

National Spiritual Assembly of the  
Bahá'ís of Australia Incorporated



ANNUAL REPORT  
179 B.E.

21 March 2022 – 20 March 2023





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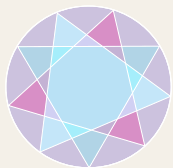
# ANNUAL REPORT

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# National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia Incorporated

## ANNUAL REPORT 179 B.E.

21 March 2022 – 20 March 2023

### INTRODUCTION

The National Spiritual Assembly is pleased to present its annual report for 179 B.E., the first year of the Nine Year Plan. This has been a year of expanding our vision and embracing all the possibilities that lie ahead as we start to learn about “the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures”. Alive to this vision, which was laid out by the Universal House of Justice in its 30 December 2021 message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, individuals, communities and institutions have taken their first strides to understand and apply it in their settings, from humble groups of families to the national stage. “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”.

The Plan was launched through the series of conferences that spanned the period from February to May 2022. The response of the Australian community to the call to be part of this global series of conferences was extraordinary, with over 13,000 souls seizing the opportunity to contribute to some 100 conferences, learning from one another and adding our voice to a dynamic national conversation about how we can apply His vision for “the betterment of the world” in the communities where we live. The conferences lent further impetus to community-building efforts everywhere, which are increasingly being led by groups of families at the grassroots level – now numbering more than 1000 – who make the active choice to learn together about how to put Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into practice in the place where we live.



Youth and Junior Youth participating in the  
World Conferences



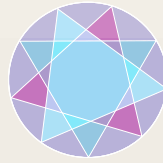
Another highlight of the year was the strong response in Australia to the call for countries such as ours to share our rich resources and experience with those at an earlier point on the path, through the deployment of international pioneers. Through the decisions made by numerous valiant souls, and the efforts of a hard-working national taskforce, we are well on our way to fulfilling the goal of settling 26 pioneers in 12 countries in the early stage of the Plan. Our prayers go with these devoted and valiant souls as they embark upon their journey.

For the National Assembly, the year provided a seminal opportunity for two of its members to participate in a gathering at the Bahá'í World Centre, alongside representatives from four other National Assemblies, to consult and learn from each other about how to strengthen the flows of guidance and information, so crucial to the advancement of learning at all levels, and the role of the National Secretariat in assisting the National Assembly in this regard. Diligent efforts are now being undertaken to apply the insights and learning gained. It is hoped that the friends everywhere will benefit from the adjustments being made, mindful that all administrative activities are ultimately "but means to an end", an instrument for the growth and progress of the community.

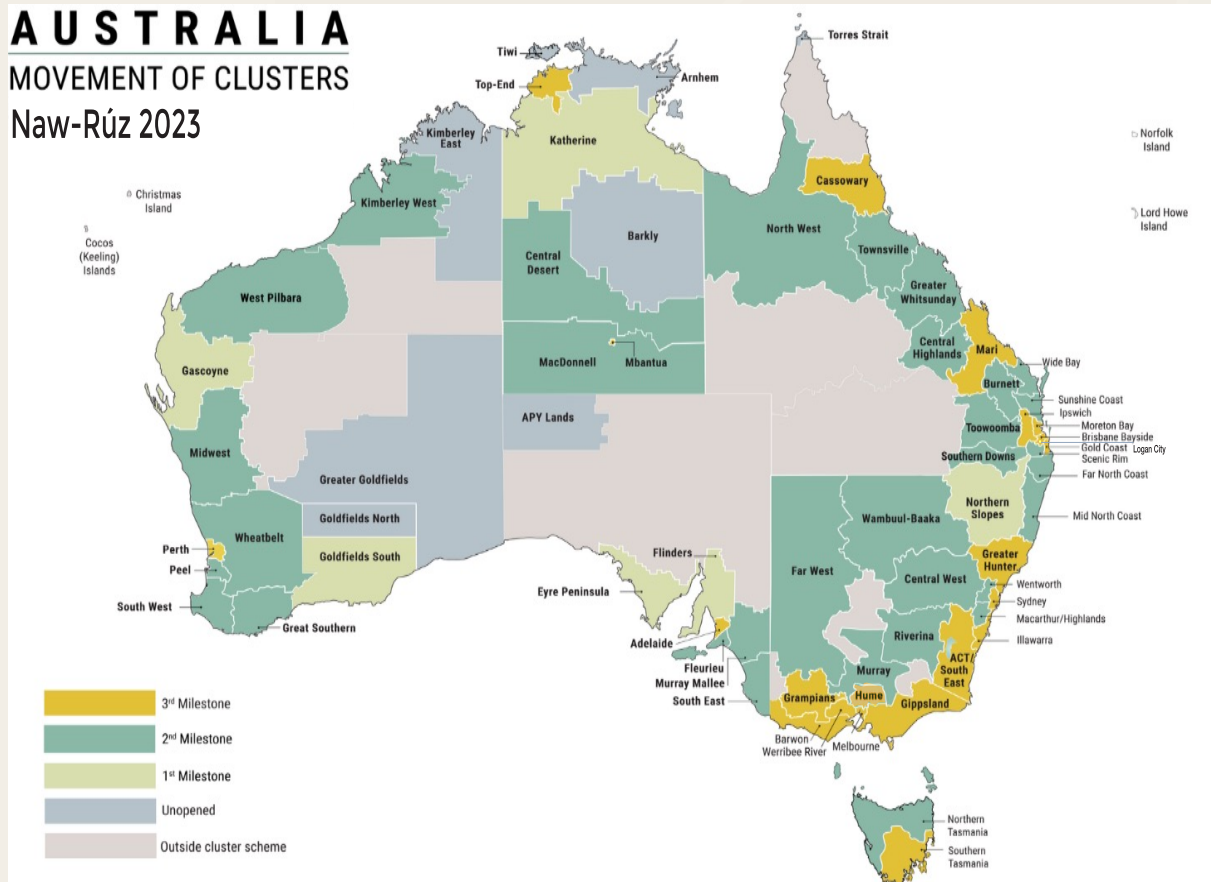
In all our efforts, we see the unerring guidance of the Universal House of Justice illuminating the path and helping us to appreciate the vista that lies ahead. We take this opportunity to express our love, gratitude and loyalty to that Divine institution and we recognise the role of the National

Convention in electing one of its steadfast and longstanding pillars, a responsibility exercised with profound diligence by the assembled delegates. We also acknowledge the critical role played by the Institution of the Counsellors. The members of the Continental Board of Counsellors are the closest collaborators of the National Assembly. Their wisdom, unfailing encouragement and sacrificial example inspire all who interact with them, and we see similar qualities in the members of their Auxiliary Boards and their Assistants. The National Assembly has striven to be a worthy partner to the Counsellors, guiding, stimulating and coordinating the efforts of this vibrant national community while "pumping spiritual love, energy and encouragement" to all its members.

We further recognise the proactive and strategic work of the Regional Bahá'í Councils in advancing the endeavours of expansion and consolidation in their respective regions, as well as the dedicated efforts of all Local Spiritual Assemblies across this vast land over the past year.



## AUSTRALIA MOVEMENT OF CLUSTERS Naw-Rúz 2023



Australia Movement of Clusters Naw-Rúz 2023



## WORLD CONFERENCES

No matter where we reside, the year began with the opportunity to host, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, a series of conferences which would “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”. During the period of 25 February-15 June 2022, around Australia we saw a total of 95 conferences with over 13,000 participating. The conferences raised our spirits and built our capacity to contribute to serving humanity. Before and after the conferences we built our capacity to have uplifting conversations: one neighbourhood recorded 900 home visits and 500 meaningful conversations in the weeks leading up to their local conference. We also built capacity to have well organised gatherings in our localities.

In many cases, participation in larger conferences inspired the emergence of conferences at a local level, multiplying the number of friends and well-wishers of humanity who gained a deeper understanding of the institute process and made a stronger commitment to service in their local setting. In some places conferences were organised in different languages including Farsi, Chinese, Swahili, French and Mongolian to broaden meaningful participation. Another capacity that developed during the conference period was use of the arts to tell our stories, to advance both our shared understanding and the ability to engage whole families with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the shared framework for action. The conferences also provided a valuable

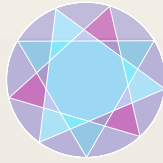
opportunity for the Regional Councils to rapidly learn about ways and means by which large numbers can be assisted to materially support their own participation in such settings. Of the approximately \$1 million required from the National Fund to hold the conferences across Australia, well over a third was recovered through voluntary contributions by participants towards the cost of their own participation. After the conferences, communities



### Children's Gathering

continued to give thought to how to share the program and spirit of the conferences in other creative ways and we saw a notable increase around Australia of neighbourhood festivals and gatherings.

