. Kindly share it with the friends.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY COMMEMORATION OF THE ASCENSION OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

A Tribute by the Universal House of Justice

378.2A century has now elapsed since the noble spirit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ascended to its eternal home. His birth had coincided with the dawn of the Faith’s Heroic Age, and His passing signalled the setting of the sun upon its final epoch. No clearer demonstration could be imagined of how He embodied the forces of unity than the sight of His funeral, at which a vast crowd of mourners from every creed in this land came together to grieve their common loss. In His day, so many of the friends who embraced the Faith absorbed the spirit of the divine teachings simply by observing Him; still today, if we wish to align our lives with that same spirit, we look to the example set by the Master, Whose word and deed reflected the brilliance of the light that shone from Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

378.3In every respect, His example is central to Bahá’í identity. Every Bahá’í may turn to Him to understand better how to diffuse the light of the Faith and for a model to follow as we seek to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in those we encounter. His own counsel, that the teacher must be “fully enkindled” so that his utterance may “exert influence”, and yet be “totally self-effaced and evanescent” so that “he may teach with the melody of the Concourse on high”, is vividly realized in the unnumbered accounts of souls transformed by being in the company of ‘Abdu’lBahá. Countless are the lessons to be learned from how He presented the divine precepts to every kind of person, constantly widening the circle of unity, without regard for any outward dissimilarities of appearance, language, custom, or belief. The universality of His love produced a community that, even at that time, could justly claim to be a cross-section of society. His love revived, nurtured, inspired; it banished estrangement and welcomed all to the banquet table of the Lord. Every community-building endeavour undertaken today, every educational activity and every outreach, carries with it the hope of communicating, through our own efforts, a token of the same love He showered upon every soul. Such efforts are the best tribute that can be rendered to Him, at this centenary and every day that follows.

378.4We offer thanks to Bahá’u’lláh for having given the world not only, in His teachings, a standard of purity, devotion, and integrity to which souls may forever aspire, but also, in the Figure of the Master, a flawless example of how life can be lived to that standard. As humanity is beset by crisis after crisis, the community of the Greatest Name, which cannot avoid exposure to such upheavals, is privileged to have before it the model of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Neither peril nor obstacle would prevent Him from discharging His mission, whether by attending to the needs of the hour or preparing for the future; neither hostility nor events of the world would divert Him from His course. Serene, confident, and resolute, He was unperturbed by setbacks, welcoming hardship and adversity in the path of God. How relentless were the attacks upon Him! How deplorable the burdens He had to bear! We recall the testimony of His distinguished sister, the Greatest Holy Leaf, that “in the dark of the night,

out of the depths of His bosom, could be heard His burning sighs, and when the day broke, the wondrous music of His prayers would rise up to the denizens of the realm on high."

378.5The passage of time has not diminished the awe with which we regard "the rôle and character of One Who, not only in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh but in the entire field of religious history, fulfils a unique function." And as Shoghi Effendi has further affirmed of Him:

> He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Centre and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being "round Whom all names revolve", the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation—styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the "Mystery of God"—an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.

378.6Dearest co-workers: We summoned you here not only to honour the memory of 'Abdu'lBahá and to recall His trials and triumphs, but also, with us, to rededicate yourselves and the communities you represent to earnestly serving the Cause to which He devoted His very existence. In fulfilment of the sacred charge laid upon Him by the Blessed Beauty, He gave the Bahá'í world custody of two Charters that have guided its progress and development ever since. One was His Tablets of the Divine Plan, through which the Word of God has come to be promulgated in every land; the other was His Will and Testament, which set in motion a process for the establishment of the Administrative Order. Now, at the close of the first century of the Formative Age, and at the outset of a new series of global Plans, the accelerating progress of the Master's Divine Plan is plain to see. And the organic unfoldment of the Administrative Order over the last hundred years is demonstrated by the existence of the vast array of institutions and agencies, from the international level to the local, that channel the spirit of the Faith and guide and support the efforts of the worldwide Bahá'í community. The Covenant of which 'Abdu'lBahá was the Centre remains an impregnable stronghold. We rejoice at how the Covenant orients each believer towards a common mission, maintaining a dynamic unity that cultivates a constantly growing community of the faithful.

378.7Contemplating the Person of the Master, we find ourselves wonderstruck by the all-compassing authority that accompanied His inexhaustible patience and understanding, by the keenness of His wisdom in every setting, by the infinite tenderness of His being, and by His limitless love that can be felt by every

unshuttered soul. But every prompting to pay homage to His matchless qualities is restrained by the recollection that never did He seek praise or worldly recognition. And so we feel compelled to testify: Beloved of all our hearts, ‘Abdu’lBahá, Your all was servitude—a servitude “complete, pure and real, firmly established, enduring, obvious, explicitly revealed and subject to no interpretation whatever”. We reserve what words remain for a pledge of fidelity to You, for our vow to uphold the Covenant that You “proclaimed, championed and vindicated”, for our wholehearted expression of loyalty to Your timeless guidance and expositions, to Your fervent entreaties and exhortations. This same pledge is manifested in the steadfast, strenuous exertions of the Bahá’í world to fulfil the mission entrusted to it at this time. Seeing this community striving to live by Your example summons up for us these words of Yours:

O friends! Praise be to God that the banner of Divine Unity hath been hoisted in every land, and the melody of the Abhá Kingdom hath been raised on every side. The holy Seraph of the Concourse on high is raising the cry of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá!” in the midmost heart of the world, and the power of the Word of God is breathing true life into the body of existence.

Wherefore, O ye faithful friends, it behoveth you all to join ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in self-sacrifice and in service to the Cause of God and thraldom to His divine Threshold. If ye be aided to attain unto such a supreme bounty, the whole world shall erelong be made the recipient of the effulgent splendours of God, and the longed-for oneness of humanity shall be revealed in the utmost beauty and charm in the midmost heart of the world. This is the dearest wish of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá! This is the greatest yearning of them that are faithful! The Glory of Glories rest upon you.

379

Reflections on the Events Marking the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

1 December 2021

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

379.1As we reflect on the events which a few days ago marked the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land, we feel impelled to express to you our sense of wonderment at the exalted character of what transpired. We offer praise and gratitude to the Blessed Beauty that, despite current circumstances in the world and the many restrictions on travel, nearly six hundred representatives of the vast majority of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá’í Councils were able to be present at the Bahá’í World Centre for this historic occasion. The days of this remarkable gathering were spent in profound contemplation on the life and example of the beloved Master, on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Centre of the Covenant, on His Will and Testament and the unfoldment of the Administrative Order over the last century, and on the extraordinary distance the Bahá’í world has travelled through the implementation of His Divine Plan. A spirit of consecration permeated the air as those present prayed in the vicinity of His resting place on the anniversary of the holy night of His Ascension. The love of

‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew the souls to the Mountain of the Lord, and they return to their homes carrying the love of the Universal House of Justice to the institutions they represent and to all the friends of God.

379.2We are confident that the spiritual forces generated by this gathering will be diffused throughout your communities and will inspire the friends as they prepare themselves for the upcoming series of worldwide conferences, which will launch the Bahá’í world into the next stage of the Divine Plan. To this end, we will offer our ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.

The Universal House of Justice

380

Passing of Shapour Rassekh

9 December 2021

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Switzerland

380.1We were grieved to learn of the passing of Shapour Rassekh, outstanding servant of the Cause of God. His decades of consecrated labour for the advancement of the Faith, distinguished by his service as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe and of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Iran and Switzerland, are recalled with profound admiration. Notable throughout an abundant life were his extensive and remarkable contributions in the fields of Bahá’í studies and Persian literature, as well as his pioneering work in the application of the social sciences. May his shining example of a life dedicated to the service of the Cause and of society be a source of inspiration for future generations. We supplicate in the Sacred Shrines for the progress of his illumined soul, now joyously reunited with his beloved wife, Mehry, throughout the worlds of God and extend our sympathy to his family and friends.

380.2We call for memorial gatherings to be held in his honour throughout Switzerland and, by copy of this message, request the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany to arrange a befitting memorial service at the Mother Temple of Europe, as circumstances permit.

The Universal House of Justice

381

Participation of Women in Administrative Affairs

10 December 2021

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

381.1The Universal House of Justice has recently reviewed the matter of the participation of women in the administrative affairs of your community. It has asked us to convey to you the following.

381.2Since the founding of your community, women have contributed greatly to its diverse spheres of action and played a vital part in the prodigious progress achieved. Sustaining community life has, for the most part, relied on their tireless and sacrificial efforts that extend their influence to the life of the family and help cement the Bahá’í identity of rising generations. Women have arisen as travelling teachers and pioneers, as educators of the young and as tutors, and as initiators and promoters of endeavours for the betterment of society. It has been heart-warming to observe their perseverance

with convening women's conferences and their enthusiasm to help organize, supply, and facilitate other gatherings dedicated to teaching and to marking special anniversaries. Indeed, the story of your community's progress is replete with tales of the heroic exploits of women.

381.3Yet, even a cursory review of the service of women on the institutions of the Faith in your community, especially at the regional and national levels, reveals a limited involvement that is out of keeping with this record of devotion by … Bahá'í women. This long-standing concern became even more evident in the elections of delegates and of members of Local Spiritual Assemblies in places where several localities combined into one and a two-stage election was instituted. But it is most apparent in the membership of your Assembly. For a community such as yours, where an intensive process of community building is releasing powerful transformative forces in many clusters, it would be remiss to allow this situation to persist. It is imperative that you take measures to address it.

381.4As the believers in your community are well aware, applying the principle of the equality of women and men is essential to the regeneration and progress of any nation, the peace of the world, and the advancement of civilization. The statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this matter are clear and emphatic: "Women must advance and fulfil their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men." He has further stated: "In the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, women are advancing side by side with men. There is no area or instance where they will lag behind: they have equal rights with men, and will enter, in the future, into all branches of the administration of society. Such will be their elevation that, in every area of endeavour, they will occupy the highest levels in the human world."

