

according to his or her conscience, aided by prayer and meditation. The nine people who receive the most votes become the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

In each area, the Bahá'ís elect delegates to go to an annual National Convention, at which a National Spiritual Assembly is elected for the whole country. The National Assembly consists of nine people, and forms a link between the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice. The National Spiritual Assembly represents the Bahá'í community in its relations with other institutions at national level and decides upon matters which affect the entire national community. There are National Spiritual Assemblies serving almost every country in the world.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Every five years, the members of the various National Spiritual Assemblies meet together to elect the nine members of the Universal House of Justice. The Universal House of Justice is a permanent body working at Haifa, in Israel. It has a written constitution and was given certain responsibilities by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, who wrote:

"The men of God's House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people. They, in truth, are the Trustees of God among His servants and the daysprings of authority in His countries."

Because conditions are always changing, the Universal House of Justice has the function of making laws or taking action as appropriate to the particular time. It cannot change the laws of Bahá'u'lláh - Bahá'ís believe that only the next Manifestation of God can do that - but it can enact or repeal its own laws within Bahá'u'lláh's framework:

"It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book ... God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth."

BAHA'I CONSULTATION

"Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."

The Local Spiritual Assembly consults the community on matters which affect everyone. Bahá'í consultation demands that each person has an unquestioned right to fearlessly state his or her opinion, which must be listened to without criticism. Once an idea has been offered to the group, the idea belongs to the whole group, and ceases to be identified with any individual. This frees the individual from attachment to the idea.

Those taking part in Bahá'í consultation should be united in their purpose, which is to establish the full facts, to decide on the principles to be applied, and to make a decision in the best interests of all. These steps

should be preceded by prayer. At the end of the process, there should be a unanimous decision. If not, it must be decided by a majority vote. The whole community should then arise in a spirit of unity to support the decision, even if they do not agree with it. In this way, if a decision should prove to be wrong, this will soon become obvious, and it can quickly be put right.

QUALIFICATIONS TO SERVE

The Bahá'í writings give an indication of how to approach voting for the members of a Bahá'í institution:

"If we turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought ... of His (God's) grace and power. Hence it is incumbent ... to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience."

THE APPOINTED ARM

The Bahá'í administration does not consist only of elected members, there is also an appointed arm. The Universal House of Justice appoints, every five years, a Board of Counsellors for each continent. Their role is to inspire, advise and assist the Bahá'ís. These Counsellors then appoint Auxiliary Boards in each country or area, whose members in turn have Assistants to help them in their work. In general, the Counsellors will consult with the National Assemblies, and encourage co-operation and cross-fertilisation of ideas between countries. The Auxiliary Board Members and their Assistants operate at a more local level.

The Bahá'í administration, therefore, has an elected arm and an appointed arm, and works most successfully when the two arms are functioning together in harmony.

THE BAHAI ADMINISTRATION

The Bahá'í administration is constantly developing as the Faith itself expands and develops. It is based on a clear and open election system. The Bahá'í Assemblies have shown themselves capable of producing social and economic development in their communities. At the same time, individuals can bring their particular problems to the institutions.

At the time when Christ promised that, "The meek shall inherit the earth," there was no obvious method by which this could be achieved. Within the Bahá'í community, however, there exists a system of administration which is spiritual in its roots, open in its methods and forward-looking in its goals. This system does produce institutions in which unassuming, honest and fair-minded people are elected, and in which it is virtually impossible for factions or cliques to form. The Bahá'ís see this as a model for how the

world will function in the future, and the Bahá'í administration itself as a system capable of serving the needs of the world.

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