**“...The conferences raised our spirits and built our capacity to contribute to serving humanity...”**



## Vignette: Monash Community Building on the World Conferences

*Monash Assembly found itself at the forefront of this learning process as hosts of the first conference in Melbourne cluster. The immediacy of requirements and timeline resulted in a far deeper level of collaboration between cluster agencies and the Local Assembly. The wholehearted commitment of the Assembly translated into individual members' total engagement either as facilitators or planners. This quality of engagement intensely heightened the consciousness of the Assembly to the requirements of the plan.*

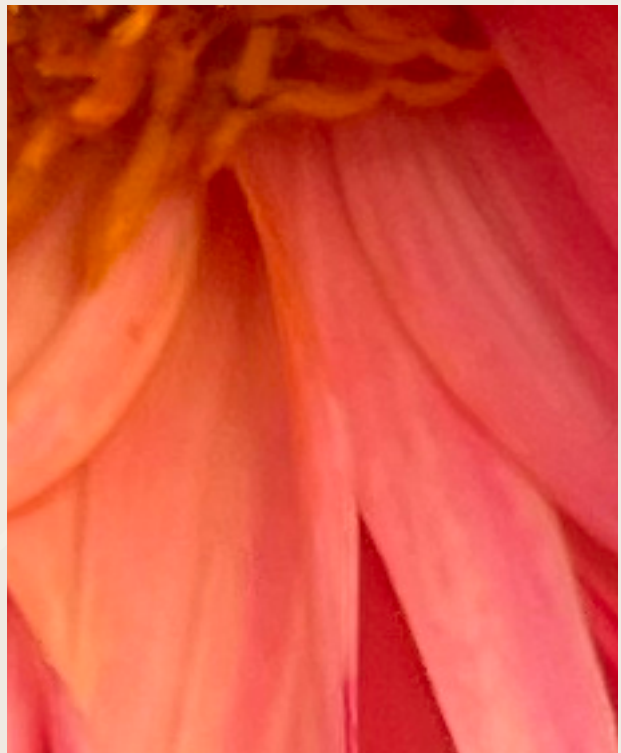
*Following the excitement and energy cultivated during the conference, Monash Assembly organised a day and a half planning meeting to further reflect and build upon this process of preparing its community for the requirements of the Nine Year Plan.*

*A reflection that emerged was the variance in vision due to portions of the community not attending the conferences in Melbourne. In light of these reflections, and also in strengthening the vision of the family groups and households movement across the cluster and region, the Assembly initiated the process of embedding the conference themes into the consultation portion of their community Feasts. Household groups in Monash had started well in the previous year and the Assembly was keen to build momentum on earlier successes.*

*In five consecutive Feasts, friends reflected systematically on the quotations of the five conference themes, with the aim to better understand the next steps and pave the way for friends to form teams to pursue service, study or worship in a manner that engaged the wider community network. The format of these discussions closely replicated the environment of the conferences, with the use of round tables, drawing on past facilitators, connecting the arts*

*and catering to all age groups. Following a few of these consecutive Feasts, the Assembly noticed a tremendous shift in the discussions emerging during the consultation portion, with the round tables stimulating more conversation and encouraging new friends to share. A noticeable increase in the willingness of friends seeking to engage in conversations with individuals in their local settings and the establishment of new groups of families also emerged.*

*Although this shift did come with some reservations, other friends have shared that this initiative has changed the way they and their family experience the Feast. It allowed for the vibrancy created in the conference setting to continue to envelop the friends and has connected more friends with the guidance and requirements of the Nine Year Plan.*





The establishment of an intensive program of growth in every cluster in the world has been identified by the Universal House of Justice as “the goal that the community of the Greatest Name must aspire to fulfil” during the current series of global Plans, which will conclude at Ridván 2046. Our country currently comprises 68 clusters – an increase of one since the commencement of the Nine Year Plan due to the decision to recognise Logan, previously part of Brisbane Bayside cluster, as a cluster in its own right. Currently 14 of these clusters remain to traverse the second milestone through the establishment of an intensive program of growth, a goal that has been set for completion by the end of the Nine Year Plan – noting that several of these goals remain unfulfilled from the last Five Year Plan.

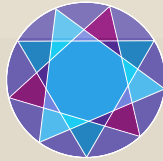
In last year's annual report, we identified the goal of redressing the decline in core activities and significantly increasing the number of educational activities. While there are pockets of activity where the core activities are increasing, including in the growing centres of intense activity, across the country we have not seen the growth that was

hoped for. On the contrary, the following table, drawn from the statistical report program, indicates a further decline over the past year, measured in both the number of core activities and the number of participants. It should be noted, however, that these figures do not include the children's festivals and junior youth camps through which the educational content of the training institute is being delivered to increasing numbers: in South-Eastern Australia alone, for example, 103 children's festivals and 72 junior youth camps took place over the two years between January 2021 and December 2022, with total participation in these short-term activities approaching 4000 children and junior youth.

A further encouraging sign is that a majority of children and junior youth participating in educational activities come from the wider community. Thoughtful consideration is required in every setting to read its reality and consider appropriate strategies to broaden and intensify the activities taking place.

METRIC	Devotional Meetings		Children's Classes		Junior Youth Groups	
	April 22	April 23	April 22	April 23	April 22	April 23
Number of Activities	2,420	2,170	585	440	218	165
Number of Participants	12,724	12,494	3,649	3,144	1,339	1,010
Friends of the Faith	4,389	3,729	2,556	2,206	990	677

METRIC	Study Circles		Total Core Activities		% Difference Total Core Activities
	April 22	April 23	April 22	April 23	
Number of Activities	903	695	4,046	3,470	-14.2%
Number of Participants	3,976	2,857	21,688	19,505	-10%
Friends of the Faith	901	720	8,836	7,332	



## INTERNATIONAL PIONEERING

In light of the call for international pioneers in the Nine Year Plan, Australia is honoured to be among those countries 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.” The National Assembly has identified the development of an effective national system to assist countries and regions at an early stage of development, through the deployment of international pioneers, as one of its key objects of learning. An international pioneering taskforce was appointed by the National Assembly in May 2022 in response to this call, with membership from each region in Australia. Working within a framework provided by the International Teaching Centre, guided by the Counsellors and the National Assembly and working closely with the Auxiliary Board members, Regional Councils and agencies, the taskforce has undertaken the process of identification, orientation and deployment of pioneers with the requisite capacities and experience for the 12 goal countries assigned to Australia by the Universal House of Justice.



**Australians Sami Milani and Jacob Baron have pioneered to Greece**

By Naw-Ruz these efforts had resulted in the deployment of 15 pioneers to French Polynesia, the Mariana Islands, Albania and Greece. Nineteen further pioneers have arisen and are awaiting deployment to goal countries in Europe and the Arab region. It is anticipated that further waves of international pioneers will be called for over the course of the Plan.

## TEACHING AND DECLARATIONS

Teaching the Cause is a key dimension of the Nine Year Plan, as stated in the 30 December 2021 message: “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”. In its annual report last year, the National Assembly expressed the goal of learning much more about the conversations which, in every setting, allow those currently at the threshold of the community to “seize thy chance” and accept the privileges and responsibility of membership in the community of the Most Great Name. Following a learning process initiated during the One Year Plan to advance our collective understanding and to build our confidence to invite individuals and groups to join the ranks of the Faith, the National Assembly systematically reached out to those who reside in settings where the community building efforts are most advanced to learn together about those who wish to register as Bahá’ís. What became clear through the consultations with these advanced neighbourhoods and centres was that this process occurs as part of a wider conversation that links the application of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to all aspects of our individual and collective lives.



# LEARNING FROM THE MOST ADVANCED CLUSTERS

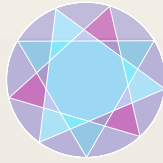
In some of these settings, a number of barriers to friends formally enrolling in the Faith were identified, one of which related to signing a declaration card. Efforts were made to learn about creating a welcoming environment that removed any suggestion that someone is considered a Bahá'í only after they have signed a card, both in the minds of the friends and the administrative processes. Adjustments to the process of registration were made in consultation with the Auxiliary Board members, Local Assemblies and teams serving those localities, with the National Assembly accepting registration in the Faith on the basis of a communication from the Assembly or Auxiliary Board member that an individual had expressed their desire to become a Bahá'í and that the individual was aware of the significance and implications of this decision; that they recognised the station of Bahá'u'lláh and were committed to following Bahá'í laws and teachings and the guidance of

the Bahá'í Institutions that administer the affairs of the community. This was followed by the dispatch of a letter confirming their membership and provision of the booklet "Being a Bahá'í". The learning process has now been extended to all of Australia, with the National Assembly inviting all friends to "remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold" in their own localities. The National Assembly has reflected deeply on the statement of the Universal House of Justice that "Bahá'í institutions ... must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed", and it encourages Local Spiritual Assemblies to do the same. We cherish the hope that through these efforts, the number of those choosing to join the community – which this year numbered 86 declarations and 87 reaffirmations – will rise markedly.

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The dedicated efforts of many souls over the past series of Plans brought our country to its current position of strength with a total of 21 clusters that have traversed the third milestone, a stage in development marked by 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". One of these clusters, Hume cluster on the outskirts of Melbourne, reached this level of intensity in the past year. The ambitious goal set at the outset of the Plan is for all but four of our 68 clusters to reach this stage in their development by the end of the Nine Year Plan at Ridván 2031. These clusters collectively represent the vast majority of

the population of our country. In each of these most advanced clusters, friends of all backgrounds are giving expression to their love for the Blessed Beauty through "a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building". Community-building work continues to be pursued in its various forms: efforts by the generality of the believers living across the cluster to apply the framework of the Plan to their own circumstances and in the various networks to which they belong; intensive activity in receptive neighbourhoods or villages; and efforts to reach out systematically to a receptive population dispersed across the cluster.