381.5You are, then, encouraged to consider, in consultation with the Counsellors, what steps to take to assist the friends across your national community to recognize and overcome whatever obstacles may be impeding the full participation of women in the administration of the Faith. It will be important to first address the matter at the level of consciousness, helping the friends to appreciate the profundity of the principle of the equality of women and men and its ramifications for all aspects of the life of the community. This the dear friends must not doubt: the subtle influence of habits of thought, culture, and traditions that are inconsonant with the Bahá'í standard endure even among dedicated followers of the Blessed Beauty if there is no conscious and unflagging resolve to counter them. One and all, women and men alike, they are urged to set before their eyes the lofty standard of equality that Bahá'u'lláh has established and to persist in their efforts to attain and express it in every aspect of their individual and collective lives.

381.6What is true for individuals applies similarly to institutions. But they must go even further. They must reflect on how they assign responsibilities to the members of their communities. That they would, when calling on the believers for various services, consider several equally important factors is of course natural, but they cannot overlook the matter of gender or deem it peripheral. In your case, this is particularly important when you are constituting Regional Bahá'í Councils, appointing members of national

agencies, and engaging your support staff. Crucially, the preparation of the friends for unit conventions and of the delegates for National Conventions needs to ensure that they are able to carry out their duties as electors wholly conscious of the necessity of the full involvement of women in the administrative affairs of the Faith. When the House of Justice addressed the matter of Bahá'í elections in its letter of 25 March 2007, it reiterated the qualities "of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience" specified by the Guardian as necessary for those believers whom an elector seeks to choose as members of the institutions. But it emphasized further that "from among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender." Having all these requisites in mind will help the friends fulfil what was the express wish of the Guardian, that "the Assembly should be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community."

381.7As you certainly appreciate, all actions you take in this important matter need to be tempered by wisdom and dignity; nonetheless, they must not be delayed. You can be confident that when the application of the principle of equality between women and men is expressed in the unfettered service of women on the institutions and agencies of the Faith, the victories of your community will multiply, and it will exert an even greater transforming influence on the life of your society. The House of Justice would appreciate your keeping it informed of your actions and their related results. It will supplicate the Blessed Beauty in the Holy Shrines that He may abundantly bless and confirm every effort you and the friends in your community make.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

382

Release of Glimpses of a Hundred Years of Endeavour

12 December 2021

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

382.1As you know from the message dated 25 November 2020 to the Bahá'ís of the world on the occasion of the Day of the Covenant, the Universal House of Justice had commissioned the production of a film that will reflect on the expiration of the first hundred years of the Formative Age from the vantage point of the heights to which the Bahá'í community has climbed. We are pleased to inform you that this film has now advanced to a stage where more details can be provided. The film, titled Glimpses of a Hundred Years of Endeavour, will have a running time of 67 minutes. Naturally, the exact manner in which it is utilized by the friends will largely depend on local circumstances.

382.2Translation of the film can now commence for those National Spiritual Assemblies that wish to prepare a subtitled version, use the voice-over technique to dub the film, or both. In order to assist with the preparation of local-language versions, a low-resolution version with English subtitles,

together with the full transcript in English and relevant technical information, has been made available through Google Drive…. Over the next two weeks, translations of the full transcript in Arabic, French, Persian, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili will be made available through the same website. High-resolution, subtitled, and voice-over copies of the film as well as a file with a design for the DVD cover can be accessed … once they become available; kindly check the website periodically.

382.3By 3 January 2022, the completed film, including all of the language versions prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre, will be made available for National Spiritual Assemblies to view or download on the Bahai.org website, in a number of formats to suit different needs. At that point, versions in other languages will need to be finalized by relevant National Assemblies and steps immediately taken to prepare for the widespread dissemination of the film, for example through copies on DVD or flash drive….

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

383

Cancellation of the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board Members

17 December 2021

To all Continental Boards of Counsellors

383.1We have been closely following developments related to the global pandemic, especially the extension of travel bans and the complications thus arising for a large number of Auxiliary Board members to travel and be permitted to enter the Holy Land. It is with deep regret that it has become necessary to cancel the much-anticipated Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board Members, which was due to commence on 3 January 2022. Although this development is of course deeply disappointing, the International Teaching Centre will be consulting with the Counsellors in the coming days regarding alternative arrangements to assist the Auxiliary Board members as they prepare themselves for the weighty responsibilities they are being asked to shoulder in the months and years ahead. It will also write to you shortly regarding plans for the Conference of the Counsellors and the subsequent meetings of the Boards of Counsellors. May the Counsellors and their auxiliaries be showered with divine confirmations and be ever guided by the Ancient Beauty.

The Universal House of Justice

384

The Nine Year Plan

30 December 2021

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

384.1At Ridván this year we described how, over the course of a quarter century, the Bahá'í world underwent a transformation that endowed it with an undreamed-of capacity to learn, to grow, and to serve humanity. But, however bright were the achievements of this period, they must be eclipsed by what is to come. By the conclusion of the new series of Plans recently begun, the

Bahá'í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present. In your deliberations over the coming days, you will be occupied with exploring what is required to bring into being such a fortified community.

384.2Bahá'u'lláh states that "the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony." He has revealed teachings that make this possible. Building a society that consciously pursues this collective purpose is the work of not only this generation, but of many generations to come, and Bahá'u'lláh's followers welcome all who labour alongside them in this undertaking. It means learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities; it means those communities learning how to bring about spiritual and material progress; it means learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress. These areas of endeavour are, naturally, familiar ones. Seen from one perspective, they are quite distinct, each having its own characteristics and imperatives. Yet they all represent ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society. Together, they are means of releasing what the Guardian described as "the society-building power" of the Faith. This inherent power possessed by the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is visible even in the fledgling efforts of a Bahá'í community learning to serve humanity and promote the Word of God. And though the world society foreshadowed in His Revelation is of course far distant, communities that are earnestly learning to apply His teachings to their social reality abound. How immensely blessed are those souls who, alive to the greatness of this Day and the significance of their actions, strive for the emergence of a society shaped by the divine teachings.

384.3The series of global Plans that began at Ridván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Ridván 2046. During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, "the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity"; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.

384.4The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan are seeking to gain an ever more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—"the sovereign remedy for every disease"—and to apply them to

the needs of their society. They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. In places where growing numbers are helping to build communities of this character, the power of the Cause to transform people's social existence, as well as their inner lives, is becoming increasingly visible. Earnest pursuit of the Plan's central aim will, we are sure, cause many, many such communities to emerge.

The movement of clusters

384.5A greater expression of the society-building power of the Faith requires, first and foremost, still further advances in the process of entry by troops in every part of the world. The essentially spiritual undertakings of diffusing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ever more widely and extending the roots of His Faith ever more deeply into the soil of society have measurable outcomes: the number of clusters where a programme of growth has been initiated and the degree of intensity that each has reached. The means now exist for a swift advance in relation to both measures. The goal that the community of the Greatest Name must aspire to fulfil during the current series of global Plans is to establish intensive programmes of growth in all the clusters in the world. This formidable objective implies a broadening and intensification of activity on a scale never witnessed. Rapid progress towards this goal must be achieved in the course of the Nine Year Plan.

384.6As a preliminary step, we ask that you assist National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils to determine whether their schemes for dividing their territories into clusters would benefit from any adjustments. As you know, a cluster defines an area where the activities of the Plan can be stimulated in a manageable and sustainable way. Over the last

twenty-one years, much has been learned about the size of cluster that is "manageable" in different contexts and in different parts of the world; in some countries, modifications have already begun to be considered, occasioned by the effects of growth. In many instances this reassessment will not lead to any change, but in some it will result in a cluster being divided or reduced in size, and occasionally a cluster might become larger. Areas that are sparsely populated owing to the natural terrain may be excluded from the clustering scheme. Of course, any believers who reside in such places would adopt as many elements of the framework for action as are applicable to their circumstances.

384.7The movement of clusters along a continuum of development will remain the basic model for the expansion and consolidation of the community. The features of the developmental path that should be followed, and in particular the first, second, and third milestones that mark progress along the way, are already well known to the friends from our previous messages and from their own experience, and we feel no need to reiterate what we have stated before. By the close of the One Year Plan we anticipate that programmes of growth will be under way in over 6,000 clusters, that in close to 5,000 of these the second milestone will have been passed, and that in 1,300 of these the believers will have advanced further. These figures must climb considerably over the coming nine years. Once any adjustments to the clustering scheme in each country have been determined, we ask that you work with National Assemblies and Regional Councils to forecast the numbers of clusters where progress could be made past the first, second, and third milestones, respectively, during the Plan. It should be borne in mind that these are only intended to be well-informed estimates; they can be refined later as necessary and need not be laboured over at length. As such, we request that the results of these assessments be sent to the Bahá'í World Centre by Naw-Rúz. At Ridván, we will then be able to set out the total collective aspirations of the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan.

384.8We are conscious that there are some regions and countries where the Faith remains at an early point of development, and there is a pressing need to ensure that what the Bahá'í world has learned about accelerating the growth process benefits these places as well. One important lesson that has become clear is the immense value, to a region, of a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. Once the friends in a given cluster have developed the range of capacities that such progress implies, and the means to disseminate insights and share experience about community-building endeavours are in place, then a swift acceleration of the work of expansion and consolidation in surrounding clusters becomes possible. With this in mind, it is imperative that during the Nine Year Plan the process of growth reach this level of intensity in at least one cluster in every country and every region. This constitutes one of the Plan's chief objectives and it will call for the concentrated effort of many a consecrated soul. The International Teaching Centre is ready to work with you to implement several strategies to bring this about. Foremost among these will be the deployment of teams of international and homefront pioneers who are familiar with the framework for action and are prepared to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to serving the Cause over a number of years. You will need to impress upon National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í

Councils the urgency of encouraging believers who, following in the footsteps of so many heroic souls of the past, can arise to ensure that the light of the Faith shines bright in every territory. We look in particular to countries, regions, and clusters where strength and experience have accumulated to generate a flow of pioneers to places where help is needed, and also to provide support by other means. This flow of support is one more way in which the spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance, so essential for progress, manifests itself in systematic action.

384.9The accomplishments of the previous series of Plans—particularly the last Five Year Plan—could not have occurred without a tremendous advance in the teaching work. An important dimension of this work is the capacity to engage in conversations on spiritual themes, a capacity which was explored in our message to your 2015 conference, where we described how it is developed through participation in institute courses and by gaining practical experience. It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Over time, many such souls begin to identify themselves with the Bahá'í community, especially as they gain the confidence to participate in community life through service. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

384.10We ask you and your auxiliaries to help the believers, wherever they reside, reflect periodically on effective ways of teaching the Faith in their surroundings, and to fan within their hearts a passion for teaching that will attract the confirmations of the Divine Kingdom. Souls who have been given the blessing of faith have a natural wish to share this gift through conversations with relatives, friends, classmates, co-workers, and those previously unmet, seeking in every place and at every moment a hearing ear. Different settings

and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are.