## GROUPS OF FAMILIES

All of these efforts have been strengthened over the past year through systemic learning processes in all three regions about working in groups of families: “families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus.” In a society in which powerful forces are tearing communal bonds and families apart, the practice of serving, visiting and learning together in groups of families – as it becomes a prominent feature of culture – can increase social cohesion and serve as a remedy to some of the ills engendered by increasing isolation and fragmentation. There are

now in excess of 1000 such groups across the country at various stages of development, including those which have begun holding family camps, festivals and conferences. The Universal House of Justice has recently commended the efforts under way to strengthen the life of the Bahá’í community in Australia and extend its teaching activities, describing the endeavours to foster collaborative arrangements among groups of families who seek to extend community-building activities to nearby households as “an approach that holds much promise”. Efforts to support and coordinate this efflorescence of activity are giving rise to new capacities in institutions at the local, cluster and regional levels.

### Vignette: A Systematic Approach to Supporting Groups of Families, Brisbane Bayside Cluster

*In April 2021, the Regional Bahá’í Council initiated a systematic regional learning process with 11 groups of families across the region to learn intensively and systematically about the potential of a group of families working together to learn about building a vibrant community in their local setting. In April 2022, the Regional Bahá’í Council decided that the regional learning process was ready to be rolled out at the cluster level across North Eastern Australia. Following this decision, the Brisbane Bayside Area Teaching Committee consulted with the Auxiliary Board members to plan the systematic roll out of the groups of families strategy within their cluster. Recognising the significant role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in this initiative, the Board members organised a meeting with the Local Spiritual Assembly of Brisbane, the largest community within the cluster. The objective of this*

*meeting was to explore the relevant concepts and gain unity of vision regarding the opportunities in their locality. A cluster team was formed including Auxiliary Board members, members of the Area Teaching Committee and Local Assembly to give thought and take steps to assist groups of families to support one another and their community. The team visited families around the cluster to consult on the opportunities and arranged a seminar for representatives from each of these groups to attend. In the days that followed the seminar, each group of families was assisted by a member of the cluster team to define or refine their plans, and to start to take some steps together. Those at the seminar agreed to a pattern of coming together regularly to learn from each other’s experiences: a fortnightly one-hour meeting on zoom and a half-day gathering in person every three months.*



**“There are now in excess of 1000 such groups across the country at various stages of development, including those which have begun holding family camps, festivals and conferences.”**

*Each fortnight, members of the cluster team and Area Teaching Committee also visit the groups of families and assist them in their plans.*

*The Local Spiritual Assembly has been following the progress of the groups of families learning process regularly at its meetings. During this portion of the agenda, the Assembly member who is following this area shares relevant guidance, narratives and advancements of the process and the Assembly discusses how to share insights with the rest of the community and how to support the community to also learn to serve within groups of families.*

Described by the Universal House of Justice as “a specialised form of the community-building work ... one which continues to show great promise”, giving attention to reaching out and connecting with networks of friends and families who have moved to Australia from specific countries has been an area of ongoing attention of those Bahá’ís naturally connected with such populations. In such networks, often working together as groups of families and individuals, the friends support one another and learn to make a meaningful contribution to the community in service to humanity.

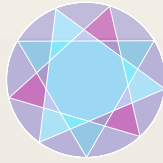
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## **Vignette: Box Hill Family Camps**

*Box Hill is located within the Whitehorse community in Melbourne cluster and contains a majority Chinese population, including local and international students and their families who have moved from abroad on working and study visas. Box Hill has been a centre of intense activity since 2012. Early in its evolution, Box Hill’s strength was drawn from regular institute and junior youth camps to guide friends through the institute and raise capacity with an expanding network of individuals, in particular the youth. More recently, this locality has been learning about sustaining the engagement of individuals along a path of development and service through engaging whole families through family camps and sustaining weekly activities. Whereas in the past there were many youth at the forefront of this community building process, now families are*

*becoming protagonists and a driving force in the efforts made, hand in hand with the youth.*

*The exploration of initiating family camps emerged from the engagement of four families in a junior youth camp in April 2021. As the parents became further engaged in the planning process, the core team learnt that the camp was no longer limited to junior youth, but became a camp for whole families with the planning of classes within the camp for children, junior youth, youth and parents. To see parents as an untapped group with potential and the openness of the team to trust in the capacity of others was an important shift in thinking and action. Another insight that the team identified was that when the parents were engaged in the camp planning process, the process of expansion would organically occur due to the close networks that*



existed with other families, as these parents would be constantly sharing about this camp with their friends, inviting them and asking for help in the logistical areas such as food and transport.

The Box Hill nucleus has now undertaken three family camps with programs engaging all family members from toddlers to parents. A new milestone was reached in December 2022 as they engaged 157 participants at a four-day camp with 53 children and 18 junior youth. Parts of the institute (Book 1, 3, and 5) were studied in the camp with parents in addition to the three children's classes and one junior youth program. A significant step saw five parents from the population and three youth assist with the children's classes and Junior Youth groups.

With the nucleus strengthening its capacity to engage deeper in conversations about the institute and the core activities with the parents, the first intake of parents has now entered Book 1 with a vision to assist and run children's classes.

Over the 2022 period, the core team sustained its weekly children's classes and junior youth groups with a vision of increasing its numbers and formalising all grades on a weekly basis. With the experience of camps engaging many families, the vision of a more formalised family school which provides weekly classes from preschool age to junior youth and adults in one venue is now the next milestone in reach.



**Family Camp in Box Hill**

## DISSEMINATION OF LEARNING

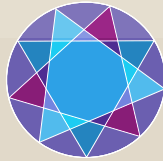
One of the goals expressed by the National Assembly in last year's annual report was to extend the system for the rapid dissemination of learning about expansion and consolidation across the country, so that friends can benefit from insights gained by others a step further along the same path. Recognising a need for the Area Teaching Committees serving the most advanced clusters in Australia to learn from one another, the National Spiritual Assembly arranged a National Area Teaching Committee gathering from 24-26 February 2023 at the Hornsby Bahá'í Centre in Sydney. In addition to Area Teaching Committee members, the gathering benefited from the presence of members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and National Assembly, Auxiliary Board members, Regional Council members as well as those serving in Auckland cluster and New Zealand North Island Council.

It became apparent that while each cluster had unique strengths and much that they could share with others, there were some key areas about which they were all learning. These areas included how to strengthen systems of support for groups of friends and families working together such that no one should feel left alone, key relationships between these clusters and the annual and cyclic regional campaigns, and how to become increasingly effective in thinking about multiple dimensions of growth while remaining focussed and systematic. A unifying approach to these multiple lines of action involved strengthening the foundations at the level of the family through empowering groups of families to learn to contribute to generating knowledge in their own context and to learn to apply the healing medicine of the message of Bahá'u'lláh to their lives and the lives of those around them.



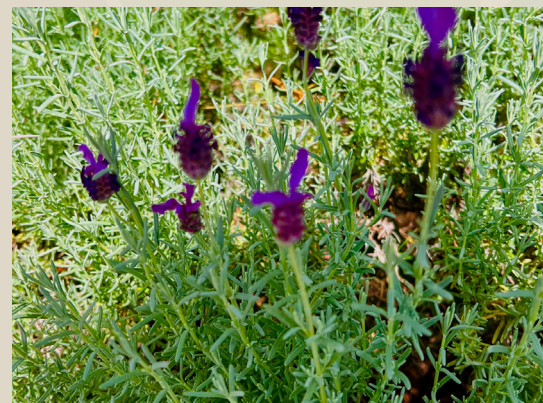
**Participants at the National Area Teaching Committee Gathering for the Most Advanced Clusters**





Another means for strengthening the flow and analysis of information relating to the growth of the Faith in Australia has been the establishment of the Office of Regional Development within the National Secretariat. While there were multiple channels of information flowing to the National Assembly, it was felt a new arrangement was required to strengthen the existing processes. As described in the 29 December 2015 message of the Universal House of Justice, “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”.

At this time, the arrangement of the Office includes individuals serving in related capacities, such as the Training Institute Learning Desk, the National Statistics Officer and the Expansion and Regional Councils desk, engaging together to share information, to prepare descriptions and to offer cogent analysis to the National Assembly on particular areas of growth in the country. By viewing growth through their individual perspectives and consulting together, the members of the Office seek to analyse certain aspects of growth such as how effectively individuals are being accompanied to initiate and sustain activities, what approaches enable a cluster to progress, and what developments are occurring in centres of intense activity. Their analysis draws on both statistical and qualitative information with an evolving understanding of how each complements the other. As an outcome of their analysis, they raise questions for the consideration of the National Assembly and are learning to prepare proposals for the National Assembly, including opportunities for dissemination of insights and experience between the regions.



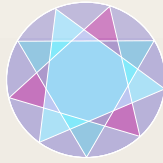
# CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

## SOCIAL ACTION

The overall aim of the Nine Year Plan, indeed the series of Plans that will unfold until 2046, is the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. This requires the sustained and coherent pursuit in a cluster or setting of three areas of endeavour: community building efforts “to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities”; social action “to bring about spiritual and material progress”; and participation in discourse “to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress”. Together, these efforts will start to transform people and the social environment in which they live and serve, bringing both closer to the vision of Bahá’u’lláh. This is the work of the Nine Year Plan. The two sections above have outlined advances taking place in the sphere of community building. Our experience with endeavours of social action and participation in discourse is more limited, but it is growing.

Friends in many settings have arisen in response to the encouragement in the 30 December 2021 message to identify barriers impeding spiritual and material progress and to learn how to respond to them, as circumstances and resources permit. Such endeavours often arise naturally, in a small-scale and humble way, through the efforts of those participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, sometimes seeking and receiving the support of the community around them. But they also arise in other ways, particularly as a group of families or a core team working with a neighbourhood or population seek to respond to a need in the lives of those they serve.

The April 2022 survey identified 266 short-term endeavours in Australia, an increase of 8% from the previous year. It is likely that many more remain uncoun­ted. Even more encouragingly, the number of social action endeavours being sustained over an extended period rose to 32 in 2022, an increase of 40% over the previous year. The great majority seek to address the educational needs of populations such as children, youth or migrants, consistent with global experience and reflecting the centrality of education to our conception of spiritual and social transformation.



Others focus on mental health, use of the arts, environmental sustainability and humanitarian assistance. A few now require basic administrative structures to sustain their work, and a smaller number again have necessitated the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organisation to support them. As participation in Book 13 increases in every region over the course of the Plan, and awareness is cultivated about the importance and distinctive nature of Bahá'í-inspired social action, we expect such endeavours to continue to grow substantially.

In this area a key object of learning for the National Assembly is how learning about social action can be captured and followed more systematically at the national level. With the encouragement of the Bahá'í International Development Organisation, the approach being adopted is to start simply by building capacity in the National Secretariat to describe what is occurring.

## Vignette: Gracemere Groups of Families and Social Action

*Gracemere is one of two sectors of Rockhampton community in Mari Cluster, Central Queensland. In June 2022, after the World Conferences, two individuals from a household in Gracemere set out to learn about establishing new groups of families within their pocket, which is within walking distance from one end to the other. The individuals initially reached out to a few families, inviting them to a social action project to establish household vegetable gardens. The families that showed interest were invited to a weekly dinner and discussion on Tuesday evenings where a conversation unfolded about building vibrant and purposeful communities. A small core group of three adults and one youth took on the coordination and planning role. The nucleus was introduced to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and explored the themes from the World Conferences.*

*A Book 1 commenced with six participants, with the clear understanding that the courses of the Institute are a path of service to humanity. The first natural activity to emerge was a children's class, soon followed by a junior youth group, with a youth from a new family being accompanied to become*

*the animator. The junior youth group organised its first service project which gave the group a sense of mission. In just over a cycle, the nucleus grew from two individuals to fifty: children, youth and adults. Nineteen families were connected to the process and the core activities grew from 0 to 9. As the nucleus expanded, the social action activities increased. A family festival was attended by 80 people. Participants actively invite their friends and contacts to join the Tuesday night gatherings and each new family is provided with an introduction to the overarching vision, concepts, and the core activities. In November 2022, one Junior Youth Group in Gracemere met to analyse statistics and understand issues faced in Gracemere. They agreed that isolation leading to anxiety was becoming a growing problem so they suggested to the groups of families to host another Family Festival.*



*They also wrote to the Local Spiritual Assembly to gain its insight, seek support, and demonstrate cooperation. The Local Spiritual Assembly responded with much encouragement and gave the group a time to meet. The animators prepared the junior youth, and all came dressed up to meet the institutions. The space was very warm and*

*congenial. The Junior Youth Group chanted the prayers they had been saying weekly at the nucleus meetings. The Assembly offered to provide any support needed for the Family Festival or other activities.*

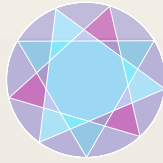


**Groups of Families in Gracemere**

## **Participation in the Discourses of Society**

Like social action, participation in discourse can be a powerful means for “awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society”. In this context, our focus is those places where the growth process is leading to greater awareness of issues impacting a population, giving rise to a need and opportunity to contribute a Bahá’í perspective at the level of thought. Spiritual Assemblies in particular have a role to play here, given their authority and responsibility to offer a considered view on behalf of the

community. As these efforts are systematised over time, opportunities arise to create spaces where many can be brought together to find common ground on a matter of concern to the community. This year the conferences provided a glimpse of what this can look like, particularly those held at a local level which gave rise to rich conversations about the needs and aspirations of a community or population for its own development. Increased participation in Book 14 will deepen understanding and build capacity to extend and multiply this work.



## Vignette: Mosman Park Neighbourhood Contributing to Local Discourses

*In Mosman Park, located in the western suburbs of Perth cluster, a small group of adults and youth have been learning about having conversations and building unity in their community. In their consultations they felt that in their neighbourhood there were a number of women who had a desire to contribute to the betterment of the community. As a result, in 2020, they arranged a gathering on the topic of Equality of Men and Women. The purpose of the gathering was to create a space for women to openly engage in discussing those issues impacting the community and to consult upon ways to address those disintegrative forces. This evolved into regular gatherings referred to as 'Sisterhood Conversations'.*

*The Sisterhood Conversations engaged diverse peoples from various backgrounds of the local population: including retirees, young mothers, working professionals and youth. This has contributed to the depth and relevance of the ideas and experiences shared in relation to the role of women in society and about the structures in place to promote equality in the community. The Sisterhood Conversations has been sustained*

*since 2020 and currently there are over 120 women engaged in conversations in Mosman Park, some of whom are involved in a core activity. Following on from the World Conferences in 2022, it was decided to hold a Sisterhood Conference as an extension of the sisterhood conversations. The conference, hosted in late August 2022, included junior youth, youth, and adults: intergenerational learning and relationship building has been a feature of sisterhood discourses and a social need of the neighbourhood. The World Conference program and themes were used as a template for the Sisterhood Conference. One aspect that was key throughout this was the emphasis on the learning process and empowering locals to see this as their conference. The working group and sub groups who organised the conference included women of all backgrounds and ages – and the conference was seen by all seen as a capacity building tool to mobilise more souls in engaging in community building activities.*



**Participants in the Sisterhood  
Conversations in Mosman Park**

Discourses also take place at the national level, where the Office of External Affairs has been learning about participation on behalf of the Australian Bahá'í Community for more than a decade. A highlight of the year was the annual social cohesion conference hosted by the Office on 30-31 May 2022, where a creative approach was taken to drawing on the world conference materials in a manner suited to the protagonists from government, civil society and the media with whom the Office engages. It is encouraging to see how seamlessly the Bahá'í teachings and our experience in applying them are being incorporated into such settings, alongside the contributions of many others who are thinking deeply about the issues we face as a society. The social cohesion conference also offered to our society a distillation of the insights and experience shared in the world conferences held across the country, channelling and amplifying this widespread grassroots conversation to national actors.



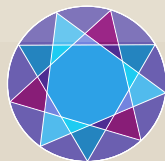
**Social Cohesion Conference**

This year the National Assembly and Counsellors reviewed the work of the Office of External Affairs in light of the anticipated needs of the Nine Year Plan. The natural transition of a number of longstanding resources out of the Office, following many years of dedicated service, also made this a timely point to pause, reflect and rebuild. It became clear that the work had outgrown the structures through which it had been advanced to date, leading to a restructure which is being bedded down. It was further decided that the discourses to be prioritised for the coming period will be those related to social cohesion, the role of youth, and the environment. For its part, the National Assembly has identified the need to learn more about how it can advance its reading of the reality of the national discourses and identify key moments in which to make a contribution as an institution.

Complementary to endeavours emerging from the community-building process are those individual initiatives that arise from one or more friends seeking to contribute to social progress by applying the Teachings in their vocation or field, whether at the level of action or thought. Two among many worthy examples over the past year are the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired K-2 primary school in north-western Sydney, and the approach being taken by Bahá'í Blog to learning about how an individual initiative online can convey creative content about the Faith and its impact for an Australian audience. The National Assembly celebrates such expressions of faith by members of the Australian Bahá'í Community and welcomes them turning to it for guidance in their efforts.



# EDUCATIONAL ENDEAVOURS AND THE TRAINING INSTITUTE



The training institute remains central to all efforts to advance the process of entry by troops and work towards spiritual and social transformation. In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice invited us to take “a more expansive view” of the institute, which it described as “a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release”. This year the Counsellors and National Assembly initiated an annual retreat to review the development of the training institute in depth. Through study and consultation, key objects of learning currently before us were clarified, including: How are the policies and practices at the national level improving or impeding the process of retaining a core of experienced staff in the training institute? Where are we seeing the growth process lead to the emergence of a degree of formality of programs for children and junior youth, and what are its characteristics? How are the institutes raising capacity in a growing number of individuals to have a deep understanding of the entirety of the institute’s content, its pedagogy, and its delivery?