Learning from the most advanced clusters

384.11Six years ago we described for you the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone along the continuum of growth. To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building. In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live. It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus. Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong—networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind—and by accompanying others who arise to serve alongside them. These efforts have tremendous merit. Even when a cluster contains a number of flourishing centres of intense activity, efforts being made across the rest of the cluster might still represent a large proportion of all the activity that is occurring. We also acknowledge, in this connection, the steps being taken in some clusters to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster. This can be seen as a specialized form of the community-building work, and one which continues to show great promise. As participation in the work of the Plan in all its forms increases, many opportunities emerge for the friends to learn from each other's experience and to kindle within one another the joy of teaching.

384.12Of course, the work undertaken in receptive neighbourhoods and villages has been a special focus of attention in recent years. As the inhabitants of such locations begin to participate in Bahá'í activities in large numbers, more consideration needs to be given to coordination in order to cope with the inherent complexity involved. Within each centre of intense activity, collaborative arrangements emerge among groups of families, who organize community-building activities among themselves with a view to widening the embrace of such activities to many nearby households; an informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours under way. The character of daily life in such places is adapting to the rise of a culture in which worship and service are cherished activities involving many people at once. Uplifting, well-prepared community gatherings—extending in some cases to camps and festivals—occur with increasing frequency, and music and song feature prominently on such occasions. Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of

acquainting those in the wider society with the principles of the Cause. And naturally, there remains a strong focus on being outward looking: finding ways to continually share the fruits of a thriving pattern of action with souls who are as yet unfamiliar with the Faith.

384.13Amid all this, we have observed a specific, heartening phenomenon, whose early glimpses we described in our message to your 2015 conference as representing a new frontier. Although learning how to embrace large numbers is a characteristic of any cluster where the third milestone has been passed, the focus of the friends necessarily begins to broaden as they approach a point where a significant proportion of the population of a particular area is taking part in community-building activities. This might be true for only a specific residential area in a cluster, or for several such areas, or for a single village; other parts of the cluster might not yet share the same reality. But in such locations, the thoughts of the friends labouring at the grassroots are increasingly occupied with the progress and well-being of everyone dwelling in the vicinity. Bahá'í institutions feel more keenly their responsibility for the spiritual education of an entire generation of children and junior youth, most or even all of whom might already be engaged in community activities. Local Spiritual Assemblies strengthen their relationships with authorities and local leaders, even entering into formal collaborations, and growing attention is given to the multiplying initiatives of social action arising from groups of junior youth, youth, women, families, or others who are responding to the needs around them. The sheer level and variety of activity requires Auxiliary Board members to appoint multiple assistants to serve a single village or neighbourhood; each assistant might follow one or more lines of action, offering counsel and support as necessary, and lending momentum to the processes in motion.

384.14In places where the activities of the Plan have reached such a degree of prevalence, the inhabitants now possess a substantially increased capacity to steer the course of their own development, and the institutions and agencies of the Faith there now have an expanded vision of their responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities still include having robust systems in place to continually build capacity and support those taking initiative. But the advancement of the community depends, to a greater extent than before, on local institutions and agencies being conscious of the social forces at work in the environment and acting to preserve the integrity of the community's many endeavours. Meanwhile, the relationship of the Bahá'í community to the surrounding society undergoes profound change. As represented by its formal structures of administration and informal collaborative arrangements, the Bahá'í community has become a highly visible protagonist in society in its own right, one that is ready to shoulder important responsibilities and intensify a broad, collective process of learning about spiritual and material progress. At the same time, as the wider society embraces many aspects of Bahá'í community life and imbibes its unifying spirit, the dynamics thus created allow divers groups to come together in a combined movement inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity. To date, the number of places where a Bahá'í pattern of community life has attained such

prevalence is modest, yet it is growing. Here is witnessed a release of the society-building power of the Faith unlike anything that has been seen before.

384.15Naturally, prevalence of Bahá'í activity on this scale is not a prospect everywhere. It is necessary to appreciate the difference that is made by the conditions in a cluster or in parts of a cluster and by the characteristics of a people—that is, by the reality of circumstances. Accordingly, the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary. But regardless of the extent to which Bahá'í community life embraces those who reside in a particular area—regardless, even, of the intensity of a programme of growth in a cluster or the level of activity in a neighbourhood or village—the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles? You and your auxiliaries are ideally placed to put this question and to ensure that appropriate strategies are identified. Much can be learned from the experience of the friends in similar clusters, for a community that is a step further along the same path can provide valuable insights about the goal to strive for next. As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it. Looking ahead on this path, might we not perceive Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the reins of humanity's affairs in one hand, His other beckoning all to hasten, hasten?

Contributing to social transformation

384.16The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is concerned with the transformation of both humanity's inner life and social environment. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi describes how the social environment provides the "atmosphere" in which souls can "grow spiritually and reflect in full the light of God" shining through the Revelation. A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

384.17As the intensity of community-building work in a cluster increases, the friends there inevitably become more conscious of social, economic, or cultural barriers that are impeding people's spiritual and material progress. Children and junior youth lacking support in their education, pressures on girls resulting from traditional customs related to early marriage, families needing help with navigating unfamiliar systems of healthcare, a village struggling for want of some basic necessity, or long-standing prejudices arising from a legacy of hostility between different groups—when a Bahá'í community's efforts in the field of expansion and consolidation bring it into contact with these situations and many others, it will be drawn to respond to such realities as its circumstances permit. In reflecting on such situations it becomes evident

that, within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society. All these efforts are pursued according to a common framework for action, and this above all else brings coherence to the overall pattern of activity.

384.18The initial stirrings of grassroots social action begin to be seen in a cluster as the availability of human resources increases and capacity for a wider range of tasks develops. Villages have proven to be notably fertile ground from which social action initiatives have emerged and been sustained, but in urban settings too, friends living there have succeeded in carrying out activities and projects suited to the social environment, at times by working with local schools, agencies of civil society, or even government bodies. Social action is being undertaken in a number of important fields, including the environment, agriculture, health, the arts, and particularly education. Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, and especially as the study of specific institute courses stimulates greater activity in this area, we expect to see a proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a people. Some of these community-based initiatives will require basic administrative structures to sustain their work. Where conditions are propitious, Local Spiritual Assemblies will need to be encouraged to learn how best to cultivate new, fledgling initiatives and to foster efforts that show promise. In some cases, the needs associated with a particular field of endeavour will warrant the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, and we anticipate the appearance of more such organizations during the coming Plan. For their part, National Spiritual Assemblies will have to find ways in which they can stay well informed about what is being learned at the grassroots of their communities and analyse the experience being gained; in some places this will call for the creation of an entity dedicated to following social action. Looking across the Bahá'í world, we are delighted to see how much momentum has already been generated in this area of endeavour through the encouragement and support of the Bahá'í International Development Organization.

384.19Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs. However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building

activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts. This has particular implications for Local Spiritual Assemblies. In places where the activities of the Plan have attained a degree of prevalence, the Assembly begins to be viewed more widely as a source of moral insight. Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation. We are pleased with the steps that have already been taken to learn how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and from the experience of Bahá'í communities can be brought to bear upon pressing social issues at the local level; much more is sure to be learned in this regard during the Nine Year Plan.

384.20We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations. Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

Educational endeavours and the training institute

384.21The importance of education to a Bahá'í conception of spiritual and social transformation can hardly be overestimated. "Consider", Bahá'u'lláh states, "the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings dependeth upon it." The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Preeminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional training institutes operating with such proficiency

around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans. Building capacity for service within communities by enabling ever-increasing numbers of individuals to benefit from the institute process will continue to be a central feature of the Plans in the present series. The capacity for community development that has already emerged, represented by hundreds of thousands of individuals who are able to serve as tutors, animators, or children's class teachers, is a resource of historic consequence.

384.22When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever-deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release. Although the task of developing curricular materials to support this purpose is a long-term undertaking, existing materials already aim to build capacity for a broad range of initiatives. Moreover, they offer a seamless coherent educational experience from the age of five, upwards to the age of junior youth, and through into adulthood, and they serve as a direct counterpart to the pattern of activities unfolding at the grassroots. In relation to this, we have been pleased to see the rich insights that the friends in different parts of the world, in a variety of social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of community development. If these insights, and those still to emerge, are to benefit Bahá'í communities more widely, systems for the preparation and refinement of educational materials will need to be extended. With this in mind, we will soon set out the approach that will guide this work over the coming years.

384.23With respect to raising the capacity of institutes to deliver each of the three stages of the educational process, we are glad to see that attention is increasingly being given to enhancing the quality of the educational experience itself, in addition to expanding the system for its delivery. A critical requirement is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections. Many training institute boards have been supported in this regard by the collaborative groups described in our message to your 2015 conference. In places, separate teams have also begun to focus respectively on children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, identifying factors that contribute to their effectiveness and finding ways to assist the friends involved in each avenue of service to further raise their own capacity. The Auxiliary Board members in a region and their assistants are often the first to see to it that what is being learned reaches a wider number of friends across adjoining clusters and within centres of intense activity. Individuals with a depth of experience in the promotion of

institute activities are serving as resource persons, and they have proved instrumental in helping institutes at an earlier point of development to advance. Nevertheless, in general it is Counsellors who are ensuring that each institute becomes familiar with the many essential insights being generated by their sister agencies in neighbouring countries and regions. Counsellors have arranged for institutes to be organized into groupings of varying sizes to enable the lessons that are being learned by the most experienced institutes to be shared more widely, increasingly through the means of formal seminars. All these arrangements will need to be strengthened during the next Plan. In places where a site for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme is operating, collaboration between the learning site and associated institutes has already proved extremely fruitful, and it should intensify; their pursuit of a common goal and their shared desire to see clusters advance create ideal conditions for the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance to flourish. The knowledge that has now accumulated about factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the institute process is extensive, and we look to the International Teaching Centre to organize what has been learned and make it available to you.