Each of the three training institutes in Australia is giving deep thought to these and other questions and is advancing and systematising its work, including through the work of collaborative groups and educational teams following each imperative, and a regular rhythm of seminars to capture and disseminate learning across their region. At the national level, the National Assembly is kept informed of progress by the Training Institute Learning Desk, which provides regular reports, updates and analyses of the processes under way and assists in the distillation and dissemination of learning across the country. By year end, the Australian institutes were preparing to participate in the zonal institute gathering to be held in Sydney from 23-26 March 2023 on the initiative of the Counsellors, bringing together the six institutes in Australia, New Zealand and Timor-Leste to develop the conditions for learning as a network of institutes as we seek to build an educational system that provides “a seamless coherent educational experience” from the age of five through to adulthood.

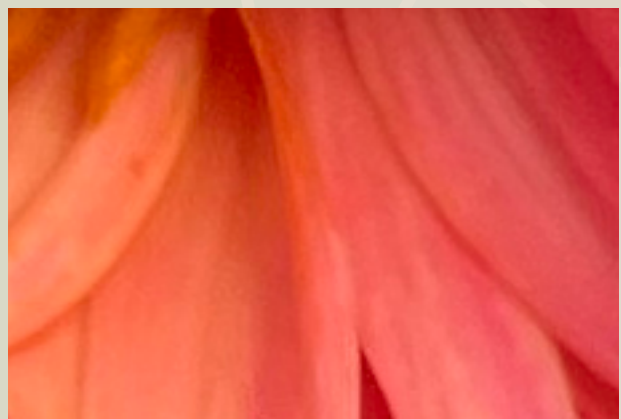
Each institute continues to share the goal of establishing a basic program for the spiritual education of children and the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in each cluster, continuing to enhance the quality of the educational experience while expanding the system for its delivery. A clear strategic imperative for all three regions is to strengthen the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, the benefits of which “are experienced in every stage of the educational process”.

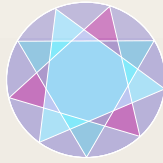
In those places where growth is occurring, we see the young people shouldering responsibility for the transformation of their communities increasingly emerge from this program, particularly where they have benefited from a rich study of many of the available texts. It is abundantly clear that all regions, all clusters and all settings need to give focused attention to strengthening the educational system in general and the junior youth program in particular. For this reason the strengthening of the junior youth program was a key focus of the zonal gathering described above.

In this light, the learning site for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, served by three resource persons, has been giving greater attention to collaboration with institutes, participating in ongoing consultation about strengthening learning processes around the junior youth program so that insight and learning can flow freely across the country. Accompanied by the Office of the Network of Learning Sites for our continent, which is in turn supported by the Bahá’í International Development Organisation, the learning site has continued to extend the frontiers of learning, linking together those centres and neighbourhoods where more advanced capacity has been built. At a seminar hosted by the site in March 2023 – the first held in person in the post-pandemic period – teams from seven neighbourhoods came together and distilled their learning about the experience of 39 junior youth who studied 10 texts and the experience of 12 youth who served as their animators. The rich insights gained have been documented and

shared across the network of institutes so that more clusters can build the capacity required to engage 300 participants in the program through the study of ten texts. While contributing to the advancement of the institute is a concern for every believer, the Universal House of Justice has urged youth in particular to view the future development of the institute as their “sacred charge”. In many cases, the loving and practical support of families and communities is what enables youth to give significant time to serving the institute, helping forge a culture where the path of service is valued and respected. Beyond the institute, a growing number of youth are reaping the benefit of participation in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP).

This year the ISGP seminars for undergraduate tertiary students were hosted in Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, and Brisbane over the summer period, and special winter offerings also took place in Adelaide and Melbourne, with a total of some 280 young adults participating. A seminar for graduates and young professionals also took place in late December 2022 and was attended by 42 participants from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific region. It is hoped that an ever-increasing number of young people will benefit from these educational endeavours, assisting them to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the tertiary education environment and to contribute as young professionals to the intellectual life of our society.





## Vignette: Seacombe Gardens Neighbourhood Supports Youth on a Path of Service

*Over 10 years ago, in the south of Adelaide, a group of Bahá'í families began to connect with each other on a regular basis. As their children grew up together, the families sustained their mutual support, holding children's classes, junior youth groups, holy day celebrations and festivals together with the friends of their children and their families, and creating a sense of community life in their locality.*

*In 2020, as some of the junior youth became youth, an institute coordinator decided to dedicate a year to learning how these youth could contribute to the betterment of their neighbourhood, which is one where people from all parts of the world live next door to one another. While continuing his studies and service to the cluster, the coordinator travelled to the neighbourhood every day to accompany the youth. As they progressed through the full sequence of courses, they started new activities with their friends, junior youth groups with younger siblings hosted an institute camp inviting their friends to join a Book one. From 2020 to 2022 the neighbourhood team, consisting of five youth and their families, sustained regular institute camps or intensives every expansion phase. They established a pattern of going to local parks weekly to meet people and they hosted one or two junior youth festivals and camps each year. During this period the youth engaged in the summer initiatives in the region and were connected to the regional learning spaces, such as institute seminars, deepening their capacity to learn together.*

*On completion of Year 12 in 2022, two of the youth decided to offer full time service. A third is also joining them, having adjusted her university schedule to be available nearly every day to serve with the others. They and their families, with the support of the Auxiliary Board members, made this*

*decision with the vision of the period of youth as a special time to immerse oneself in the arena of service: not as a fleeting part of one's journey, but a firm foundation for their entire life. Now a new cohort of younger youth has begun advancing through the main sequence of courses and are being accompanied by the neighbourhood team to run core activities. The youth and those walking beside them are not only learning to advance to become a centre of intense activity, they are also learning about supporting similar neighbourhoods to advance from one stage of development to the next. This capacity to generate and disseminate learning will no doubt continue to contribute to the advancement of the region.*



**Youth Preparing to Serve in Seacombe Gardens**

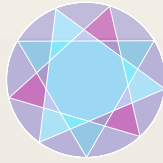


# RAISING CAPACITY FOR ADMINISTRATION AT ALL LEVELS

The gathering held at the Bahá'í World Centre in September 2022 focused on flows of guidance and information and the operation of the National Secretariat, enhanced understanding about the evolution of the Administrative Order. Counsellor Daniel Pierce Olam, the National Secretary and Assistant Secretary and Shirin Stevenson, a key member of staff from the National Secretariat, joined their counterparts from Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and United States at this gathering, which was framed in the context of the development of Bahá'í Administration over the last 25 years and implications for the Nine Year Plan. It is clear that the Administrative Order must continue to evolve in coming years in response to the growth and progress of the



**Participants from Five Countries in the Gathering at the Bahá'í World Centre**



community, as it did over the previous 25-year series of Plans which witnessed the establishment of the institution of the Regional Bahá'í Council, the creation of training institutes, the formation

of groups of families, and the establishment of reflection spaces enabling decision-making to move closer to the grassroots.

## DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES

The imperative of strengthening the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies is one of the important objectives of the Nine Year Plan, the pursuit of which is critical to developments at the grassroots of the community. In the past year the National Assembly established a Local Spiritual Assembly Development Desk within the National Secretariat. The Desk began its work by studying guidance on the path of development of Local Assemblies in order to prepare a framework for analysis. In December 2022 the National Assembly considered the first quarterly report of the Desk and determined its priorities for the coming two cycles, which include: supporting the basic administrative functioning of Local Assemblies; building capacity in Local Assemblies at their earliest stages as well as those serving very large communities that are learning to develop a Secretariat; following learning about the role of Local Assemblies in facilitating the flow of guidance from the Universal House of Justice; and continuing to refine the tools and mechanisms for analysis. While its work and resources remain modest and at an early stage, the National Assembly looks forward to the Desk continuing to build its capacity in coming years.

One mechanism through which the Desk is learning about supporting the basic administrative functioning of Local Assemblies is the introduction of half-yearly webinars for Assembly Secretaries, which draw upon and complement the webinars held over many years with their Treasurers. Orientation webinars for Assembly Secretaries were held for the first time in 2022, attracting

participation by approximately 100 Secretaries over three repeat sessions. These webinars were conducted by staff of the National Office with support from the National Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Council Secretaries. The webinars incorporated study of guidance on the role of the Secretary and basic functions such as preparation of minutes, storage of records, tools for communication and sources of support. A follow-up webinar was held specifically dedicated to the use of technology. A further webinar was scheduled towards the end of the year with a focus on the preparation of annual reports, which provide a key annual opportunity for reflection by Local Assemblies as well as offering a rich source of information for the Desk.

An example of the evolution of the Administrative Order in response to growth is the introduction of the two-stage election process in localities where the size of the community and its capacity to manage complexity have reached a stage where this is warranted. In 2022 the Local Assemblies of Blacktown, Brisbane and Gold Coast were elected through the two-stage process for the first time. It was evident that the process refreshed and reinvigorated these three Local Assemblies and energised their communities. Following an intensive education process led by the Auxiliary Board members, the proportion of the community participating in the elections also increased, thereby strengthening the dynamic relationships between the individual, the local community and the institutions of the Faith.



Following guidance dated 23 December 2022, in which the Universal House of Justice advised the National Assembly that “...the introduction of a two-stage election should be considered as part of your overall effort to foster the development of Local Assemblies in the context of expansion and consolidation of the Faith”, the National Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors, decided that four additional Assemblies would be elected through the two-stage process for the first time at Ridván 2023: Manningham, Parramatta, Stirling, and The Hills Shire. These seven Assemblies, which collectively tend to one-quarter of the Bahá’ís in Australia, will continue to be supported to learn together about managing complexity.

It is clear that a key factor in strengthening all Local Assemblies is the appreciation of believers of the sacredness of the electoral process and their duty to participate in it. Following the initial two-stage elections, the National Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors, decided to extend a learning process about education for Bahá’í elections to more localities. The educational materials prepared for the initial two-stage elections were refined in light of experience and provided to a larger group of 18 Assemblies across all states and territories, which were invited to learn about the use of such materials in their communities, in collaboration with their Auxiliary Board members.

The reflections of these Assemblies will be analysed with a view to further refining and extending the process to more localities in 2023-4. It is hoped that this process will also contribute to our learning about the significant role that Local Assemblies can play in disseminating the guidance of the House of Justice and promoting its study.



**Delegate in Blacktown**

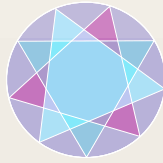


**Elected Delegates in the Gold Coast and a Representative of the National Assembly**



**Elected Delegates in Brisbane Cast their Ballots for the Local Spiritual Assembly**





## REGIONAL BAHÁ'Í COUNCILS

The National Assembly is actively learning about how it supports the development and progress of the Regional Bahá'í Councils in Australia, alongside the close accompaniment provided to these institutions by the Counsellors. All three Councils in Australia have reached a stage where they can operate in a proactive and strategic manner and are able to follow multiple lines of action concurrently over time. As noted in the 30 December 2021 message, "where 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". A growing number of

Assemblies benefit from information and input provided by the Councils. The National Assembly acknowledges with gratitude how much of the progress in the first year of the Plan has been led and coordinated by the Regional Bahá'í Councils. Their annual reports are a testimony to their service and capacity, and the hard-working members who devote themselves to the work of these institutions deserve the community's wholehearted gratitude and support.



**Participants in the Regional Council Gathering**

The annual gathering for all Council members following their election, a fixture of the national calendar since 2016, was held in person for the first time since 2019 in the grounds of the House of Worship, including a strong spiritual component featuring a visit to the gravesides of Mother and Father Dunn. Rich insights were shared across common learning areas including working with groups of families, the impact of the conferences on clusters across the country, what is being learned as we seek to inculcate a more expansive view of the training institute, and the strengthening of financial and other systems in the regions.

Other measures in place to support the development and progress of the Councils have been further strengthened and systematised. In addition to their established weekly meetings, an annual retreat was held with the Council Secretaries in the grounds of the House of Worship. Regular meetings of the national financial system team continued and were extended to include the treasurers of the Training Institute Boards. The Council Chairs and Vice-Chairs have met together, in addition to a periodic space where the Chairs and Secretaries meet to reflect on common areas of learning and prepare the program for the annual gathering. Other national-regional teams continue to strengthen or

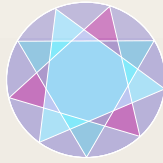
are emerging, including the national statistics team and those serving information technology and human resources.

The functioning of Regional Councils and the development of their administrative systems are closely tied. All three Councils have given attention to strengthening their Regional Offices including the Secretariat and Treasury Office and the various agencies that support the Council. Particular attention is still required to strengthen these systems in South-Eastern Australia, given the scale and complexity of work under way in that region, which this year necessitated the formalisation of new sub-regional teams. In North-Eastern Australia, the Council put measures in place, with the support of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Brisbane, to formalise its Seat at the Brisbane Bahá'í Centre of Learning, creating a much-needed hub where friends serving at the regional and cluster level can work and meet side-by-side. In Western and Central Australia the collective learning process of the well-established Regional Office has continued to gain in strength with the close accompaniment and support of the Secretary and Treasurer of the Council.

## NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

Like all institutions, the National Assembly is striving to continually enhance its functioning and to cultivate a greater orientation towards learning. Following key guidance received from the Universal House of Justice in 2021, this includes internal arrangements to follow learning across its various areas of responsibility and to reflect, at strategic points throughout the year, on progress made, obstacles encountered and learning. Through this process, increasing clarity has been gained about what has been learned and what needs to be learned next, enabling objects of learning to be

articulated, refined based on experience and followed more precisely. This includes objects of learning about the Assembly's own functioning as a corporate body: how to enhance the quality of its consultation, to systematically follow learning processes, to collaborate more effectively with the Counsellors, to benefit from the arrangement of an Assistant Secretary, and to support the well-being of its members.



The annual orientation process for the National Assembly continues to be refined with the purpose of preparing members of the Assembly for the year ahead, spiritually and practically. The first day of the first main meeting was dedicated to prayer in the House of Worship, a visit to the Archives and the National Office, study of guidance about the institution of the National Assembly and the role of its members, review and refinement of the National Assembly's framework document on its own functioning, and workshops on key systems utilised for managing information and the agendas of the National Assembly.

This year saw a return to monthly face-to-face main meetings as the normal mode of operation. Most main meetings were held at the National Centre. A highlight of the year was a session in which the National Assembly met virtually for the first time with the National Assembly and Auxiliary Board members for Timor-Leste, an occasion of much love and joy for our sister institutions. One main meeting was held at Mt Morton, affording the opportunity for a community gathering with the Victorian friends.

To support the wellbeing of members and their families, the main meeting was held online in months where all members were required to travel to attend another national gathering or retreat. A weekly evening tele-meeting was held in most weeks between main meetings to progress the work of the Assembly.

The practice of dedicating a second evening each week to collective study was also continued, enabling the Assembly to learn from new guidance or longer papers and reports without the pressure of a meeting agenda. The growing complexity of its work requires the National Assembly to organise its time to be able to extensively explore and consult about fundamental issues related to the progress of the Faith. The September gathering at the World

Centre provided an opportunity to learn about arrangements some other National Assemblies are putting in place to respond to this need, which necessarily involves building capacity for decision-making to devolve to other levels, within clearly-articulated frameworks and policies. A fundamental principle is that decisions should be made at the point closest to the grassroots where capacity to do so exists.

Since the gathering, the National Assembly has put some further arrangements in place to manage more routine items off the table of the Assembly, allowing more time to consult at a strategic level. Another key mechanism enhancing the functioning of the National Assembly is the role of the Assistant Secretary introduced in January 2022, following guidance received from the Universal House of Justice, as a means to ease the workload of the National Secretary. Working in close collaboration and constant communication with the National Secretary, this arrangement has enabled the work of the Assembly to be viewed and planned more strategically and has ensured continued focus can be given to important lines of action, uninterrupted by other matters arising that demand urgent attention.

The expanded capacity at the executive level has enabled the institution to increase the lines of action it is advancing and to progress its work at a faster pace. The role has also supported the National Secretary by providing a more consultative and team-based approach to the work, sharing the mental burden and enabling lines of action to proceed more seamlessly when the National Secretary is unavailable or takes leave. The institution has observed that it has been able to look further ahead and put things in place well in advance.



A focus for the National Assembly this year was learning about supporting those serving the Faith with intensity to ensure they can thrive in their service, tend to their spiritual, physical and mental health, and maintain coherence across the various dimensions of their lives. Initial learning has focused on those serving as members of the elected institutions at the national and the regional level. Following consideration of insights arising from experience and case studies, the National Assembly is now learning about a number of key elements which include the creation of environments that allow those serving to meaningfully reflect together, encourage each other and learn about how they sustain their service; a process for enabling time off throughout the year; and the provision of channels for family members to reflect on what they are experiencing. It is proving helpful for a small team of members to systematically follow this area as an object of learning, supported by periodic reflection by the institution as a whole. The insights and measures put in place by the National Assembly were shared in a dedicated session of the gathering of Regional Councils, opening a conversation which the Councils themselves are

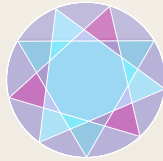
now advancing. Other institutions are similarly encouraged to pursue a learning process about supporting friends on the path of service and the wellbeing of their members and their families, as the intensive demands of the Nine Year Plan will continue to test all our resources.

As the National Assembly has worked to advance its own functioning, its collaboration with the Counsellors has moved from strength to strength. There is a strong partnership and love between our institutions as we carry out our respective roles as part of a single Administrative Order. The pattern of collaboration includes quarterly two-day meetings to read our national reality and review strategic aspects of the growth and protection of the Faith; two annual retreats to allow deeper consideration of vision, priorities and strategies in the areas of the training institute and spiritual health; and other ad hoc meetings with one or more Counsellors to obtain guidance and consult on specific matters. Underlying this rhythm is frequent communication as part of a “dynamic ongoing conversation”, especially between the Counsellors and the National Secretary.