384.24What we have described above is an educational system in a state of constant refinement. This requires many individuals to lend their support to its further development; it also requires institutes, and Bahá'í institutions more generally, to plan ahead and ensure that individuals who have developed considerable capacity in supporting the community's educational endeavours are able to sustain their service and can, when their life circumstances change, continue to be involved in the work of the institute in other meaningful ways. Appreciating the effectiveness of the institute process, every follower of Bahá'u'lláh will feel a desire to contribute to its advancement in some way—not least, the Bahá'í youth. Institutes know well that releasing the potential possessed by young people is, for them, a sacred charge; we now ask that Bahá'í youth view the future development of the institute in the very same light. At the vanguard of a nine-year, community-wide endeavour to bring the institute to a higher level of functioning, we expect to see a broad movement of youth setting the standard. They should seize every opportunity—in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction—to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute's programmes. Some youth will be able to devote a period of service—perhaps even successive years—to the provision of education, especially to those younger than themselves; for many, support for the institute's activities will be an ever-present dimension of their lives throughout their own education and as they seek a livelihood from their calling in this world; but for none should it be anything less than a cherished commitment.

384.25In many parts of the world, a natural outcome of the participation of individuals and families in the institute process has been an increased consciousness of the importance of education in all its forms. Friends serving as children's class teachers take a keen interest in the broad educational development of those they teach, while friends serving as tutors and animators

are naturally concerned with the extent to which those approaching or entering adulthood—girls and boys alike—can access and benefit from education of many kinds, not limited to the courses offered by the institute itself. For instance, they can encourage young people to look towards apprenticeships or university studies. We have been struck by how, in many communities, engagement in the institute process by large numbers has gradually reshaped this aspect of culture within a population. The institutions of the Faith will need to take responsibility for ensuring that, as consciousness is raised in this way, the noble aspirations that arise in young people as a result—aspirations to acquire the education and training that will allow them to offer a lifetime of meaningful service to their society—can be fulfilled. The long-term development of a community and, ultimately, of a nation, from generation to generation, depends to a large degree on the effort made to invest in those who will assume responsibility for collective social progress.

384.26This exploration of the centrality of education to a community founded on Bahá'í principles would be incomplete without a further observation. Shoghi Effendi has laid great stress on the importance of striving, through "constant endeavour", to obtain "a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation". The training institute has no parallel as an instrument for the systematic exposure of limitless numbers of souls to the life-giving waters of the Revelation and the inexhaustible meaning of the Word of God. But the friends' efforts to increase their understanding of the Faith and its teachings are of course not limited to participation in the institute process. Indeed, one strong indicator of an institute's effectiveness is the thirst it cultivates within those who engage with its materials to continue to study the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh—individually, but also collectively, whether in formal spaces created by the institutions or in more informal settings. Beyond the study of the Revelation itself, the implications that the teachings hold for countless fields of human endeavour are of great importance. A notable example of one form of education through which young believers are becoming better acquainted with a Bahá'í perspective on issues relevant to the progress of humanity is participation in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. Given the vastness of the ocean of the Revelation, it will be apparent that exploring its depths is a lifelong occupation of every soul who would tread the path of service.

384.27As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.

Raising capacity for administration at all levels

384.28Eighty years ago, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian described

Bahá'í administration as "the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living". Today, at the beginning of the second century of the Formative Age, the shape of Bahá'í administration has developed considerably, and its continued development will be essential for the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

384.29The administration of the Faith at the grassroots is, of course, intimately connected with the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies. These nascent Houses of Justice are described by Shoghi Effendi as "the chief sinews of Bahá'í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure", and he greatly emphasizes the importance of their formation. In 1995, we called for the reinstitution of the practice that required all Local Assemblies, including those being newly formed, to be elected on the First Day of Ridván rather than at any other time of year. This development was related to the fact that, while believers from outside a locality could assist with the electoral process, the primary responsibility for electing any Assembly and maintaining its operations rests with the Bahá'ís of that place; much depends on their readiness for undertaking administrative activity. It has been seen, in recent years, how a sense of Bahá'í identity can gradually gain strength in an area as a pattern of action grounded in the teachings becomes established among individuals and families living there. Thus, a community will often have attained a certain level of capacity in relation to community-building endeavours by the time the formation of a Local Assembly becomes possible. As this point approaches—and it should not be unduly delayed—efforts have to be made to cultivate an appreciation for the formal aspects of community life associated with Bahá'í administration. The Local Assembly that emerges in such a milieu is likely to be well aware of its responsibility to encourage and strengthen those activities which help to sustain a vibrant community. However, it will also need to gain proficiency in discharging a wide range of other responsibilities, and the support provided to it by your auxiliaries and their assistants will be vitally important. In our message to your 2010 conference, we described the developmental path of such an Assembly, and we referred to various dimensions of its functioning that would need to receive attention, including its ability to manage and develop a Local Fund and, in time, to support initiatives of social action and to interact with agencies of local government and civil society. The benefits that accrue to a community being served by such an Assembly need no elaboration.

384.30In your interactions with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, we ask that you devote attention to the matter of establishing Local Spiritual Assemblies and consolidating their operations, especially in areas where this aspect of growth may have received less emphasis. We anticipate this will contribute to a rapid rise in the number of Local Assemblies formed year on year. In some countries, your consultations will need to include consideration of whether in rural areas existing arrangements for defining the boundaries of each locality are adequate.

384.31One compelling insight which has emerged is that the extent to which the station and leadership of a Local Assembly is recognized in a community is

related to how deeply the believers appreciate the sacredness of the electoral process and their duty to participate in it, in an atmosphere wholly free from the taint of suasion or worldly attitudes about power. As consciousness is raised in a community about the spiritual principles underlying Bahá'í elections, a new conception is formed of what it means for someone to be called to serve on an institution, and understanding grows of how the individual, the community, and the Local Assembly and its agencies relate to one another. Where systematic effort has been made to stimulate conversations in a community about the formation of the Local Assembly and its purpose, and to sustain those conversations year after year, the strength of the elected body and the dynamism of community life reinforce each other.

384.32This reciprocal effect has been especially noticeable over the last two years in places where we have approved the adoption of a two-stage electoral process for a Local Spiritual Assembly, an approach which traces its origins to instructions given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Spiritual Assembly of Tihrán. Twenty-two Local Assemblies, spread over eight countries, have already begun to be elected by this method during this period. Similar in many respects to the election of a National Spiritual Assembly, it involves the division of a locality into units from each of which one or more delegates are elected, after which the delegates elect the members of the Local Assembly. As the number of Bahá'ís residing in a locality grows large and the community's capacity for managing complexity increases, the case for implementing a two-stage electoral process becomes commensurately stronger. Accordingly, in the coming Plan, we expect to authorize the adoption of this method for electing a Local Assembly in many more places, both urban and rural, where conditions make such a step timely.

384.33A Local Spiritual Assembly maintains a keen interest in learning how best to advance the community-building work within its jurisdiction, and as such it consults regularly with friends involved in coordinating endeavours in the cluster. It follows closely the development of any centres of intense activity in the locality, especially by offering support to the teams of believers who have emerged there and are stimulating the process of growth. In general, the more the intensification of activity requires organizational arrangements at the level of the locality or in parts of the locality—say, arranging campaigns of home visits, accompanying families who are holding devotional meetings, or encouraging them to form groups to work together—the more prominent the role that can be assumed by the Local Assembly in this regard. In localities where large numbers are being welcomed into the embrace of Bahá'í activities, and where the complexity of an Assembly's work and manifold responsibilities is increasing, the Assembly sometimes finds that its Secretary needs to be supported by a staffed office, and eventually, the need for a befitting local Hazíratu'lQuds becomes more pressing.

384.34As Local Assemblies begin to take on a greater and greater share of responsibility for nurturing the development of the community, institutions at the regional and national levels must become more systematic in their efforts to support them. We have been pleased to see this need being addressed in methodical ways, for instance by National Assemblies or Regional Councils

convening periodic meetings with the Secretaries and other officers of Local Assemblies to consult about the unfoldment of specific lines of action.

384.35Where a Regional Council has developed an enhanced capacity for administration, including an ability to provide appropriate kinds of support to many clusters at once, this has been conducive to the accelerated progress of the whole region. Our message to your 2015 conference indicated that in smaller countries where the establishment of Regional Councils is not required, a formal structure would need to emerge at the national level which would be charged with helping clusters to advance. We ask that, in countries where this has not yet occurred, you now consult with National Assemblies about the steps that can be taken to appoint that formal structure, namely, a National Growth Committee with three, five, or seven members. The National Assembly will need to give this agency the necessary latitude to foster the movement of clusters, drawing relevant insights from what has been learned about Regional Councils in this regard. Its responsibilities can include appointing Area Teaching Committees and encouraging them in their plans, arranging for the deployment of homefront pioneers, supporting teaching projects, and distributing core literature. The Committee will benefit from being able to collaborate closely with the training institute, itself an agency of the National Assembly, and with the Auxiliary Board members serving the country, and it will also be able to communicate directly with the relevant Counsellor. While a National Assembly will naturally wish to maintain an ongoing familiarity with the work of the Committee and provide it with guidance, support, and encouragement, creating an entity that is wholly occupied with promoting growth should enable an Assembly to give greater attention to other important matters. In countries where Councils have not been formed but could be established eventually, a National Growth Committee should also be appointed at this time.

384.36As the spiritual energies released by earnest pursuit of the Plan surge, they meet resistance from the countervailing forces that hold humanity back from attaining full maturity. In the face of such forces, the vitality of the various lines of action being followed at the local level needs to be preserved and fortified. This critical responsibility is of special relevance to the members of the two Auxiliary Boards, whose numerous, demanding duties keep them closely connected to conditions at the grassroots and alert to anything that might affect the spirit of a community. Across different cultures and social environments, they must assist the friends to face different kinds of challenges: to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal; to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity’s period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds; to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook; to put the equality of women and men into practice; to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative; to put one’s support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference; to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects; to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests; to reject the opiate of consumerism; to turn

away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God. These, and many more besides, constitute a formidable set of responsibilities for the company of the faithful to fulfil as they navigate what are sure to be tumultuous years in the life of humanity. Your auxiliaries, who have so creditably acquitted themselves in advancing the process of entry by troops, must be equal to all such challenges whenever and wherever they arise. Through the power of their good example and the clarity of their good counsel, may they help the friends to grow in faith, assurance, and commitment to a life of service, and accompany them as they build communities that are havens of peace, places where a harried and conflict-scarred humanity may find shelter.

384.37Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society-building power of the Faith shine forth.

A historic mission

384.38We hope to have impressed upon you, in these pages, that the present-day capacity of the Bahá'í community, combined with the discipline it has achieved through adherence to a coherent framework for action, has prepared it for an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material. The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than those with which it honours the glorious deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.

384.39We put great reliance on you and on National Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that, in all the efforts made to acquaint the friends with the nature of this collective enterprise, the perspective of history is kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: "Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?" The establishment of Divine Civilization is, in the words of the Guardian, "the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith". It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration,

fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth, a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart.

384.40How we long to see humanity illumined with the love of its Lord; how we long to hear His praise on every tongue. Knowing the ardency of our wish, you know then the emotion with which, when we lay our heads upon the Most Holy Threshold, we implore Bahá'u'lláh to make you, and all who cherish His precious Faith, ever more perfect channels of His ineffable grace.

The Universal House of Justice

385

Materials of the Training Institute

1 January 2022

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

385.1Over the twenty-five-year period that ended at Ridván 2021, the endeavours of training institutes to help the friends enhance their capacity for service were central to progress. When, at the beginning of the last series of global Plans, we called for systematic attention to be given to devising methods for training large numbers of believers, institutes faced the task of developing their own materials or selecting from those readily available. Generally, institutes found it challenging to develop new materials; however, those that adopted the courses prepared by the Ruhi Institute were able to make rapid progress. Therefore, as was stated in our message to you of 28 December 2005, we determined that the books of the Ruhi Institute, which had proven their efficacy, would constitute the main sequence of courses of institutes everywhere at least for the remainder of that series of Plans. The extensive use of these courses, as well as of the lessons and texts for the spiritual education of children and junior youth, expedited the advance of the institute process across the globe. Now, with the Bahá'í world embarked on a new series of global Plans, we have considered again the question of the materials of training institutes and wish to convey our conclusions.

385.2The knowledge and insights, the spiritual qualities and attitudes, and the skills and abilities for service treated in the courses of the Ruhi Institute remain vital to the efforts of Bahá'í communities. Therefore, these materials will continue to be a prominent feature of the educational endeavours of all training institutes during this new series of global Plans. We are aware that the Ruhi Institute will, during the Nine Year Plan, seek to complete the preparation of all the materials it has outlined for use in children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, and the revision of published editions as necessary in light of experience. However, beyond what it has already delineated, it is not expected to develop new materials to be used worldwide.

385.3In our message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we highlighted how pleased we have been to observe the rich body of knowledge and insights which the friends, labouring in diverse social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of the community-building process. The friends are also becoming increasingly adept at identifying needs related to growth that are emerging naturally from efforts at

the grassroots. These developments have implications for the systems for preparing and refining educational materials. We have thus concluded that it would now be propitious for more attention to be paid to extending the capacity to prepare educational materials, particularly in relation to supplementary materials and branch courses.

385.4When we addressed the question of materials for the education of children and junior youth in our message to you of 12 December 2011, we indicated that, beyond the materials that are the core of each of these programmes, teachers and animators would, often in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level, determine whether or not additional elements would be required to reinforce the educational process. The impressive advances in many parts of the world with regard to offering spiritual education to large numbers of children and junior youth have certainly involved a growing capacity of teachers and animators to wisely supplement the study of the lessons and texts with appropriate elements on the basis of their specific circumstances. Notable in this respect are elements related to artistic activity and service projects. Nonetheless, when the need to supplement the study of a particular topic has been felt across a country or region, some institutes have themselves developed or adopted additional materials and have arranged for them to be disseminated more extensively. These supplementary items have, for the most part, been simple elements, such as songs or stories. A similar experience is unfolding in relation to the main sequence of courses, although the additional materials that some institutes have introduced in this connection, which include compilations from the Bahá'í writings on specific topics and case studies of relevant experience, tend to be of a more complex nature.

385.5The flourishing of a vibrant process of spiritual education in growing numbers of clusters will require of institutes a well-developed ability to oversee the appropriate introduction of supplementary elements. In this, institutes must be as much concerned with reinforcing the educational process as with maintaining its integrity. They will thus need to bear in mind the various cautions we set out in our 12 December 2011 message. They must, of course, also guard against overwhelming the friends with diverse additional elements that, by their sheer volume, might inadvertently detract from the effective delivery of the principal materials.

385.6Concerning branch courses, how they are to emerge must be understood in the context of the dynamics in countries and regions where the community-building process is advancing with intensity. As many more friends dedicate themselves to promoting the various activities to which the study of institute courses gives rise, distinct areas of learning associated with each of these activities steadily take shape in the life of a population. Some of these areas of learning, such as those concerned with collective worship, deepening, and teaching, are supported by Area Teaching Committees, while others related to the spiritual education of children, junior youth, and youth and adults are fostered by the training institutes. Additional areas of learning supported by other agencies also gradually come into place as more and more people study the higher courses of the institute's sequence. As the endeavours in each of these areas are sustained by growing numbers of friends,

fresh insights are generated that are distinctive in that they arise from systematic effort undertaken in a particular social and cultural setting. There is an increasing understanding of what other concepts, approaches, abilities, and attitudes are essential to advancing an aspect of the community-building process. These become objects of conversation in periodic gatherings held to consult and reflect on the experience being gained. Aside from the initiatives individuals or institutions and agencies may take to respond to these needs, the institute might decide to promote the use of a supplementary material as described above. Over time, what is learned is captured by the institutions and agencies of the Faith in various documents, narrative accounts, and case studies which, in their totality, constitute a record of unfolding experience. When a sizeable body of knowledge accumulates, it becomes possible to further systematize it by developing a branch course.

385.7We have in the past likened the main sequence to the trunk of a tree that supports other courses branching from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. The preparation of such branch courses would necessarily occur over time through a pattern marked by action and reflection and in which conceptualization and activity in the field go hand in hand. For training institutes that take on this task, there are several requisites. They will need to be able to understand profoundly the content of the institute's main sequence and the pedagogical principles involved, analyse clearly the experience arising at the grassroots as activities advance, collaborate with teams of friends dedicated to the progress of specific aspects of the community-building process, operate in a learning mode, and draw into their work individuals with abilities needed for preparing materials. Once in place, the branch course would help the friends promoting the related activity to further strengthen their capacity, and it would contribute to extending the associated process of learning in the life of the population. The course would also serve as a repository of the accruing knowledge and as a means for its propagation.

385.8Developing materials of this nature is a complex exercise, and it is of course not a goal that every training institute develop its own branch courses. Training institutes, in consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Counsellors, will determine when it is timely to develop or adopt such additional educational materials. Many institutes will simply select branch courses appropriate to their needs from those of proven effectiveness created by other institutes. Beyond branch courses, it is anticipated that institutes will in the future prepare or adopt other types of courses, which may be integrated in some way into the main sequence or be offered separately. This will, naturally, require the acquisition of even greater capacity by the institutes. However, notwithstanding the far-reaching effects of their efforts, institutes are not expected to address all the educational needs of the Bahá'í community. Within divers populations, large-scale growth will lead to new educational endeavours to address other pressing demands.

385.9We are confident that, as the friends labour in all regions to release the society-building power of the Faith, the years ahead will witness a significant further expansion of the capacity of training institutes to provide spiritual

education to large numbers and to generate, apply, and disseminate knowledge. As part of its mandate to watch over the process of human resource development, we have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow closely the raising of capacity for preparing educational materials. It will establish mechanisms for supporting the institutes and for ensuring that what is learned is appropriately propagated.

385.10We will beseech the Blessed Beauty in the Holy Shrines that the operations of training institutes, these vital agencies of the Faith, may ever receive His unfailing blessings and confirmations.

The Universal House of Justice

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Message to the Auxiliary Board Members

3 January 2022

To the Auxiliary Board members throughout the world

Dearly loved Friends,

386.1On this day that we had awaited with so much anticipation to welcome you all in the Holy Land for a joint conference with the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we feel moved to write to you and express our sadness that, owing to world conditions, this longed-for gathering could not take place. The sentiments that we had hoped to express to you in person must now be conveyed from afar. But distance does not diminish the intensity of the love we have for each one of you.

386.2It is one hundred years to the day since the first public reading of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In that precious Document, He set out the obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God, for whose support the Auxiliary Boards for Propagation and Protection were originally created. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summoned the Hands of the Cause “to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things.” Reading these words at this time evokes for us the service that each of you are carrying out across the Bahá’í world. Indeed, the worldwide Bahá’í community owes a debt of gratitude to the entire institution of the Counsellors, including all those who have served as Continental Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, and assistants in years gone by. Without such devoted service from so many, the marvellous advances made in recent decades, which are evident in the world today, could not have occurred. And an indispensable contribution to that progress has been the guidance and encouragement provided by the International Teaching Centre: an institution agile and perspicacious, and wholly indefatigable.

386.3By now you have had the opportunity to become acquainted with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan and to ponder its implications. As will be apparent, the range of fields in which the believers are being asked to serve within their clusters, in order to release the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures, has broadened. Correspondingly, the range of matters to which you must give serious attention has broadened as well. Your efforts are integral to the work of developing capacity to contribute to the Bahá’í community’s various areas of endeavour, and your efforts are just

as integral to helping the friends demonstrate in action the capacity they have acquired. In attending to both of these needs, and more generally in fulfilling your responsibilities for education and the improvement of character, you of course rely a great deal on the efficacy of the institute process. Ever since its creation, the institute has been an essential instrument for your work, and equally, your energetic support has been essential to its development. It brings us much joy, then, to see the pronounced, earnest spirit of collaboration that characterizes your relationship with all those responsible for coordinating the institute's endeavours.

386.4You have no doubt read the description we presented, in our message to the Counsellors a few days ago, of how you must help the friends to find a fitting response to each of the many challenges they encounter in their pursuit of the Plan. In this regard, we feel sure you are conscious that, however beneficial the influence of your counsel, the influence of your example will be greater still. A notable strength of your office is that it connects the believers with the different levels of Bahá'í administration and reinforces the spirit of cooperation that binds them together. You have a vital duty to help raise consciousness of the purpose of Bahá'í administration and to assist with the establishment and proper functioning of new Local Spiritual Assemblies. You keep the friends connected with the plans and projects of Bahá'í institutions operating at the local, regional, and national levels. Ultimately, you strengthen the connection between the friends and the Universal House of Justice by encouraging and leading the study of messages as they emerge. The believers look to you for a sound understanding of the Plan and for a courageous example of how to put its provisions into effect, especially in teaching the Faith. Your strong familiarity with the reality of circumstances in various clusters, combined with your thorough grasp of what is required for the Cause to advance, puts you in an ideal position to make thoughtful, creative, and timely contributions to consultations about how to release the society-building power of the Faith in every setting.

386.5In addition to the foregoing, we wish to draw attention to your special role in encouraging the youth. So many youth who are now winning victories for the Cause were inspired by an Auxiliary Board member or assistant whose enthusiastic support and spirit of devotion taught them to rely on the power of divine confirmations and boldly enter the arena of service. Your responsibilities extend even further to the promotion of the education of children and junior youth, to the upliftment of the young, and to the strengthening of a pattern of family life that will produce generation after generation of consecrated souls, faithful followers of Bahá'u'lláh who have chosen the betterment of the world over the advancement of personal interests. The youth who, in the final year of the Nine Year Plan, will be carrying out acts of service to ensure its ultimate success are in many cases the children who, today, need to be nurtured in their love of the Blessed Beauty and their understanding of His mission.

386.6Beloved friends, in your moments of prayer, be assured that all your entreaties to Bahá'u'lláh are accompanied by our own supplications in the Holy Shrines on your behalf. May your movement and your stillness be guided by

the gentle winds of His Will, and may He bestow upon you the enduring bounty of being enabled to serve Him in accordance with His wish.
The Universal House of Justice
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Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
4 January 2022
To the Bahá'ís of the World
Dearly loved Friends,
387.1We are at this moment with the company of the Continental Counsellors—the great majority of them present in the Holy Land, while some who could not travel here join from a distance—and the sixth and final day of their conference, focused on the upcoming Nine Year Plan, is about to conclude. There is so much that could be shared with you about the spirit of this conference, as seen in its participants. Steeped in experience, they have been eyewitnesses to the rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world, and they brim with confidence about what you can further accomplish. We could not have wished for a keener, more insightful grasp of what is called for in the next Plan than was demonstrated in the consultations of these consecrated souls. But this, of course, is just the beginning. When the Counsellors return to the countries of five continents, they will bring to you and those who serve with you all that they have absorbed. They and their auxiliaries will be at your side as you prepare for this immense collective enterprise—especially through your participation in the wave of conferences soon to sweep across the globe, where Bahá'u'lláh's universal summons to work for the betterment of the world will galvanize the assembled well-wishers of humanity.
387.2A confluence of circumstances in the world at large and within the Faith has made this a charged moment. The global challenges now facing humanity are a severe test of its willingness to put aside short-term self-interest and come to terms with this stark spiritual and moral reality: there is but one, interconnected human family and it shares one precious homeland. At this same moment, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are examining anew the possibilities before them to release the society-building power of the Faith. This Plan will test their stamina, their willpower, and the strength of their love for those who dwell alongside them. They will help to nurture, in every place, communities of common purpose that recognize the power of unity to heal, to transcend. Within these communities, every soul may find sanctuary, and in the friends' many endeavours for worship and praise, for education, for social transformation, for the development of communities—in all these, every soul may find room to grow and to serve. We are stirred by the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The small shall be made great, and the powerless shall be given strength; they that are of tender age shall become the children of the Kingdom, and those that have gone astray shall be guided to their heavenly home."
387.3When Bahá'u'lláh sent forth His glad tidings, the devoted believers who could carry His message to humanity were so few in number. Today, praise be to God, the devotion of the friends is undimmed and their numbers have soared. May their hearts be fortified through the power of His Word and, on every

occasion and in every space, may they shine with the light of the splendours of heaven. Such will be the prayer on our tongues and the hope in our breasts when, today, with the Counsellors, we enter the Shrine of the Blessed Beauty to supplicate on your behalf.

The Universal House of Justice

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International Financial Collaboration Programme

9 February 2022

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

388.1In recent decades, the international financial collaboration goals programme has enabled selected national communities to provide financial assistance to their sister communities around the world. The approach adopted by the Universal House of Justice has been to invite selected National Spiritual Assemblies, at the beginning of each Plan, to assess how much they could contribute towards the capital expenses of other national communities during the course of that Plan. On the basis of these estimates, the House of Justice then called upon them to assist communities in various countries as and when specific needs came to its attention.

388.2During the Five Year Plan that concluded at Ridván 2021, 51 National Assemblies contributed approximately US$6,000,000 to over 50 national Bahá'í communities around the globe. This magnificent expression of solidarity has delighted the House of Justice. These funds were used to meet a variety of needs, such as the acquisition of land for multi-purpose facilities in selected clusters, the construction of local Bahá'í Centres, the renovation and enlargement of Bahá'í properties, and the purchase of furniture and equipment necessary for teaching and administrative work. Beyond that, the generosity with which geographically distant national communities have assisted each other has reinforced the bonds of unity and solidarity between them. It is a demonstration of the "spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance" that the House of Justice describes, in its 30 December 2021 message, as being "so essential for progress".

388.3Given the duration and high expectations of this Nine Year Plan, you will no doubt appreciate that the financial needs of the communities around the world are likely to be considerable. We have been asked to inform you that your National Assembly is one of 57 Assemblies now being invited to participate in the international financial collaboration goals programme for this Plan. The House of Justice would therefore appreciate receiving from you by 15 April 2022 an estimate of the amount you can offer, whatever it might be, for financial collaboration during the coming nine years. Such an estimate would preferably break down the total sum you can make available, indicating how much you anticipate you can provide each year. Kindly note that if monies remain from the pledge your Assembly made at the start of the previous Plan, these may be carried forward to form part of your new pledge.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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Age and Membership on Bahá’í Institutions
20 February 2022
To a National Spiritual Assembly
Dear Bahá’í Friends,
389.1The Universal House of Justice has observed that several of your members are of an advanced age. We have been asked to convey to you the following.
389.2As you are aware, with respect to age, the Writings do not specify an upper age limit for service on the institutions, and the House of Justice has made no decision in this regard. And in the matter of resignation from Bahá’í institutions, decision-making has been guided by the principles initially laid down by the Guardian and elaborated by the House of Justice that resignation is discouraged. Those who are called upon to serve on the institutions of the Faith are to endeavor to uphold the verdict of the electors and lend their share to the service of the Faith, regarding their membership as a “sacred obligation” that is “gladly and confidently accepted.”
389.3Recognizing the toll that age can take on the capacity for service of even the most consecrated friends, however, the House of Justice has in recent years provided additional guidance. For example, it has called upon electors to take into account age as one factor in their determination for whom to vote. It has also permitted those believers who pass the age of seventy to approach their Assemblies and ask to be relieved of their membership, and has advised their Assemblies to acquiesce to this request, unless special circumstances exist that would render such a decision inopportune….
389.4Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines on your behalf.
With loving Bahá’í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat
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Naw-Rúz 2022 Message to the Bahá’ís of Iran
Naw-Rúz 179
To the faithful and patient followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the sacred land of Iran
390.1As we write these lines to those devoted followers of the Divine Beloved on the occasion of this auspicious day, the Festival of Naw-Rúz, to convey to you our love and affection, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh throughout the world are directing their energies towards reflecting deeply on the requirements of the new stage of their endeavours. Together, and with like-minded individuals, and with large numbers of those who desire the betterment of the world and the well-being of its peoples, they are engaged in conversation and the exchange of insights, and are consulting about the manner of their participation in the process of spiritual transformation and the promotion of the welfare of their societies in accordance with the teachings of Him Who is the Lifegiver of the world. Reports indicate the unprecedented response of the loved ones of God and their friends and co-workers who, rank upon rank, are participating in conferences convened in numerous parts of the world and in different settings, particularly at the local level. This response is an indication both of the growing capacity of the Bahá’í community and

of the ever-growing spiritual receptivity of the peoples of the world. These friends are eager to attain a dynamic spiritual life and achieve a profound transformation of social relations that is founded on the principle of the oneness of humanity.

390.2A complete century has now elapsed since the start of the Formative Age, which began with the Ascension of the peerless Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The extent of the growth of the Bahá’í community in the first century of this Age, the diffusion of the light of the Faith to the furthest corners of the world, the entry of individuals from every people and nation into its fold, the expansion of the circle of its endeavours, and the rise in the degree of vision and insight on the part of its followers with regard to their mission—all these, truly, astound the human mind. One marvels at how, after the departure of their kind Master, His followers throughout the world—that handful of feeble ones devoted to their peerless Beloved, those lovers who were burning in the fire of separation from Him, mournful and anxious in His absence—succeeded through unshakeable determination and matchless sacrifice to carry out the admonitions of their far-sighted Master contained in His Tablets of the Divine Plan, and were enabled to establish the Cause of God upon so strong a foundation. Assuredly, confirmations made the drops to become seas, and endowed the atoms with the splendour of the sun.

390.3In this luminous, epic drama, the share of the lovers of the Abhá Beauty and valiant knights of the Lord in the sacred Cradle of the Cause of God is great indeed. It is clear in the mirror of history, and reciting its countless evidences is obviously impossible within these few lines. A river of ink is required and a mountain of paper needed. The contribution of those dear friends to the protection and progress of the Cause of God at every juncture, to the very limits of their means and despite every obstacle and restriction, is worthy of admiration and of endless praise. Future generations will undoubtedly recount it in detail. At this moment in history, reflection upon the outcome of a whole century of effort and labour brings to mind the weighty and celebrated statement of the beloved Guardian, who, after enumerating the achievements of the Bahá’ís of the world, referred to the sacrifices of the oppressed and courageous believers in Iran and described with these perspicuous words a spiritual truth that is a mystery from the invisible Realm: “These have come about solely from the powerful effect of the bitter cruelty tasted as if it were purest honey all these long years by those who are overwhelmed in tribulation at the hands of the malevolent in that sorely afflicted land.”

390.4After a hundred years of endeavour—and of sacrifice, trial, and learning—all that the Bahá’ís of the world have attained, and which, in the past twenty-five years in particular, took a new form and acquired new systems and organization, has prepared them for the fulfilment of an exalted spiritual and moral mission. Its principal purpose is to release that mighty and heavenly power that brings about the betterment of the world, a power latent in the reality and essence of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, so that it may, day by day, become increasingly manifest and conduce to the building of society. The release of this power, briefly stated, implies a profound inner and outer transformation. Its purpose is the appearance of a heavenly

character, the emergence of conduct and manner befitting the station of a human being, and the manifestation of unity and harmony in the various strata of society. This creative power promotes and brings about the spiritual, moral, and intellectual progress of peoples, so that they may concentrate on both material and spiritual education and may advance in knowledge and understanding; that the younger generation may become equipped, as rational and loyal citizens, with the requirements of service to humanity; that contending individuals, tribes, and peoples may become united; that thoughts and perspectives may harmonize around the axis of unity and oneness, in order that this foundational principle and other divine teachings may be manifested in practical ways in collective life; that through the strengthening of cooperation and goodwill, collaboration and solidarity, the pillars of society may be fortified and social cohesion may increase; that individuals may become as members of one family; that progressive and noble societies may emerge; that the culture of society may be affected by these developments, and both reflect and reinforce them; and that the three protagonists in this collective enterprise—the individual, the community, and the institutions—each in its own reality as well as in relation to one another, may make considerable advances. The signs of the appearance of this power are present in even the most basic activities inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. But in those places, whether villages in rural areas or neighbourhoods in cities, where the spiritual enterprise has advanced to higher levels and where large numbers of souls have joined their voices to the call of the Faith for the construction of a society based on divine principles, the release of this power has become an obvious reality and its effects plain to see. The process of learning pursued by the Bahá'í world along this path and the coherence of the areas of endeavour of the community of the Greatest Name have been described in detail in our message of 30 December 2021, and you will have seen that this new stage in the labours of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world will, for a quarter of a century, be directed towards learning more about the release of this power and its manifestation in diverse places in the world.

390.5In the closing years of the first century of the Formative Age, one of the most significant advances of the Bahá'í community in countless parts of the world has been that the dynamism of the youth and their activities has not been limited to their acquisition of perfections, their efforts to prepare themselves, and the service they render to society. There has been a considerable expansion of their loving enthusiasm to be sources of encouragement and motivation, collaborators and companions, guides and supporters of other members of the community, to the degree that, in most countries of the world, younger generations now walk alongside others in the front ranks of the community and shoulder greater responsibilities than before. Witnessing this groundswell of love and the appearance of this enhanced capacity prompted us to make possible their participation in Bahá'í elections at a younger age. At a time when, more than ever before, materialism is inducing souls, whether in societies of the East or the West, to be occupied with the pursuit of beguiling and ephemeral aims and desires, the dazzling lustre shed by the Bahá'í youth in recent years is a reflection of this

statement of the Blessed Beauty: “Blessed is he who in the prime of his youth and the heyday of his life will arise to serve the Cause of the Lord of the beginning and of the end, and adorn his heart with His love. The manifestation of such a grace is greater than the creation of the heavens and of the earth.”

390.6In this context, when we view the Bahá’í youth in the hallowed land of Iran, we are filled with awe. Their spirit of steadfastness and their commitment to their spiritual mission in the path of service to their sacred homeland and its people, in spite of the countless injustices and numberless wrongs they suffer, have made them models and examples to all the youth of the Bahá’í world, for they have sallied forth in the arena of love and fidelity to the Abhá Beauty, endeavouring to attain heavenly qualities and acquire knowledge and insight, while at the same time striving to fulfil their spiritual responsibilities. The intrepid youth in the Cradle of the Faith must know that they are the pride of the Bahá’í world and should commit to heart and memory the lofty aim that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has envisaged for them: “‘Abdu’l-Bahá eagerly anticipates that each one of you may become even as a fearless lion moving in the pastures of human perfection and a musk-laden breeze wafting over the meads of virtue.”

390.7Faithful and long-standing friends of the Abhá Beauty: At a time when the world is in turmoil and its order shaken, when its peoples are in a state of fear and anxiety and exposed to dangers and difficulties, when the heart of every conscientious person burns with anguish, and when the global Bahá’í community, in response to the condition of the world and its peoples, has once again committed itself to discharge its spiritual and social mission and to propagate a culture of peace and unity, of tolerance and amity, throughout the world, we are certain that the friends of God in Iran, too, will gird up the loins of endeavour and, more than ever before, strive to walk the path of service and, in collaboration with other people of goodwill, determine to help society in their homeland; to open wide the circle of unity and extend the compass of oneness; to seek to put into practice the teachings of God for the betterment of the world and find suitable spaces in which to share with their well-intentioned compatriots the experience they have gained and continue to gain in this path; to participate in the constructive and diverse discourses of society; and inspired by the teachings and reliant on the community’s experience, to make evident the practicability of the different dimensions of the principles of peace and justice in this radiant age. Through their conduct, let them become embodiments of the divine admonitions, and through their actions, let them become servants of the world of humanity. Let them pay special attention to the culture of their own community so that the divine precepts may become ever more manifest in their individual and collective lives, and their capacities may increasingly blossom. What evokes our admiration is that, despite numerous limitations, those friends are well aware of their spiritual obligations, and they endeavour, to the extent possible, to benefit from what their spiritual brothers and sisters throughout the world have learned and the experience they have acquired.

390.8We adorn the ending of this message with words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the

flame of Whose perfect example was at every moment during this past year aglow in the hearts, thoughts, and deeds of the people of Bahá. A brief address which that luminous Being delivered to the believers in the final hours of His abundantly fruitful travels to America ended with the following words. Consider with what eloquence the Centre of the Covenant describes the perpetual aims of Bahá'ís and sums up, even as distilled nectar, their abiding duties:

Turn all your thoughts toward bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! lest ye offend any heart. Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, care for every sick one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one, and shelter those who are overshadowed by fear.

In brief, let each one of you be as a lamp shining forth with the light of the virtues of the world of humanity. Be trustworthy, sincere, affectionate and replete with chastity. Be illumined, be spiritual, be divine, be glorious, be quickened of God, be a Bahá'í.

390.9Beloved friends: We greet you and all the pure-hearted people of Iran at the start of the new year, and offer prayers in the Holy Shrines that struggles and conflicts may cease, the light of peace and reconciliation shine forth, and the tabernacle of unity be pitched in the midmost heart of the world.

The Universal House of Justice

391

Response of Bahá'ís to the Situation in Ukraine

1 April 2022

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

391.1The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 3 March 2022, in which you express your deep sadness at the events in Ukraine and ask about the response that the House of Justice and the friends can make in this situation. We have been asked to convey the following.

391.2Your concern for the well-being of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples at this time that has prompted you to write is warmly acknowledged. The heart of a Bahá'í cannot help but be affected by the torrent of news and images depicting the plight and suffering of the hundreds of thousands of souls who are caught up in such a devastating ordeal. As you can appreciate, the challenge now confronting Europe is yet another manifestation of the disintegration of a lamentably defective world order described in such vivid terms by the beloved Guardian.

391.3You may be interested to know that, within the limits of their capacity and the uncertain circumstances, Bahá'ís inside and outside Ukraine are responding directly to the crisis. The believers in the country are supporting their compatriots to the extent possible, and the friends in the neighboring countries have arisen to support Bahá'í and other refugees. Reports have been received of efforts initiated by Bahá'ís who are medical professionals to travel to the region to volunteer medical care to the victims, and the Bahá'í International Development Organization has reached out to all of the relevant National Spiritual Assemblies to encourage and assist with their efforts. Moreover, funds have been provided to the National Spiritual Assembly

of Ukraine from the Humanitarian Relief Fund, established some years ago by the House of Justice, to which Bahá'ís worldwide have contributed.

391.4Sadly, the war in Ukraine is but the latest of the unfolding tragedies and hardships humanity has inflicted upon itself as a result of its refusal, or inability, to establish a just order. Many of these dire incidents do not receive the widespread attention of the world, but are no less severe in their impact upon divers populations. The ultimate resolution is the embrace of the healing remedy brought by the Divine Physician, first in the form of the Lesser Peace, as you have observed, and then through attainment of the Most Great Peace. Prayer and acts of service may seem like a feeble and slow response when weapons of destruction are fired; they are, however, the means by which, ultimately, those weapons will be silenced forever.

391.5You are assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your efforts in the path of service to the Cause of God and to humanity may attract heavenly confirmations, and that every affected soul may be surrounded with the unerring protection and unceasing grace of the Ancient Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

392

Development Concerning the Construction of Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

8 April 2022

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

392.1A major fire broke out earlier today at the construction site of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The fire has now been extinguished and no one has been injured. The Holy Site of the Ridván Garden has not been affected.

392.2Time will be required to assess the extent of the damage that has been caused and the remedial work needed. More information will be provided in this regard when it becomes available.

392.3While this is a considerable setback for the project, the steps required to recover from it and for the construction to resume will begin as expeditiously as possible.

The Universal House of Justice

393

Update on the Construction of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

14 April 2022

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

393.1Further to the message of the Universal House of Justice dated 8 April 2022 concerning the fire at the construction site of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we have been asked to share with you the following update.

393.2The distress with which the friends around the world received the news of the fire testifies to the depth of their love for 'Abdu'l-Bahá and their longing for the completion of His Shrine. The House of Justice has been greatly moved by the outpouring of heartfelt love, the effusive expressions of support, and the untempered resilience and determination that are evident in the messages from individuals and institutions alike. Although investigations are

yet to conclude, initial information suggests that the fire was the result of an unfortunate accident. Intensified by prevailing windy conditions, the fire led to loss of building material, destruction of the temporary formwork and scaffolding, and damage to portions of certain walls. Fortunately, the completed concrete structures remain intact, and the project is covered by insurance.

393.3Despite this disruption and loss of several months of work, the project team has already taken steps to move the project forward. It has the full confidence of the House of Justice. As the damage to the sections most affected by the fire is considered and addressed, the focus of the construction will shift to completing work on other aspects of the project, including the north plaza. The construction of a visitors' centre and other related facilities is also to commence shortly. In addition, the cutting and shaping of the marble cladding for the trellis in Italy and the manufacturing of the glazed glass in Portugal continue unabated.

393.4While no specific completion date for the project has been set by the House of Justice, it shares the eager anticipation of the believers worldwide of the completion of the edifice and its surroundings and, ultimately, the transfer of the sacred remains of the beloved Master to their final resting place.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

394

Institutional Meeting for Eastern Europe

15 April 2022

To the Believers Gathered at the Institutional Meeting for Eastern Europe

Dearly loved Friends,

394.1As we supplicate at the Sacred Threshold for the successful launch of the Nine Year Plan throughout the world, our thoughts are especially with you who have come together in the heart of a region that is, at this dramatic hour, beset with so much suffering and uncertainty. We are deeply touched by the unified endeavours of the peoples of your lands to respond to the immediate crisis by providing assistance and shelter to those afflicted and displaced. In the midst of this tragedy, multitudes throughout Eastern Europe are searching once again for answers to existential questions. What else but the divine remedy of Bahá'u'lláh can heal their wounds and provide them with hope and vision for a better world? Where else can so many children and youth find the promise of a society founded on truth and justice if not within the community-building endeavours of the Cause of the Comforter of the world? We look to you who have been called to serve on the institutions and agencies of the Faith to exert a mighty effort in each of your countries to attract souls in significant numbers to His message, especially in clusters where a programme of growth is under way, and to draw on the methods and instruments of the Plan to address the needs and aspirations of your populations.

394.2As you set your objectives for the coming cycles, you should keep in mind the urgency of the situation at hand and the magnitude of the global enterprise about to begin and ensure that your efforts excel all those you have previously

made. In recent months, the people of your region have been stirred to a new consciousness and have demonstrated great resourcefulness and initiative. Let this be evidence of the widespread capacity that exists to shoulder the work of the Cause. Seize the moment to aid and empower receptive souls to spearhead the community-building process, and trust in their ability to take charge of the growth and consolidation of communities.

394.3Alas, dramatic upheavals have periodically plagued Eastern Europe, the most recent of which has shaken the world. You who are the spiritual descendants of the great teachers of the Cause in that region hold the key to the ultimate resolution of the source of people's suffering. We assure you of our abiding love and fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines that you and your communities may fulfil the vital part you are destined to play in the upliftment of your societies.

The Universal House of Justice

395

Ridván Message 2022

Ridván 2022

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

395.1A year of preparation and reflection, as well as of great exertion, has concluded, distinguished by the efforts of the friends worldwide to mark the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, including by sending representatives to participate in a special event honouring Him in the Holy Land. Through these efforts, the inspiration offered by the life of 'Abdu'lBahá has been felt by countless souls and not only Bahá'ís. His concern for every member of the human family, His teaching work, His promotion of undertakings for education and social well-being, His profound contributions to discourses in both the East and the West, His heartfelt encouragement of projects to construct Houses of Worship, His shaping of early forms of Bahá'í administration, His cultivation of varied aspects of community life—all these complementary facets of His life were a reflection of His constant and complete dedication to serving God and serving humanity. Beyond being a towering figure of moral authority and surpassing spiritual insight, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a pure channel through which the forces released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh could act upon the world. To comprehend the society-building power possessed by the Faith, one need look no further than the achievements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His ministry and the transformative effects of the guidance that flowed unceasingly from His pen. So many of the marvellous advances made by the present-day Bahá'í community—which were surveyed in our message to you last Ridván—trace their origins to the actions, decisions, and directions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

395.2How fitting, then, that the Bahá'í community's collective tribute to its perfect Exemplar should form the prelude to its commencement of a major undertaking focused on the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The areas of endeavour that fall within the scope of the Nine Year Plan, and of the current series of Plans, are directed towards the fulfilment of this overarching objective. It is also the focus of the more

than 10,000 conferences being held across the globe to mark the launch of this great spiritual enterprise. These conferences, expected to welcome unprecedented numbers of participants, are bringing together not only Bahá'ís but many other well-wishers of humanity who share with them a longing to foster unity and better the world. Their determination and strong sense of purpose are reflected in the spirit generated at the gatherings that have already occurred, where the participants have been galvanized as much by the dynamic consultations to which they have contributed as by the collective vision explored at these joyful events. We look with eager anticipation to what the coming months and years will bring.

395.3Since we addressed our 30 December 2021 message to the Counsellors' Conference, National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils have been earnestly assessing the possibilities for intensifying the process of growth in the clusters within their jurisdiction during the Nine Year Plan. We feel it would be helpful, for the purpose of gauging the progress made over time, to view the Plan as unfolding in two phases of four and five years' duration, and National Assemblies were invited to consider the advances they expect to see in their respective communities by Ridván 2026 and then by Ridván 2031. This exercise also involved a reevaluation of cluster boundaries, and the outcome of these adjustments is that the total number of clusters in the world has risen by a quarter and now stands at over 22,000. Judging by the forecasts received, it is estimated that, by the end of the Plan, a programme of growth at some level of development will exist in around 14,000 of these clusters. From among them, the number where the programme of growth could be considered intensive is projected to climb to 11,000 over the same time period. And of these, it is anticipated that the number of clusters where the third milestone has been passed will rise above 5,000 by 2031. Without question, to make such advances will entail colossal effort over the entire duration of the Plan. Yet we find these to be worthy aspirations towards which to strive, for they represent an ambitious but serious appraisal of what lies within reach.

395.4This is telling. Such objectives could not be realistically contemplated if administrative institutions and agencies had not evolved markedly, endowing them with significantly heightened capacity to manage the affairs of a community whose activities have multiplied so quickly, embracing a vast and growing number of kindred souls. It would not be possible to aspire to such growth if a desire to learn—to act, to reflect, to capture insights, and to absorb the insights emerging elsewhere—had not been cultivated at all levels, extending to the grassroots of the community. And the effort implied by such projections would hardly be feasible if a systematic approach to the teaching work and to human resource development had not become increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í world. All this has brought about an advance in the Bahá'í community's awareness of its own identity and purpose. A determination to be outward looking in the process of community building had already become an established aspect of culture in many, many places; it has now blossomed, in a rising number of communities, into a sense of real responsibility for the spiritual and material progress of larger and larger groups within society,

well beyond the membership of the Bahá'í community itself. The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles. The significance of the developments we have described, reaching this point one hundred years after the inauguration of the Administrative Order, cannot be overlooked. In the extraordinary rise in capacity that has occurred in the last two decades—and which has made it possible for the Bahá'í world to view its endeavours in terms of the release of the society-building power of the Faith—we see incontrovertible evidence that the Cause of God has entered the sixth epoch of its Formative Age. We announced last Ridván that the widespread phenomenon of large numbers participating in Bahá'í activities, being kindled by faith, and acquiring the skills and abilities to serve their communities signalled that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan had commenced; thus, the One Year Plan, at its inception then and at its conclusion now, has come to mark a set of historic advances made by the company of the faithful. And at the threshold of a new, mighty undertaking, this united body of believers stands ready to seize the possibilities wide open before it.

395.5A prominent feature of the epoch that now ends was the erection of the last of the continental Houses of Worship and the initiation of projects to establish Houses of Worship at the national and local levels. Much has been learned, by Bahá'ís the world over, about the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and the union of worship and service it embodies. During the sixth epoch of the Formative Age, much more will be learned about the path that leads from the development within a community of a flourishing devotional life—and the service which it inspires—to the appearance of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. Consultations are beginning with various National Spiritual Assemblies, and as these proceed, we will periodically announce places where a Bahá'í House of Worship will be raised up in the coming years.

395.6Our joy at seeing the community of the Greatest Name go from strength to strength is tempered by our deep sorrow at seeing the persistence of conditions and conflicts in the world that create misery and desperate suffering—in particular, at observing the recrudescence of destructive forces that have disordered international affairs while visiting horrors upon populations. We know well and are reassured that, as Bahá'í communities have repeatedly demonstrated in many different contexts, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are committed to offering relief and support to those around them, no matter how straitened their own circumstances. But until humanity as a whole undertakes to establish its affairs on foundations of justice and truth, it is, alas, fated to stagger from one crisis to another. We pray that, if the recent outbreak of war in Europe is to yield any lessons for the future, it will serve as an urgent reminder of the course that the world must take if it is to attain genuine and enduring peace. The principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh to the monarchs and presidents of His time, and the weighty responsibilities with which He charged rulers past and present, are perhaps even more pertinent and

imperative today than when they were first recorded by His Pen. For Bahá’ís, the inexorable advance of the Major Plan of God—bringing with it ordeals and upheavals, but ultimately impelling humanity towards justice, peace, and unity—is the context within which the Minor Plan of God, with which the believers are chiefly occupied, unfolds. The dysfunctional state of present-day society makes the need for the release of the society-building power of the Faith abundantly clear and pressing. We cannot but expect that, for now, convulsions and disturbances will continue to afflict the world; you will no doubt appreciate, then, why every earnest supplication we offer for all God’s children to be relieved from bewilderment and bitter hardship is coupled with an equally heartfelt prayer for the success of the much-needed service you are rendering for the Cause of the Prince of Peace.

395.7In every cluster where the activities of the Plan are gaining momentum, we see the development of communities with the noble characteristics we described in the 30 December 2021 message. As societies experience stresses of various kinds, the followers of the Abhá Beauty must stand out more and more for their qualities of resilience and rationality, for their standard of conduct and their adherence to principle, and for the compassion, detachment, and forbearance they demonstrate in their pursuit of unity. Time and again, the distinctive characteristics and attitudes shown by the believers in periods of acute difficulty have prompted people to turn to Bahá’ís for explanation, counsel, and support, especially when the life of a society has been upset by peril and unforeseen disruptions. In sharing these observations, we are mindful that the Bahá’í community itself also experiences the effects of the forces of disintegration at work in the world. Moreover, we are conscious that the greater the friends’ efforts to promote the Word of God, the stronger the countervailing forces they will encounter, sooner or later, from various quarters. They must fortify their minds and spirits against the tests that are sure to come, lest these impair the integrity of their endeavours. But the believers know well that whatever storms lie ahead, the ark of the Cause is equal to them all. Successive stages of its voyage have seen it weather the elements and ride the waves. Now it is bound for a new horizon. The confirmations of the Almighty are the gusts that fill its sails and propel it towards its destination. And the Covenant is its lodestar, keeping the sacred vessel set on its sure and certain course. May the hosts of heaven send blessings upon all who sail within.

The Universal House of Justice

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