## FLAWS OF GUIDANCE AND INFORMATION

The National Assembly is mindful that “the proper growth of a community is possible only when the National Spiritual Assembly, through its office and secretary, is able to maintain a steady flow of communication to the believers in its jurisdiction, offering guidance and encouragement to them”, while at the same time, “to 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”. The National Assembly has been seeking to learn about how the three protagonists are interacting with the

guidance disseminated by the National Assembly and what we are learning about the role of the institute in this regard, and how the flow of information—qualitative and quantitative—into the national secretariat is enabling the National Assembly to gain an effective reading of reality and to stimulate, coordinate and unify the efforts of the community, including the training institute.



In its annual report for 178 B.E., the National Assembly noted that it had recommenced work on a document capturing the framework for the flows of guidance and information in Australia. The preparation of such documents was one of the themes of the September 2022 gathering at the World Centre referenced above, in light of the learning that similar documents in relation to financial systems and the development of properties have proven to be essential to the work of a National Assembly, providing a framework within which to clarify thinking and refine systems related to these areas of its responsibility.

Drawing on the guidance and insights gained from that gathering, we are pleased to advise that the draft framework document has since been completed and shared with the Universal House of Justice. It identifies key priorities and next steps to ensure that, in the context of the vision of growth in the Nine Year Plan, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the National Assembly can flow quickly to its intended recipients, while quantitative and

qualitative information and learning is accessible to all those requiring it. Following encouragement to swiftly implement steps that became apparent through this process, the National Assembly has accepted in principle a proposal to transition to a new mode of communication of national news incorporating the following key elements: digital-first publication via a publicly accessible website with a subscription facility; secure access for Bahá'í-only content; and periodic publication of a print edition compiling selected content available online. While this transition occurs, the publication of the quarterly newsletter The Australian Bahá'í has been paused, with news being disseminated instead through the shorter Bahá'í-monthly newsletter. A raft of other priorities have also been identified for implementation over the coming years as we work towards a system that makes guidance and information accessible to all people in Australia on their path towards Bahá'u'lláh.

## Development of the National Ḥaẓíratu'l-Quds

Integral to the functioning of the National Assembly is the continued development of the national Ḥaẓíratu'l-Quds. This subject was the focus of considerable attention at the September 2022

gathering at the World Centre, given its central role in the flow of guidance and information to and from the National Assembly. The National Assembly has identified fostering the conditions to enable



**Staff Members with the Counsellors and National Assembly**

capacity to be built across all friends serving the national office and enable the office to rise to higher levels of functioning as a key learning priority. It is also striving to learn how we can expand the pool of human resources serving the National Office.

The National Assembly acknowledges, with deep appreciation, the dedicated labours of those serving within the National Secretariat and as part of broader National Office. This includes those who have put their other work on hold to offer full-time service, as well as many others serving on a part-time or casual basis, whether at the Ḥaḏīratu'l-Quds or remotely from other parts of the country. The work of this dedicated team is core to the smooth functioning of the national administration and indeed the National Assembly itself. Over the past year several friends have completed their service, some of whom had served for more than a decade, and the National Assembly takes this

opportunity to thank them again for their sacrificial and devoted service to this institution. We also acknowledge with sorrow the passing this year of several friends who had offered extended periods of service at the National Office at different stages in its evolution: the late Barry Anderson, Qi-Jie Oh, Verna Podger and Allan Waters. We are fortunate that other capable friends have arisen to continue their devoted work, although some key positions remain to be filled. It is a source of joy that the youth volunteer program has now resumed, with an influx of young volunteers from Australia and abroad bringing fresh energy to the work of the National Centre.



A review of work being undertaken across the Office was completed in 2022 through which a number of priorities for improvement were identified and approved by the National Assembly. The short-term priorities were establishing spaces for executive staff to study and reflect together; documenting policies in a central repository; streamlining the Correspondence Manual; establishing a systematic process for catering to the well-being and morale of staff; clarifying the National Organisational Structure; and drafting updated Terms of Reference for each team or office and standardising the position descriptions for each role. These projects are at varying stages of completion and work has

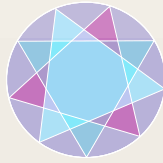
now commenced on the establishment of a more systematic and comprehensive process for the orientation of staff, also identified by the review as a priority. The National Assembly's framework document on flows of guidance and information and the operation of the National Secretariat, informed by the September 2022 consultations at the Bahá'í World Centre, now sets out further adjustments required over the short, medium and long-term to equip the Office to support the needs of the National Assembly in response to growth over the course of the Nine Year Plan.

## Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár

The ongoing development of the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, the Mother Temple for our continent, is primarily advanced through the work of the Temple Board and Temple Director.

At the time of writing the National Assembly was preparing to appoint a new Temple Director, in consultation with the Counsellors, after the outgoing Director completed his service at the end





of 2022. Key objects of learning for the National Assembly relate to the respective roles of the Board and the Director and how they can best be supported; how to ensure adequate and capable human resourcing is in place; and how we can increasingly draw on the institute to enhance the experience of visitors and to connect them to the community-building process. There is a significant need for resources, both human and financial, to fulfil current needs and to meet the requirements of the growth anticipated over the course of the Nine Year Plan.

During 2022 some promising advances were made in learning about the connection of the House of Worship to teaching and the community-building process through closer and more frequent collaboration with the cluster agencies, including the Area Teaching Committee, the training institute and Auxiliary Board members. This included efforts to learn about engaging groups of families, specific populations and focus neighbourhoods with the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. Focussed efforts continued to engage the Chinese population that is dispersed throughout Sydney cluster with the House of Worship. Institute camps were hosted on the grounds of the House of Worship during expansion phases. A cyclical reflection gathering was established with regular guides, at which priority was given to learning to draw on the institute in conversations with visitors.

Several important long-term projects are currently being advanced by the Temple Board. The master planning process has entered the second of three stages with the engagement of a consultant team which is developing the plan in light of the vision articulated by the National Assembly and the Board, and the complex constraints of the site identified in stage one. Management of the grounds and gardens has advanced significantly with the development of a vegetation management plan and the appointment of a specialist Grounds and Gardens Manager who is putting in place a

long-term holistic grounds strategy for the site, while ensuring the gardens surrounding the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár remain well-maintained. Other priorities for the coming year include a review of the visitor experience, development of the water management plan, and increasing the availability of on-site accommodation for those serving the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. These projects as well as the day-to-day maintenance and operations of the House of Worship are expected to require around \$0.5 million in the coming year. It is anticipated that around 30% of these costs would be covered by the return on the investment of growing contributions that are now held within the Endowment Fund.

## Dayspring of Light Project

Following the selection of the architect in 2021, the design for the Temple steps and restoration project was approved by the Universal House of Justice in 2022. This major project has been named the Dayspring of Light Project, inspired by the prayer of 'Abdu'l-Baha which reads in part: "Open wide the doors of Thy blessings unto every soul who ariseth to make offerings for this exalted edifice, this wondrous House of Prayer, this Dayspring of light." The lead consultant and project manager have been appointed by the National Assembly and work is currently under way to prepare the detailed designs and seek the necessary approvals from the Northern Beaches Council. During 180 B.E. it is anticipated that the design and approval phases will be completed, and the construction phase will commence, with the latter currently scheduled to be completed in the first half of 181 B.E. This project also entails the relocation of the National Archives out of the basement of the Temple in the coming year. The National Assembly has established a new dedicated fund for this purpose. It calls the friends to generously support this once-in-a-generation project, in order to restore the edifice of our beloved House of Worship and surround it with a beautiful and befitting tranquillity zone.

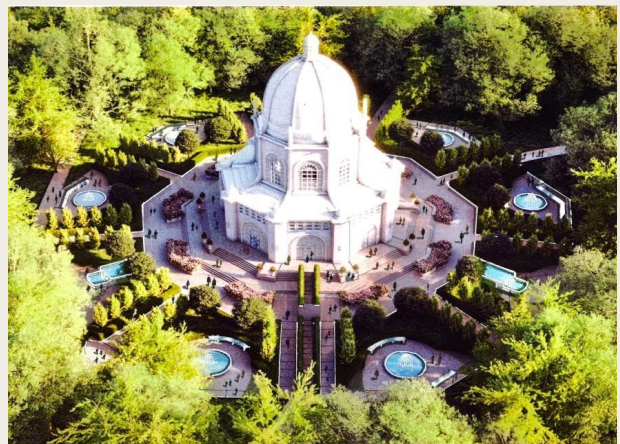
## Properties of the Faith

Just as the administrative institutions exist to support the propagation of the Faith, so too the purpose of the acquisition, development, management and maintenance of properties is to support the growth process. How to ensure the properties of the Faith are best utilised to support the needs of growth, including in the process of formalisation of the training institute, is a key object of learning for the National Assembly. Other learning priorities are how the national property committee can be supported to advance a national learning process around property, and how institutional capacity is being built at the regional and local levels in relation to development and maintenance of properties which constitute seats for Regional Councils and for some Local Assemblies.

The national property committee, appointed in 2021 – a mechanism recommended to the National Assembly by the Universal House of Justice – enables the Assembly to draw on skills and expertise present in the Australian Bahá'í community. In reviewing its first full year of operation, the National Assembly observed that the committee has taken to its work systematically and enthusiastically, significantly easing the burden on the National Assembly by providing it with expert advice while initiating a national learning process among those tasked with the management of Bahá'í properties. This process is initially focussing on Bahá'í Councils and Bahá'í Centre of Learning Management Committees.

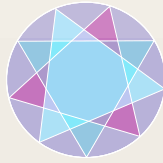
At the request of the National Assembly, the Committee undertook a review of the national property strategy in light of advances in the growth process as well as changing economic conditions in Australia. In considering the review, the National Assembly asked the Committee to further explore property needs in centres of intense activity, where

the need for dedicated facilities is becoming more pressing in a number of places. The National Assembly is currently refining its vision for properties in the Nine Year Plan. The review confirmed the high priority for a dedicated residential facility for the training institute in the vicinity of each major state capital. This year the Australian Bahá'í community



**Approved Design for the House of Worship  
Steps and Tranquillity Zone**





moved a significant step closer to fulfilling this vision through the purchase of the Aldinga Beach Holiday Park outside Adelaide, a facility already receiving significant usage. Plans to construct an institute facility for South-East Queensland at the property purchased for this purpose in Logan, however,

have been delayed following the imposition of new flood requirements by the city council, and it appears unlikely that this project will be able to proceed at the present location.

**“ ...moved a significant step closer to fulfilling this vision through the purchase of the Aldinga Beach Holiday Park outside Adelaide...”**



The Aldinga Beach Property



South Australian Summer School at Aldinga



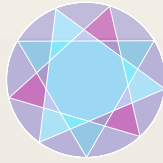


**3D Render of the Approved Design for the Regional Bahá'í Centre for Melbourne**

We are pleased to report that work continues to progress towards the long-awaited new regional Bahá'í Centre for Melbourne, with demolition of the existing structure planned to take place this financial year, once final approvals have been secured. The National Assembly looks to the community to generously support this and other property projects across the country, having already conveyed to the community in a letter dated 7 October 2022 that it anticipates property requirements may cost upward of \$30 million over the coming decade.

This year the National Assembly took the significant decision to devolve responsibility for the management of some regional properties to the Regional Bahá'í Councils, with the Bahá'í Council for Western and Central Australia assuming responsibility for the Bahá'í Centres of Learning for Perth and Adelaide, and the Council for South-

Eastern Australia taking over management of the Sydney Bahá'í Centre of Learning. This decision reflects the National Assembly's confidence in the growing capacity of the Councils, as well as the importance of ensuring that these facilities are managed in a way that best supports the needs of the institutions and communities that utilise them.



## Flow of Literature

With the distribution service now operating both efficiently and effectively, the National Assembly's priority for learning in this area is how capacity can be built to advance a publication program that best meets the needs of the Australian Bahá'í Community at this time, including needs arising from the training institute. In last year's Annual Report, the National Assembly announced the appointment of a new Distribution and Publication Board. The Board has now completed its first year of operation, during which it consulted with institutions and individuals with strong experience in the growth process at the grassroots to clarify publication needs and priorities.

The publication program for the coming year, approved by the National Assembly after meeting with the Board in February 2023, will prioritise the development of companion materials to the training institute, with a focus on materials that support specific cultural and linguistic groups to draw closer to and move through the institute

process and its associated activities; and materials that support Books 3 and 5, including the teaching of children's classes and animation of Junior Youth groups. Other publication priorities will include ensuring that new releases of Authoritative Texts are always made available, are accessible and to fulfil special requests or projects determined by the National Assembly. In addition, the Board is now open to considering manuscripts from authors for potential publication.

The Board has also consulted with Bahá'í bookshops across the country with a view to enhancing this mechanism for the flow of literature and has continued to manage, enhance and promote the website of the distribution service, [www.bahaibooks.com.au](http://www.bahaibooks.com.au). With permission of the National Assembly, it has extended its service to New Zealand, the Pacific and the United States. Further details are available in the Board's Annual Report.

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## Financial System

The development of the national financial system continued through implementing the provisions of a revised financial system document. This, together with a "robust review process that is in place", were noted by the House of Justice, in a letter to the National Assembly dated 30 October 2022, to "represent a significant step in strengthening the management of finances in Australia." The National Assembly was encouraged by the House of Justice's "confidence that your financial system will continue to be refined in light of experience and in response to the increasingly complex demands of the current series of Plans."

An increasingly important consideration for the National Assembly has been the strengthening of the reciprocal interaction between the financial system framework and the operations of the training institutes, now managing well over 50% of the regional budgets. As well as extending the membership of the national financial system team to include treasurers of the training institute boards, efforts are under way to strengthen the institute's capacity for financial administration, planning and budgeting, and supporting fund education efforts at the grassroots level.

Other developments pertaining to the financial system include the reorientation of the National Fund Education Team, steps towards establishing an independent legal entity for managing the Endowment Fund, a process for the orientation of local treasurers at the outset of their service, a

more robust process for the review of annual plans and budgets, the introduction of an online tool for creating, managing, and aggregating budgets, and further alignment of the chart of accounts with the exigencies of the work under way.

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## Spiritual Health

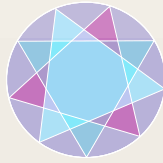
The growth of the community and the attainment of any of its goals is inextricably linked to its spiritual health, which is ultimately rooted in the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Recognising that our two institutions form part of a single coherent system for protecting the body of the Cause, spiritual health is among the themes of joint exploration and learning between the Counsellors and the National Assembly, concurrent with learning and collaboration about the growth of the Faith. These two processes are closely interconnected as we seek to “build communities that are havens of peace, places where a harried and conflict-scarred humanity may find shelter”.

We are working to build capacity for analysis and documentation of learning, including the capacity of the spiritual health team within the National Secretariat that supports the National Assembly in managing spiritual health threats and challenges. Among the current priorities are learning processes in relation to the conditions that foster unity and help to identify and respond to disunity at an early stage; child protection and child safety, including responding to allegations of current and historic sexual abuse; and mental health issues and their impact on individuals, institutions and communities. In 2022 the team also undertook an analysis of resignations from the Faith to identify patterns and consider early measures that can assist individuals to remain connected with their communities.

The National Assembly has recognised the need to strengthen our capacity to take an educative approach to spiritual health, mindful of the role that the training institute can play in contributing to the spiritual health of the community and the vitality of the Faith. In 2022 a review was undertaken of the spiritual health program for Local Spiritual Assemblies to consider how to build further on the capacity that has emerged at the local level. One of the greatest achievements of the program, in which approximately 100 Assemblies have now participated, has been to strengthen the relationship between the Local Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members or their assistants. The volume of material and the length of time required has, however, posed a barrier to many Assemblies completing the program.

The program will continue to be made available to those Assemblies that would benefit from it. In consultation with the Counsellors, the National Assembly has decided that the next stage of this learning process will involve the establishment of a “hub” in one cluster where a small number of Local Assemblies that have completed the program are invited to come together periodically to reflect on their ongoing learning about spiritual health, with a view to developing modules that could assist Assemblies in orientation or in facing particular threats or challenges.





In our efforts to strengthen the capacity of Local Assemblies to sustain vibrant communities, one specific area of learning relates to building capacity in Local Assemblies in dealing with the impact of mental health issues, given their prevalence in our society. To this end, following consultation with the Counsellors, the National Assembly has invited a small team based in Perth to advance learning in this area. The team includes assistants to the Auxiliary Board member who had already been

learning together about various dimensions of mental health. After considering a narrative of the learning accrued to date, the National Assembly has endorsed the team's proposal to learn with an initial group of four Local Spiritual Assemblies about building capacity to recognise, respond and know where to refer to, when dealing with people who have mental health issues. It is hoped that this learning process will be extended more widely over time.



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dear friends, the National Assembly is well aware of the demands the Plan is making of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions of the Faith. This could not be otherwise, as the Universal House of Justice foreshadowed that the community would face “an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material.” As we review the accomplishments of the first year of the Nine-Year Plan, we are filled with love for this vibrant community and confidence in the capacity of its members to reach “the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned”.

At this time, the eyes and hearts of many friends turn to Iran, the Cradle of our Faith. The Bahá'í community in Australia, as with every Bahá'í community throughout the world, stands with the people of Iran, and indeed all people, in their quest for justice and equality. The National Assembly expresses its profound sympathy for victims of oppression throughout Iran, and it looks forward to the development of the harmonious and truly prosperous society for which all Iranians, indeed all people, yearn. Let us not stand by helpless at this time, but rather channel our longing for social transformation into that which we know will be most effective: striving to live a Bahá'í life; engaging in meaningful conversations with many, which will awaken and invite them to join us; sharing our principles and experience in discourses with those who are thinking constructively about the future; seeking by whatever means available to us to promote unity and reduce the pain and suffering of others.

At the time of writing, members of the National Spiritual Assembly are preparing to carry out their sacred responsibility of voting for members of the Universal House of Justice at the Thirteenth International Bahá'í Convention, scheduled to take place from 29 April to 2 May 2023 in the Holy Land. Please be assured of our prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the countless souls in Australia who are dedicating their time and talents, day after day, to service of the Blessed Beauty. We will humbly carry into the consultations the learning borne of your labours, and we eagerly look forward to sharing the insights gained from the collective deliberation of National Spiritual Assemblies worldwide with delegates at the National Bahá'í Convention on our return.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia