

LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH

BAHÁ'Í RESOURCE

LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH

The Ruhi Institute

Learning About Growth

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LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH

The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale
Expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Colombia

Foreword

In October 1952 the beloved Guardian announced to the Bahá'í world the imminent launching of a "fate-laden, soul-stirring, decade-long, world-embracing Spiritual Crusade" aimed at "the immediate extension of Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual dominion as well as the eventual establishment of the structure of His administrative order" in all sovereign states and dependencies scattered over the surface of the entire planet. The response of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to the Guardian's call during the Ten Year Crusade and to plans subsequently given to them by the Universal House of Justice constitutes a glorious chapter in the history of the Faith, one which future generations will contemplate with pride and wonder. After the lapse of but a few decades, it can be asserted without reservation that Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual dominion has indeed been extended throughout the world and the structure of His administrative order established.

In a century and a half, the growth of the Faith has followed various patterns in accordance with the exigencies of time and place. In the Cradle of the Faith, during the early years of the Heroic Age, this growth displayed characteristics unprecedented in religious history. The galvanizing and ennobling influence of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh spread with extraordinary swiftness throughout the country, setting souls aflame, elevating them to the loftiest heights of sanctity, inspiring them

to acts of heroic sacrifice, and generating, at the same time, the fiercest and most persistent opposition that followers of a new religion ever had to face. The growth of the Bahá'í community in Irán continued throughout the Heroic Age, though its outward manifestations were curtailed by relentless persecution. Energies had to be focused increasingly on the pursuit of spiritual and material education, and on the establishment of vibrant Bahá'í communities that were to bring renown to the Iranian friends for the purity of their lives, the rectitude of their conduct, and the loving-kindness they showed even to their enemies. During the Ten Year Crusade these sorely tried believers were presented once again with the opportunity to contribute significantly to the expansion of the Faith, this time through pioneering. Thousands of them arose, and along with their co-religionists, particularly those from North America, propagated the Message of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the planet.

In the latter years of the Heroic Age, as the Faith spread to other countries of the world, especially those in the West, a distinctive pattern of growth emerged. In locality after locality, the Faith was introduced to a small nucleus of believers; they were gradually helped to achieve the status of a Local Spiritual Assembly, and that institution was nurtured to assume responsibility for the expansion and consolidation of a growing local community and its extension into neighboring localities. Through the

operation of this process in successive epochs of the Formative Age the Bahá'í community has extended itself to thousands of cities and towns in every region of the world. Growth, according to this pattern which no doubt will continue to be fruitful for decades to come, can be slow or rapid depending on the receptivity of the people and the degree to which the believers draw upon the spiritual forces that are always available to them. The recent efflorescence of the Faith in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is fresh testimony to the effectiveness of this pattern.

Signs of yet another distinctive pattern of growth, one which echoes episodes of conversion in the Heroic Age, could already be discerned in the early years of the Ten Year Crusade. This remarkable process, which brought delight to the heart of the beloved Guardian, was initiated when the friends in Africa began to take the Faith to the inhabitants of rural areas and recognized their great receptivity to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. Soon, entry by troops spread to other parts of the world. In country after country, the ranks of Bahá'u'lláh's followers swelled, increasing in number from a few hundred thousand to a few million. But consolidating local communities while maintaining a rapid pace of expansion proved to be a formidable challenge for the Bahá'í community. In various countries the inability to meet this challenge brought the process of teaching the masses to a standstill, and often provoked debilitating disagreements on the entire subject of teaching. Although in other countries,

the believers persevered and developed balanced approaches to expansion and consolidation, by the end of the 1970s a great deal of momentum had been lost and the pace of growth had slowed considerably on every continent.

The release of the 1988 Ridván message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í world, awakened a new eagerness to revitalize large-scale expansion of the Faith. This time, however, accumulated experience is producing more suitable methods for sustained expansion, and, especially through the activities of institutes, effective ways of deepening the friends in large numbers are being discovered.

In “Learning About Growth”, the Ruhi Institute describes its conceptual framework and its programs, tells the story of one national community’s efforts to maintain large-scale expansion, and analyzes the lessons it has learned. In reading it, one appreciates the fact that it makes no claim to present a model for emulation; its value lies in its systematic description of a process that in one way or another has been repeated wherever Bahá'ís have labored to bring about large-scale growth of the Faith. People, of course, need to create their own experience, and move with it as they learn and grow in knowledge and wisdom. Yet, the sharing of experience is extremely valuable. Reflection on the dynamics of the efforts of others yields insights into the causes of crisis and victory in one’s own endeavors. This document is of particular value for such reflection, as in telling its

story, the Ruhi Institute avoids the duality of success and failure and analyzes its progress in terms of the constant interplay of crisis and victory.

May the reading of this brief history inspire others to thoughtfully analyze their own experience and share their perceptions with Bahá'ís around the world who are engaged in the same search for effective approaches to the large-scale expansion and consolidation of the Faith.

Farzam Arbab

Preface

During the past few years a number of Bahá'í communities and individuals have asked the Ruhi Institute to share with them its materials and methods. In responding to these requests we have recognized the need for a more thorough presentation of our programs and their evolution. This booklet is an attempt to meet that need. We hope it will be useful to the friends who are working to increase the human resources of the Faith through institute programs.

The Ruhi Institute

I

Initial Impulse

- 1 During the latter years of the Nine Year Plan, large-scale teaching among the masses was gaining momentum in an increasing number of Latin American countries. Small groups of the followers of the Blessed Beauty scattered throughout the continent were feeling the stirrings of a forceful process that had begun during the Ten Year Crusade and was now spreading to receptive populations in rural areas and urban neighborhoods in almost every country of the world. As old attitudes and unfounded fears disappeared, these groups felt strongly attracted to the inhabitants of thousands of villages and towns, where numerous souls were more than ready to accept the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and join the swelling ranks of its adherents. In region after region, it became apparent that brief presentations of the basic verities of the Cause, offered with faith and enthusiasm, sufficed to lead significant numbers to the acceptance of the new message and to immediate enrollment.
- 2 The responses of the Bahá'ís to these teaching opportunities varied from exhilaration, to caution, to incredulity. But whatever the attitudes adopted by individuals, the new process was destined to change the face of the Bahá'í community across the continent. With amazing rapidity most national communities were thrust from their early stages when they existed as closely connected networks of a few small local

communities, into a stage of unprecedented growth, an era of unforeseen challenges and new blessings.

In Colombia, about fifteen people, who comprised the entire active working force of that community in 1970, set out to take the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to the great masses of their country. Their original expectations were high: somehow, in a state of immense optimism and excitement, they had declared their intention to raise the number of believers in the country to 100,000 in as short a time as possible. 3

The teaching method these believers adopted was not different from what was being used in many other receptive areas. Small groups would enter a village, offer ardent prayers, walk the different pathways, and meet the people. Soon, the villagers would invite the Bahá'ís to their homes and gather some members of the family to hear a presentation that proclaimed the advent of Bahá'u'lláh as the new Manifestation of God for today. The oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of humanity constituted the central theme of this presentation which, in its simplicity and depth, attracted the hearts of the villagers and enabled a teacher to enroll twenty or thirty believers in a typical day. In order to reinforce the enrollment process, the villagers would often be invited to large evening meetings that invariably were replete with sentiments of great joy and spiritual exaltation. 4

During this period everyone had an unwavering conviction that these new believers, despite their apparently limited understanding of the significance 5

of the Faith, would become transformed by the very fact of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh, and that Local Spiritual Assemblies, by the very fact of having been elected, would immediately become channels through which God's grace would flow to the entire village. It was expected that the number of Local Spiritual Assemblies would quickly rise to a few thousand, paving the way for a subsequent stage when the people of Colombia, on their own initiative, would seek out the Bahá'ís and enter the Faith in large numbers.

- 6 Although it is inevitable that sooner or later every country will see a vast increase in the number of Bahá'ís, the path leading to large-scale expansion in Colombia did not prove as straightforward as had been expected. The initial results were exhilarating: in the span of a few months, the number of Bahá'ís in the rural areas around the city of Cali had risen from twenty to about one thousand. During the same period, another two thousand believers were enrolled in four other regions, Tumaco, Chocó, North Coast, and settlements of the indigenous Guajiran tribe near the border with Venezuela. But rapid teaching success also engendered problems, and a condition of crisis began to emerge as the community struggled to confront new and unexpected situations.
- 7 The meetings held by the National Spiritual Assembly for participants in the teaching projects, often attended by visitors from other countries, were alive with passionate discussions on the nature of mass teaching and the relative merits of different methods and concepts.

“Shouldn’t we concentrate entirely on expansion and worry about consolidation much later?” “Shouldn’t we stop expansion and immediately proceed to consolidate?” “If the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies is the key to the establishment of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, shouldn’t we concentrate all our efforts in that direction?” “Three thousand Bahá’ís are too few; maybe we should accelerate the rate of expansion. The problem is that not enough numbers have entered the Faith yet; once they do, all the problems will take care of themselves.” “What if we only concentrate on the nine members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies and deepen them first?” “The answer may be in the use of mass media, since the process of teaching one-by-one is proving inadequate.” These are only examples of the thoughts that were expressed in a genuine and sincere search for methods that would help a small group of Bahá’ís respond to the receptivity of millions of people.

There were also occasions when some of the friends 8 would express negative feelings, using phrases such as *“paper Bahá’ís”* and *“paper Assemblies”* to deny the validity of the very concept of large-scale teaching. But, although few in numbers, the Colombian community was blessed with a high degree of unity, and its National Assembly was able to help the friends set aside all negative comments and concentrate only on opinions which, if divergent, nevertheless reflected genuine concern for the process of teaching among the masses. Thus, the tensions created by the challenges of large-scale teaching in Colombia were never allowed to cause dissension.

The community never entered that stage of paralysis which in later years, unfortunately, afflicted some of its sister communities. For the Bahá'ís of Colombia, the basic issue was very simple: *Humanity needs the healing Message of Bahá'u'lláh. Millions of people from among the masses in Latin America are willing to accept His Message. Imaginative ways, then, have to be found to reach them in large numbers.*

II

In Search of Unifying Principles

The remarkable increase in the number of believers from a few hundred to about three thousand, the ensuing confusion, and unity of purpose that finally emerged from an intensive process of consultation, set the pattern for the recurring cycles of crisis and victory that for years, and probably decades to come, would characterize large-scale expansion and consolidation in Colombia. The most valuable lesson learned in this first experience of large-scale teaching was that, in order to move consistently from victory to victory, the community would have to seize in every crisis whatever opportunities would help it to become more unified. For the next few months, then, while the teaching work moved along at a much slower pace, the friends focused their energies on clarifying ideas, building consensus, and laying a firm foundation for their future collective endeavors. 9

Unity of purpose and tolerance of divergent ideas on how to achieve a cherished goal are important first requirements of success, but unless higher levels of unity are reached it is impossible for a community to carry out its plans of action effectively. The Colombian friends, then, found it necessary to resolve the contradictions cited in the previous section and to strive for a certain degree of unity of thought, at least concerning the nature of the activities they were moved to undertake collectively. The National Spiritual Assembly was acutely 10

aware that the community needed an evolving vision, not merely of a distant future, but also of the process that would lead the community to the fulfillment of its more immediate destiny.

- 11 Regular meetings of consultation were called to explore the diverse elements of a more unified vision of teaching. Every effort was made to prevent these consultations from being reduced to mere expression of differing opinions and tiring analysis of abstractions. The community was constantly reminded that it was viewing the very complex process of the growth of the Faith in an entire country, and that any one of them would only be able to see a few aspects of this process through the lens of their own understanding and experience. But limited understandings could not persist in the form of personal opinions once the process had been viewed through different lenses; sooner or later, a new and more complete vision, to be shared by all, had to be formulated and adopted.
- 12 The light that would illuminate this new vision of growth, it was agreed, would not be so much that of the brilliance of those who contributed to consultation, but the light of guidance which emanates from the Writings of the Faith. "Expressing differing opinions" would mean that individuals would describe the processes of expansion and consolidation as they understood them in light of the Writings; everyone would then try to integrate these views for themselves so as to render their own understanding broader and more complete. But everyone agreed that even in this process there was a very subtle

danger to be avoided: that of taking one or two sentences from the Writings out of context and using them to support unfounded personal opinions. Statements such as “*expansion and consolidation should go hand in hand*” and “*expansion should not be stopped for consolidation*” were not meant to be used as arguments in debate. They constitute guidance that, if properly heeded, would help the community formulate a unified vision, learn how to respond to the great receptivity of souls, and achieve ever-increasing rates of expansion.

As the believers in Colombia matured in their ability to consult, they began to advance rapidly towards the unity of thought and vision they so ardently desired. At this stage their search for a common vision was still focused on an overall understanding of processes and did not touch upon details of methods and procedures. The most adequate expression of their unified thoughts, of course, would not have been in the words of the believers themselves, but in the very passages from the Writings that were giving them new insights and a deeper appreciation for principles of teaching. In this short essay it would be impossible to cite even a representative sample of these Writings and the gems of wisdom they contain, but the following passages from the guidance of the Universal House of Justice will illustrate the nature of the unifying principles which lie at the heart of the remarkably strong consensus that was built within the Colombian Bahá’í community in those early years of large-scale expansion. 13

- 14 “When the masses of mankind are awakened and enter the Faith of God, a new process is set in motion and the growth of a new civilization begins. Witness the emergence of Christianity and of Islám. These masses are the rank and file, steeped in traditions of their own, but receptive to the new Word of God, by which, when they truly respond to it, they become so influenced as to transform those who come in contact with them.
- 15 “God’s standards are different from those of men. According to men’s standards, the acceptance of any cause by people of distinction, of recognized fame and status, determines the value and greatness of that cause. But, in the words of Bahá’u’lláh: ‘The summons and Message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever has been revealed and vouchsafed unto it.’ Or again, ‘He has endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God. How could He, otherwise, have fulfilled His testimony unto men, if ye be of them that ponder His Cause in their hearts.’ In countries where teaching the masses has succeeded, the Bahá’ís have poured out their time and effort in village areas to the same extent as they had formerly done in cities and towns. The results indicate how unwise it is to solely concentrate on one section of the population. Each national assembly therefore should so balance its resources and harmonize its efforts that the Faith of God is taught

not only to those who are readily accessible but to all sections of society, however remote they may be.

“The unsophisticated people of the world—and they form the large majority of its population—have the same right to know of the Cause of God as others. When the friends are teaching the Word of God they should be careful to give the Message in the same simplicity as it is enunciated in our teachings. In their contacts they must show genuine and divine love. The heart of an unlettered soul is extremely sensitive; any trace of prejudice on the part of the pioneer or teacher is immediately sensed.” 16

“When teaching among the masses, the friends should be careful not to emphasize the charitable and humanitarian aspects of the Faith as a means to win recruits. Experience has shown that when facilities such as schools, dispensaries, hospitals, or even clothes and food are offered to the people being taught, many complications arise. The prime motive should always be the response of man to God’s Message, and the recognition of His Messenger. Those who declare themselves as Bahá’ís should become enchanted with the beauty of the teachings, and touched by the love of Bahá’u’lláh. The declarants need not know all the proofs, history, laws, and principles of the Faith, but in the process of declaring themselves they must, in addition to catching the spark of faith, become basically informed about the Central Figures of the Faith, as well as the existence of laws they must follow and an administration they must obey.” 17

- 18 “After declaration, the new believers must not be left to their own devices. Through correspondence and dispatch of visitors, through conferences and training courses, these friends must be patiently strengthened and lovingly helped to develop into full Bahá’í maturity. The beloved Guardian, referring to the duties of Bahá’í assemblies in assisting the newly declared believer, has written: ‘... the members of each and every assembly should endeavor, by their patience, their love, their tact and wisdom, to nurse, subsequent to his admission, the newcomer into Bahá’í maturity, and win him over gradually to the unreserved acceptance of whatever has been ordained in the teachings.’”ⁱ
- 19 “It has been due to the splendid victories in large-scale conversion that the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh has entered a new phase in its development and establishment throughout the world. It is imperative, therefore, that the process of teaching the masses be not only maintained but accelerated. The teaching committee structure that each National Assembly may adopt to ensure best results in the extension of its teaching work is a matter left entirely to its discretion, but an efficient teaching structure there must be, so that the tasks are carried out with dispatch and in accordance with the administrative principles of our Faith. From among the believers native to each country,

i Letter dated July 13, 1964 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, published in “Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 31-33

competent traveling teachers must be selected and teaching projects worked out. In the words of our beloved Guardian, commenting upon the teaching work in Latin America: 'Strong and sustained support should be given to the vitally needed and meritorious activities started by the native ... travelling teachers, ... who, as the mighty task progresses, must increasingly bear the brunt of responsibility for the propagation of the Faith in their homelands.'

“While this vital teaching work is progressing 20
each National Assembly must ever bear in mind that expansion and consolidation are inseparable processes that must go hand in hand. The interdependence of these processes is best elucidated in the following passage from the writings of the beloved Guardian: 'Every outward thrust into new fields, every multiplication of Bahá'í institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development. From this vital, this ever-present need, attention must, at no time, be diverted, nor must it be, under any circumstances neglected, or subordinated to the no less vital and urgent task of ensuring the outer expansion of Bahá'í administrative institutions. That this community... may maintain a proper balance between these two essential aspects of its development ... is the ardent hope of my heart.' To ensure that the spiritual life of the individual believer is continuously enriched, that local communities are becoming increasingly

conscious of their collective duties, and that the institutions of an evolving administration are operating efficiently, is, therefore, as important as expanding into new fields and bringing in the multitudes under the shadow of the Cause.

- 21 “These objectives can only be attained when each National Spiritual Assembly makes proper arrangements for all the friends to be deepened in the knowledge of the Faith. The National Spiritual Assemblies in consultation with the Hands of the Cause, who are the Standard Bearers of the Nine Year Plan, should avail themselves of the assistance of Auxiliary Board Members, who, together with the traveling teachers selected by the Assembly or its Teaching Committees, should be continuously encouraged to conduct deepening courses at Teaching Institutes and to make regular visits to local Spiritual Assemblies. The visitors, whether Board Members or traveling teachers should meet on such occasions not only with the local Assembly but, of course, with the local community members, collectively at general meetings and even, if necessary, individually in their homes.”ⁱ
- 22 “Many National Spiritual Assemblies in carrying out their plans for expansion and consolidation have found it necessary to select a number of believers for

i From a letter dated February 2, 1966 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies engaged in mass teaching work, published in “A Special Measure of Love: The importance and Nature of the Teaching Work Among the Masses” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 29-31

service as travelling teachers. While we appreciate the valuable services these travelling teachers have already rendered we are nevertheless deeply conscious of the problems facing your National Assemblies in your desire to carry out your teaching programmes with as much dispatch as possible. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the fact that these problems could well be minimized if the selection of such teachers were done with great care and discretion.

“It must be realized that people who are mostly illiterate cannot have the benefit of reading for themselves the written word and of deriving directly from it the spiritual sustenance they need for the enrichment of their Bahá’í lives. They become dependent, therefore, to a large extent on their contacts with visiting teachers. The spiritual calibre or moral quality of these teachers assumes, therefore, great importance. The National Spiritual Assembly or the Teaching Committees responsible for the selection of these teachers should bear in mind that their choice must depend, not only on the knowledge or grasp of the teachings on the part of the teachers, but primarily upon their pure spirit and their true love for the Cause, and their capacity to convey that spirit and love to others. 23

“... What wonderful results will soon be witnessed in the areas under your jurisdiction if you devise ways and means to ensure, as far as circumstances permit, that the travelling teachers you are encouraging to 24

circulate among the friends will all be ... pure and sanctified souls, with nothing but true devotion and self-sacrifice motivating them in their services to God's Holy Cause. ..."ⁱ

i From a compilation entitled "Extracts from Letters of the Universal House of Justice and the Guardian regarding Teaching the Masses" sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies in March 1968

III

Learning: Action Accompanied by Reflection and Consultation

With a well-established unity of purpose to teach the masses and a newly achieved unity of thought on the nature of expansion and consolidation, the Colombian friends once again turned their attention to the practical path that would lead them to their cherished goal of large-scale expansion. At first, much of the consultation was directed to the search for a prescription that would bring about rapid success, but soon it became clear that such a quest was in vain and that the path to mass conversion would have to be pursued with constancy and discovered step by step. “What methods to use” was not a simple matter to be determined through the clash of differing opinions; it would have to be the object of a long learning process and approached systematically and with perseverance. 25

A number of important conclusions were then formulated. First, it was recognized that the friends would have to refrain from speculating about the future and abandon the habit of elaborating pet theories concerning the destined patterns of growth for the Faith. The community reminded itself that the future of the Cause of God is in the hands of Bahá'u'lláh, Who guides its progress with inscrutable wisdom. Faith, itself, is a gift that He alone can bestow; only He can confirm souls and offer them the privilege of serving Him. What the small 26

group of active Bahá'ís in the country could do was to be thankful for the opportunities they had been granted to serve a highly receptive population; they only needed to concentrate on the quality of their own activities, and strive daily to work with deeper faith, devotion, and intensity. In their meetings they repeatedly cited the following quotation from Bahá'u'lláh and applied it to themselves:

- 27 “Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker’s heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.”ⁱ

- 28 The second conclusion concerned the necessity to focus attention on learning in action. Plans and methods could not be perfect from the beginning, but had to evolve and increasingly reflect the principles of the Faith. These principles, themselves, would progressively come to be understood with greater clarity as everyone pursued diligently the goals that were set for each stage of the teaching process. The teachers and administrators of the Faith had to understand that many of their tasks were straightforward, even simple; they would have to resist the temptation to exaggerate the importance and complexity of their own roles and contributions. The

i Bahá'u'lláh, “Kítáb-i-Iqán”

most they could expect from themselves was to engage wholeheartedly in an intensive plan of action and an accompanying process of reflection and consultation. This reflection and consultation had to be carried out in unshakable unity and with a spirit of utmost humility. The main thrust of consultation had to be the objective analysis of possible courses of action and the evaluation of methods and results, all carried out in light of the Writings of the Faith. The purpose of joint reflection was to seek in the unfathomable depths of the ocean of Revelation the answers to questions, challenges, and problems and to discover the next steps in a path that, if trodden with absolute faith, would lead to unprecedented expansion. There was little more that could be done by the friends; success would be a gift from Bahá'u'lláh, in some way related to the intensity of their efforts and the spiritual quality of their endeavors.

IV

The Unique Attributes of Large-scale Expansion

29 Yet another important conclusion reached during this period had to do with the very nature of teaching campaigns. The friends agreed that what they had experienced during those first months of large-scale expansion was entirely different from any teaching work in which they had previously participated. Success had been achieved only because several distinctive elements had been combined: a group of dedicated teachers in continuous contact with the Creative Word; constant prayer, the capacity to dedicate long hours to teaching every day; a spirit of great joy and happiness, generated through prayer and song, that would permeate an entire village upon the arrival of the group of teachers; freedom from any trace of racial or class prejudice; intense love; and profound respect for the people who were being invited to join the Faith. These elements created opportunities for a teaching process that, qualitatively, was just as different from individual teaching as farming thousands of acres is different from tending a few plants in a small personal garden. It was essential to understand that both types of teaching are valid, and that it was not correct to measure one with the parameters of the other. The intensity of the spiritual sentiments created during teaching campaigns opened new spiritual doors and made the hearts of listeners who were already

spiritually inclined more receptive to the Faith. Was it not the experience of every group that on a given day the neglect of any one of the essential elements of group teaching—whether caused by disunity, by the influence of prejudice, or by lack of attention to prayer and use of the Creative Word—could easily close the doors of success? Had not every group observed that whenever a teacher forgot the true purpose of the campaign and became attached to a sense of glory, of superficial excitement and success, even after the enrollment of large numbers, in the end, few lasting results were obtained? Had not every sincere teacher observed in his or her own experience that the moment self-glorification entered the mind, the ability to teach and confirm was immediately and noticeably diminished?

This realization of the distinctiveness of large-scale teaching led to the decision to accord it a special place among the processes of growth of the Faith in Colombia. Never would this type of teaching be seen to compete with other activities such as individual teaching, proclamation of the Faith to political and intellectual leaders, the strengthening of national, regional, and local institutions, or the promotion of Bahá'í scholarship. The challenge facing the National Assembly was to ensure that each of these growth processes would achieve its own momentum and would interact with others so as to enhance and accelerate progress.

30

V

The Quality of the First Contact and the Role of the Teacher

- 31 The ongoing analysis of experiences showed clearly that success, both in large-scale expansion and in the subsequent deepening of new believers, depended to a great extent on the quality of the first contact between the teacher and the seeker. In teaching campaigns among the masses this first contact will often be brief, yet its spiritual impact must be great: the flame of faith has to be kindled in a receptive heart with sufficient intensity to persist and grow through a deepening process which is usually slow and frequently interrupted. To achieve this high quality of teaching, the Colombian friends understood that it was necessary to include in their plans of action regular activities to uplift the spirits, refine the character, and enhance the understanding of the teachers, old and new.
- 32 It was well understood that in teaching among the masses, as in any kind of teaching effort, the teacher plays a far more crucial role than is usually called for in proclamation activities. If the hearts of people are to be connected with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the teacher's love, for the seeker and for the Faith, must become the vehicle through which the message of the Revelation flows, penetrates the heart, and leads the new believer into a bond of love with the Manifestation of God for today. In this first, subtle interaction of human

hearts, through which God bestows the gift of faith on a new believer, both the teacher's words and the sentiments of the teacher's heart are of great importance; one without the other does not lead to appreciable or lasting effects. After all, teaching is not the selling of a product; it is a spiritual process that depends on the direct action and influence of great spiritual forces. Teaching among the masses is not a missionary activity focused on conversion; it is the process through which large numbers of people are empowered to arise and participate in the construction of a new World Order.

It was decided, then, that the next plan of action would incorporate regular meetings of consultation for the participants of teaching campaigns, dedicated to fostering a deeper understanding of the spiritual qualities that an effective teacher needs to possess. To support these consultations, numerous passages from the Writings were selected, and everyone was encouraged to memorize them—short quotations at first, and later, entire passages and Tablets. Memorization of the Holy Writings eventually became a well-established tradition in the Colombian community and today is a cherished aspect of Bahá'í life for the believers of all ages, including the children. Quotations were selected and memorized with various purposes in mind. Some were concerned with spiritual qualities such as love, detachment, perseverance, patience, faith, courage, kindness, joy and happiness. Others were chosen to further the teachers' understanding of the teaching process itself; still others, to illuminate the dynamics of group teaching

33

and help maintain the necessary levels of unity and love among the teachers. The number of quotations selected was large; however, a sampling of them suffices to indicate the approach to “teacher training” taken by the National Assembly and its committees at the time when the elements of a permanent teaching institute were beginning to coalesce:

- 34 “O wayfarer in the path of God! Take thou thy portion of the ocean of His grace, and deprive not thyself of the things that lie hidden in its depths. Be thou of them that have partaken of its treasures. A dew-drop out of this ocean would, if shed upon all that are in the heavens and on the earth, suffice to enrich them with the bounty of God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. With the hands of renunciation draw forth from its lifegiving waters, and sprinkle therewith all created things, that they may be cleansed from all man-made limitations and may approach the mighty seat of God, this hallowed and resplendent Spot.
- 35 “Be not grieved if thou performest it thyself alone. Let God be all-sufficient for thee. Commune intimately with His Spirit, and be thou of the thankful. Proclaim the Cause of thy Lord unto all who are in the heavens and on the earth. Should any man respond to thy call, lay bare before him the pearls of the wisdom of the Lord, thy God, which His Spirit hath sent down unto thee, and be thou of them that truly believe. And should any one reject thine offer, turn thou away

from him, and put thy trust and confidence in the Lord, thy God, the Lord of all worlds.

“By the righteousness of God! Whoso openeth his lips 36
in this Day and maketh mention of the name of his
Lord, the hosts of Divine inspiration shall descend
upon him from the heaven of My name, the All-
Knowing, the All-Wise. On him shall also descend
the Concourse on high, each bearing aloft a chalice
of pure light. Thus hath it been foreordained in the
realm of God’s Revelation, by the behest of Him Who
is the All-Glorious, the Most Powerful.”ⁱ

“Be pure, O people of God, be pure; be righteous, be 37
righteous. ... Say: O people of God! That which can
ensure the victory of Him Who is the Eternal Truth,
His hosts and helpers on earth, have been set down in
the sacred Books and Scriptures, and are as clear and
manifest as the sun. These hosts are such righteous
deeds, such conduct and character, as are acceptable
in His sight. Whoso ariseth, in this Day, to aid Our
Cause, and summoneth to his assistance the hosts
of a praiseworthy character and upright conduct,
the influence flowing from such an action will, most
certainly, be diffused throughout the whole world.”ⁱⁱ

“Say: Doth it beseem a man while claiming to be a 38
follower of his Lord, the All-Merciful, he should yet
in his heart do the very deeds of the Evil One? Nay, it
ill beseemeth him, and to this He Who is the Beauty

i Bahá’u’lláh, “Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh”, CXXIX

ii Ibid., CXXXI

of the All-Glorious will bear Me witness. Would that ye could comprehend it!

39 “Cleanse from your hearts the love of worldly things, from your tongues every remembrance except His remembrance, from your entire being whatsoever may deter you from beholding His face, or may tempt you to follow the promptings of your evil and corrupt inclinations. Let God be your fear, O people, and be ye of them that tread the path of righteousness.

40 “Say: Should your conduct, O people, contradict your professions, how think ye, then, to be able to distinguish yourselves from them who, though professing their faith in the Lord their God, have, as soon as He came unto them in the cloud of holiness, refused to acknowledge Him, and repudiated His truth? Disencumber yourselves of all attachment to this world and the vanities thereof. Beware that ye approach them not, inasmuch as they prompt you to walk after your own lusts and covetous desires, and hinder you from entering the straight and glorious Path.”ⁱ

41 “The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of

i Bahá'u'lláh, “Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh”, CXXVIII

the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful. We have accepted to be abased, O believers in the Unity of God, that ye may be exalted, and have suffered manifold afflictions, that ye might prosper and flourish. He Who hath come to build anew the whole world, behold, how they that have joined partners with God have forced Him to dwell within the most desolate of cities!"ⁱⁱ

"If any differences arise amongst you, behold Me standing before your face, and overlook the faults of one another for My name's sake and as a token of your love for My manifest and resplendent Cause. We love to see you at all times consorting in amity and concord within the paradise of My good-pleasure, and to inhale from your acts the fragrance of friendliness and unity, of loving-kindness and fellowship. Thus counselleth you the All-Knowing, the Faithful. We shall always be with you; if We inhale the perfume of your fellowship, Our heart will assuredly rejoice, for naught else can satisfy Us. To this beareth witness every man of true understanding."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Lift up your hearts above the present and look with eyes of faith into the future! Today the seed is sown, the grain falls upon the earth, but behold the day will come when it shall rise a glorious tree and the branches thereof shall be laden with fruit Rejoice and be glad that this day has dawned, try to realize its

ii Ibid., XLV

iii Ibid., CXLVI

power, for it is indeed wonderful! God has crowned you with honour and in your hearts has He set a radiant star; verily the light thereof shall brighten the whole world!”ⁱ

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“O son of man! Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart, that thou mayest be worthy to meet Me and to mirror forth My beauty.”ⁱⁱ

i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Paris Talks: Addresses given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912”

ii Bahá’u’lláh, “The Hidden Words”, Arabic No. 36

VI

The Content of the First Message

While they were deliberating on the spiritual qualities which would be essential to the growth of the teachers, the Colombian friends were also consulting on the content of the message that, during the first contact, was to kindle the spark of faith in the seeker's heart, and were looking for ways to help an increasing number of believers express their newly acquired knowledge of the Faith by teaching others. Consultations on the content of a "first message" led to the preparation of a small, introductory booklet with simple explanations and illustrations that could be easily used by those who desired to teach their families and friends. The booklet was not intended to present a formula for teaching, but to help the new believer follow a sequence of ideas known to be successful in enhancing a basic understanding of the Faith. Its use also ensured that the presentation of the message would not be reduced to the superficial discussion of a few principles, but would cover the points deemed necessary for enrollment.

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The booklet, which, it must be remembered, was developed for a predominantly Catholic population, begins with praise of God as the Creator of all things, and introduces the concept of the Covenant as an expression of God's love for His creation. In this same context, it explains the meaning of the word "manifestation", and offers a short account of the life of Bahá'u'lláh as

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the Manifestation of God for today, emphasizing His sufferings as well as His triumph over all the powers of the earth. In this explanation, it also refers to Christ as a Manifestation of God, while avoiding words such as “prophet” or “messenger” which, for a Christian, would diminish Christ’s station. It does not refer to Bahá’u’lláh as the return of Christ, for the concept of return taught by the churches is misleading and its association with Bahá’u’lláh confuses the listeners rather than helping them formulate clear initial concepts. The booklet next presents a short account of the life of the Báb as the Herald of the New Age Who sacrificed His Own life to usher humanity into the Kingdom of God on earth. It goes on to explain the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Interpreter, the Exemplar, and the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant. In doing so, it emphasizes fundamental concepts such as the protection against strife and division conferred on the Faith through the power of the Covenant, and the unique bounty bestowed on the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the example of Abdu’l-Bahá as the embodiment of His Father’s teachings. The presentation then turns to a brief description of several laws and ordinances, such as the education of children, the requirement of daily prayer, the prohibition of alcoholic drinks, and the injunction against backbiting and slander. Finally, the existence of an administrative order is mentioned, and some of the characteristics of a Local Spiritual Assembly are described in a very general way. Each page of the booklet includes a quotation from the Writings which the teacher is urged to recite after explaining the related ideas. Teachers are also encouraged to invite

questions and comments from the seekers throughout their presentation and, at the end, to invite them to join the Faith, by asking them to meditate in their hearts on whether they accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for today.

VII

The Second Wave of Expansion: Joy and Sorrow

47 Having witnessed a new level of consensus emerge among its small band of teachers, who now numbered about 30, the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia adopted a new plan for teaching in villages and in neighborhoods of the cities to which, for several decades, rural people had been migrating in large numbers. The intensive consultation and preparation that had occupied the friends for a few months had produced miraculous effects on the Colombian believers. In a relatively short span of time they had achieved unity of thought, not only on the principles that would guide their teaching efforts but also on many fundamental issues related to the practical path they had traced for themselves. Invigorated by their new understanding and vision, they arose in support of the new plan of the National Spiritual Assembly and became vigorously engaged in teaching among the masses. Enthusiasm and an indescribable spirit of joy pervaded the community. Two members of the National Assembly offered to dedicate full-time service to teaching, and small teams, consisting mostly of youth, were formed around them. The work of these teams was strongly reinforced on weekends, when the friends would joyfully devote long hours to offer the healing Message of Bahá'u'lláh in one village after another. The results were spectacular: in less than two

years the number of Bahá'ís in the country rose to about 10,000.

With the new emphasis on the quality of teaching, the believers found a great deal of satisfaction in their renewed activities. The message being offered was clear, and people were entering the Faith with much more understanding than in the previous stage of teaching. It was extremely gratifying to discover that more complete presentations of the Faith were leading to even higher rates of acceptance. Everyone was convinced that the masses were truly responding to Bahá'u'lláh, and were not only attracted by a few notions about unity and the abolition of prejudices. Also, the new method of teaching helped increasing numbers of new believers who were willing to arise and teach others. Teachers were asked to give special attention to new believers who showed great interest and capacity. Such believers were invited to weekend courses and encouraged to take part in teaching campaigns. Thus, over a two-year period, about two hundred people took part in teaching activities at one time or another.

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Yet, the number who could be relied upon to teach consistently grew very slowly. Many potential teachers participated in only a few events before gradually drifting away, often because of the pressure of expectations they sensed from the other Bahá'ís that they should assume a great deal of responsibility as soon as they had participated in a few teaching events. Money was also a great test. Believers with little deepening were entrusted with sums of money which, although small,

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represented great temptations to them. When these new believers misused funds, the administrative institutions and coordinators of teaching campaigns would lose all confidence in them. At the time, strong emphasis was being placed on the notion that Bahá'ís should not judge one another, and that every believer was reborn the moment he or she accepted the Bahá'í Message. The extreme application of these ideas led some of the friends, who were overly concerned with the increase of numbers, to promote as teachers individuals who were motivated by desire for personal gain. In one region, a group of about twenty teachers turned out to have deceived the pioneer. When this was discovered, a group of trusted teachers had to be sent to re-introduce the Faith to about one thousand souls, so that statistics already shared with the friends would not have to be revised. The personal differences which sometimes arose among new believers who joined teaching campaigns constituted another constant source of difficulty. Despite peace-making efforts by more experienced teachers on the teams, it was often impossible to avoid clashes which, unfortunately, affected many so strongly that they dropped out of teaching activities altogether.

- 50 Apart from problems with individuals, a more far-reaching aspect of the growth of the Cause in this period gradually became a concern of the institutions and indeed was soon recognized as the kernel of a new crisis. Although, as individuals, new believers were attaining deep understanding of the Faith, communities were not responding in the same way. Hardly any Bahá'í

community life was developing in the villages. Local Spiritual Assemblies were elected with enthusiasm, but would meet only once or twice before the initial interest completely disappeared. Despite a constant flow of new believers, the community was not growing according to the pattern the friends had envisioned. It was realized that once again, the community needed to engage in an intensive process of consultation and reexamine some of the assumptions underlying the choice of methods and procedures.

VIII

Shifting from the Individual to the Community

- 51 A series of meetings of consultation shed new light on the challenges of developing communities and increasing the number of teachers, and helped the community move forward again. The facts seemed to indicate that too much emphasis had been placed on first impressions of individuals and, indeed, that in the desire to refrain from judging, a great many judgements had been made. It began to seem unreasonable that the institutions of the Faith should close their eyes to the frailties of human nature; surely, they should exercise caution when assigning responsibility to people who had not yet had an opportunity to draw upon the power of the Faith to bring about significant change in their inner lives. The mood of the National Spiritual Assembly swung away from an emphasis on individuals. The approach adopted for the next phase of the expansion-consolidation process centered mostly on community education. It was decided that no special efforts would be made to open new communities, but a relatively small number of villages and towns would be visited time and again. The majority of the families in each of these villages would be systematically deepened, and a sequence of Bahá'í concepts would be explained to every household during repeated visits. New believers would be invited to teach, but mostly in their own villages. The more experienced

teachers would take it upon themselves to act with such purity and to teach in conditions of such sacrifice that the hearts of the people would be transformed through the power of their example. Within this atmosphere of self-sacrifice and detachment, sincere new teachers would surely arise spontaneously, and the mistakes of the past would be avoided.

The new approach brought abundant blessings. The number of Bahá'ís increased to about 30,000 within a few years. The number of teachers who participated in campaigns hovered around 50, but their quality and dedication more than compensated for the fewness of their numbers. The 30,000 Bahá'ís were clustered in about 200 large Bahá'í communities, so that the deepening of new believers became more manageable. Groups of teachers would stay in a village for days and even weeks, holding meetings with the families, the Bahá'í community, and especially the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly. The most enthusiastic new believers were the children and youth 12 to 15 years of age, and they received a great deal of special attention. Efforts were made to develop teaching materials and audio-visual aids for the teachers to use. A small print shop was acquired. Thousands of copies of single sheets and booklets for children and adults were produced and shared with the constant stream of new believers. So intense was the enthusiasm of the teachers, so joyful the deepening meetings in the newly formed communities, so successful the regional weekend institutes, and so high the rate of acceptance that, for a few months, the

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community seemed to be achieving its dream of a self-sustaining process of expansion and consolidation.

53 But, alas, the rate of expansion began to diminish, and the goal of 100,000 Bahá'ís in a few more years began to seem less and less attainable. At the time, the most apparent reasons were personal tests. The physical health of the few workers was rapidly deteriorating, financial resources were not increasing, and the constant pressure of maintaining high-quality activity, campaign after campaign, became progressively harder to bear. So few were the workers that a crisis in the life of just one would affect an entire plan and constitute a strong test for all the others.

54 Yet, for those who took part in the teaching, the early 1970s are remembered as the most precious days of their lives, and the beauty of those days has never been equalled by any subsequent experience. Those were years of rapid spiritual growth. The answers to all physical, financial and numerical shortcomings were sought in faith, in prayer, and in a more profound understanding of what it means to rely on the power of divine assistance. Even today, in moments of fond reminiscence, those friends often wonder whether their dreams might have been fulfilled if they had only persisted longer, had sacrificed their all, had soared to greater spiritual heights, had behaved more like the Dawn-Breakers, the stories of whose lives they used to study so intensively during countless hours filled with prayer, meditation, deepening, and consultation.

Whatever the answers to such difficult questions may be, it is an historical fact that this small band of dedicated workers in Colombia could not respond effectively to all the requirements of large-scale expansion and consolidation. Expansion was coming to a halt, and it seemed physically impossible for them to carry forward the parallel processes of expansion and consolidation. As they looked desperately for answers in every direction, one question loomed, and gradually emerged as the core of all their concerns: *There were about 15 of us when large-scale expansion began in our country. The number of Bahá'ís has grown from a few hundred to about 30,000. We have taught diligently, have visited the new believers time and again, and on every visit have found them firm in the Faith, joyful to receive us and happy to learn more about their new religion. Yet, the number of dedicated administrators and teachers has hardly quadrupled. Why haven't we succeeded in helping more, out of such a large number of new believers, to arise and dedicate themselves to serving the Cause as its teachers and participants in its administrative affairs?*

IX

Back to the Individual: Deepening Booklets

56 Insights did not come easily when the friends examined the contradiction between the enthusiasm and willingness of their fellow believers to be deepened in the Faith and their apparent inability to arise in its service. By now, the Colombian community was accustomed to recurrent crises that, if managed in a spirit of unity, would always lead to a new stage of great victories. But this new crisis seemed somewhat different from the previous ones, for it pointed to shortcomings that were difficult to discover and painful to examine: *Could it be that in our desire to achieve greater heights of devotion, purity, love, dedication and unshakable faith, we have overlooked other qualities that are essential in a successful teacher? By concentrating on our own spiritual conditions and the quality of what we give, have we failed to consider the realities of life for those who are the recipients of our message? How much do we know about the customs of the people among whom we are working? Are we aware of their needs, their aspirations, and the difficulties of their day-to-day struggle for existence? Although most of us are Colombians, can any one of us claim to have the ability to see the world through the eyes of the villagers who have carried the burdens of an unjust society on their shoulders for so many decades? Do we even know how they perceive*

their own relationship to those of us who visit them and, in general, how they relate to the institutions of the Faith?

It was clearly time to slow down what had become a very high-powered approach to “giving the Message” and begin to listen. As the teachers did listen more carefully to the new believers and learned to observe the communities with a degree of detachment from their own plans and projects, it became clear that the villagers’ impressions of them were very much at variance with the images they had intended to project. The new believers viewed them as a group of highly dedicated people they had grown to love and respect as their teachers, but not as people with whom they could easily walk on a common path: *These newly acquired friends visited them regularly and explained the verities of the new religion they had accepted. Some of these friends were more constant than others. Some came quietly to visit families at their homes; others were dynamic and would infuse large meetings with joy and spirit. At the Bahá’í meetings in the village one always heard inspiring talks, sang joyous songs and felt uplifted by beautiful prayers. On occasion, special courses would be offered in nearby towns which, unfortunately, one’s busy life did not often allow one to attend. But whenever the opportunity presented itself, one could certainly receive valuable instruction by attending these special courses. It was also possible for some of the youth of the village to accompany the teachers in visits and campaigns, but they could not stay away from home for too long, for the subsistence of a family depends on contributions from every member. Of course, an important*

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distinction of this new religion was that it had no clergy and everyone was urged to participate in running its affairs. That is why, every year, a Local Spiritual Assembly was elected in every village. The emphasis that was put on the Local Assembly showed how important this institution would become in the future. One was constantly reminded that the Assembly would eventually be responsible for the progress of the entire village, even if now it was only in its beginning stages. To vote for the Assembly was not difficult. To be a member of it made one feel the weight of certain responsibilities. But what did it really mean to be responsible for the progress of the community, much less the entire village? To convince the Bahá'ís to attend meetings was difficult enough, and the effort succeeded only when one of the experienced people from outside was present. But to run the affairs of the village was another matter; it was a wonderful ideal that some day would surely be addressed.

- 58 The foregoing clearly is only an effort to portray how the new believers perceived service to the Faith, but the analysis that it reflects helped the Colombian friends gain insights into the approach and methods they had been using. At stake here was the fundamental question of how to help others tread the path from acceptance to service. Acceptance, for people whose hearts had been prepared by suffering, was apparently an easy matter. That Bahá'u'lláh had come to lead us into a new civilization was easily understood by the villagers when they examined His teachings in the context of their own lives and in light of a common wisdom that had been handed

down through the generations. Love for Bahá'u'lláh came easily to them as they listened to the stories of His life and His sufferings, and contemplated the signs of His inevitable victory. Confirmation in the new Faith, although slow and gradual, was proving possible for them, through visits, courses, and conferences. Even a certain level of consciousness that it is necessary to obey the laws of Bahá'u'lláh was becoming widespread. But effective participation in the service of the Cause seemed to require a different dynamic of teaching that somehow had not been generated by the approaches and methods known at that time to the Colombian friends.

In retrospect it is clear that the friends in Colombia were beginning to question their approaches to teaching at a most fundamental level. At that early stage, however, they were unaware of the magnitude of change that this line of questioning would require of them. In fact, in their haste to achieve victories, they clarified only one idea from among the many topics that needed consultation, used it to make a slight modification to their plans, and returned quickly to the field of action.

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The argument that led to the modified plan of action was simple. As the friends reviewed the evolution of their plans and concepts they realized how, at an earlier stage, they had been deeply affected by their errors of judgement in selecting and promoting individuals without due discretion. In reaction, they had then concentrated on the development of their own spiritual qualities, hoping that the example of their sacrifice and selfless service would suffice to inspire others to arise

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and teach the Faith. But somehow, in this process, many of them had assumed the posture of instructors, and they had neglected to help the new believers to discover their own capacities for action. The problem was not, of course, that they had failed to mention the importance of participation while issuing appeals and giving instructions. It was simply that the new believers needed to be shown a path of service which, if followed, would gradually make them independent of outside visitors.

- 61 The courses, talks and conferences actually succeeded in imparting knowledge about the precepts of the Faith, its history, its aims, and its Administrative Order. Villagers were quite inspired when they were presented with the vision of a future Bahá'í society and its harmonious and well-organized local communities. They were convinced of the necessity for strong Bahá'í families. They aspired to attain the station and the qualities of a true servant described by their teachers. But how were they actually to achieve their aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities? Emotionally charged calls to action and the affirmations that no matter how little we knew, we would be confirmed if we only would arise to serve the Faith, were uplifting and reassuring; yet, most individuals needed to build up confidence and to develop gradually their capacity to serve the Faith, starting with simple, practical acts, and progressing to more complex and demanding forms of involvement in the work of the Faith. Effective deepening, then, in addition to imparting knowledge and uplifting the spirit,

had to offer people the possibility of following a concrete path of service.

There is no doubt that this line of reasoning was pointing to very exciting possibilities for the Colombian Bahá'í community. But at the time, the friends were trying to remedy, as quickly as possible, the shortcomings they had discovered in their latest approach to teaching. The answer that came most easily was that large numbers of believers might be helped to embark on their paths of service by repeating the simplest act that the more experienced teachers were already performing in their visits to the communities. The National Teaching Committee had been developing a set of small booklets, each devoted to a single topic such as the Covenant, the life of Bahá'u'lláh, love and unity among the friends, or the Nineteen Day Feast. These booklets were being shared with individuals and families when they were visited in their homes, and the results had been encouraging. It was already known that the new friends were hesitant to share these booklets with others, basically because they were afraid of being asked questions that they would be unable to answer. The modified plan of action, then, called for the preparation of material that would treat each topic more extensively, to be studied with those who showed a willingness to share the small booklets with their relatives and friends. With a new wave of enthusiasm, the teachers resumed their visits to the villages, confident that in addition to fostering general community education, they would now be helping some of the friends to begin a path of service.

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But, alas, although they continued to have success in deepening believers with the booklets, the study of additional materials with the more interested ones added very few to the total number of dedicated teachers in the country and proved to be an inadequate response to the much weightier challenge of fostering the spirit of service among a significant number of new believers.

X

Elements of a Framework for the Creation of the Ruhi Institute

Although the failure of the new plan of action to greatly increase the number of dedicated teachers was disconcerting, there was little reason to question the validity of the analysis that had led to the concept of paths of service. Experience confirmed the previous conclusion, that mere acceptance of the basic verities of the Faith would not move the body of the friends to serve the Cause unless they were offered a practical path they could gradually follow as their capacities expanded. Now it was also becoming clear that these friends would not necessarily sustain their services simply because they received some training to carry out a few acts of service. If service was to be sustained beyond initial expressions of enthusiasm and excitement, it had to become possible for the believers to participate in a continuous process of spiritual enrichment. With the exception of a few believers who quickly learned to derive spiritual sustenance from their own personal study of the Writings, everyone needed systematic programs, organized by the institutions, to help them tread at least the beginnings of their newly adopted paths of spiritual progress. Such systematic programs, however, had to go beyond the exposition of facts or simple training in practical matters; they had to help the participants walk paths of service that were informed by

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spiritual insights and derived meaning from ever-deeper spiritual understanding.

64 The idea of a systematic educational process, especially when modified by the adjective “spiritual”, was attractive to most of the friends and was certainly in accord with the tendency of the Colombian people to respect and aspire to education. However, it was recognized from the beginning that the effort would fail if the many distortions created by formal educational systems could not be avoided. Service to the Cause was a right and a responsibility of every believer, no matter how new to the Faith; their exercise of this right could not be conditioned on the completion of a set of educational courses that could be interpreted as prerequisites for service. The challenge was to set in motion an educational process that would increase the believer’s capacity to serve, without creating barriers to spiritual growth or introducing rigidity into the teaching plans of the institutions of the Faith. As the Colombian community set out to meet this challenge, a systematic approach to deepening was gradually developed and organized under what later came to be known as the Ruhi Institute.

65 Over the years, a number of key ideas have been identified as elements of a conceptual framework that guides the development of the Ruhi Institute. A few of these ideas are closely linked to the evolution of the concept of large-scale teaching described in the previous sections. They may be expressed in the following sequence of statements:

1. Large-scale expansion and consolidation can be effectively viewed as the movement of receptive populations towards the future World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. This movement is eminently spiritual. It occurs fundamentally in the hearts and minds of individuals, but gradually manifests itself in the entire social, economic, and cultural structure of the population and in the transformation of the relationships between the individual and society. Teaching is the spiritual process by which this movement is constantly propelled. 66
2. It is natural to expect that individuals within the population will not tread their spiritual paths at the same pace. At any given moment the population will present a continuum of responses, from the indifference of those who are barely aware of the existence of the Cause, to the intense devotion of those who have dedicated their lives to its promotion. The classification of Bahá'ís in mutually exclusive categories—active and inactive, deepened and undeepened, spiritualized and unspiritualized—has little place in an approach that is concerned with the dynamics of the spiritual movement of a people. Even undue emphasis on a Bahá'í/non-Bahá'í duality proves to be harmful in that it creates unnecessary barriers to the progress of individual souls and blurs the vision of a spiritual movement. 67
3. In order for a population to move towards a Bahá'í civilization, forces of transformation from within the population, which are directly generated by the power 68

of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, must be allowed to grow in strength and range of influence. Such a process of transformation is impeded if the initiators of large-scale expansion, often regular visitors from nearby regions or pioneers, cling to their identity as outsiders, perpetuating thereby a “we/they” duality that, in turn, leads to a condition of dependence, to frustration, or even to bitterness. Teachers, whatever their background, must develop a sense of belonging to the people they try to serve and learn to view their own spiritual progress as one component of the spiritual movement of the entire population. The spiritual transformation of a people is an organic process that must be propelled from within. In this Revelation, it is guided by the institutions of the Faith which, after all, belong to experienced and new Bahá'ís alike; but it cannot be managed from outside, no matter how well-intentioned the outsiders may be.

- 69 4. The spiritual dynamics of teaching is essentially the same for the poor and the rich, the villagers and the urban dwellers, the educated and the illiterate. All new believers must have the benefit of a nurturing process that allows them to become confirmed in the Faith as they gradually dedicate more time and resources to its service. When the numbers are small, close friends often accompany new believers through joy and sorrow, tests and triumphs, until confidence is built and a sense of responsibility is firmly established. When many people rapidly accept the Faith in the process of large-scale expansion it

cannot be assumed that their need for this nurturing is any less real. The problem, of course, is that as the numbers increase rapidly it becomes impossible for a few to establish intimate bonds of friendship with the majority of the new believers. Deepening, especially for populations that have little tradition of reading books, becomes a difficulty that, unless surmounted, tends to slow the movement of the population and bring to a sudden halt the process of expansion. The use of modern communications media can be of some help, but they are no substitute for personal support and the transmission of spiritual insights and energy from one heart to another when they are connected by bonds of love.

5. The recognition that the spiritual movement of a population necessarily comprises the movements of individuals, each at a unique pace; an appreciation of the essential role played by forces generated from within the population in propelling its spiritual movement; attention to the universal need for participation in a consistent, progressive process of spiritual education; and the acknowledgement that a few, by themselves, cannot respond to the deepening needs of large numbers of believers, all point to the necessity of a systematic process of human resource development that concentrates on those who show more interest, are more capable, and have a greater desire to render service. Human resource development in this context, however, embodies two principles that distinguish it from prevalent models

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of formal education. The pace at which believers move along their paths of spiritual development is not predetermined, but varies according to individual desires and aspirations in an open learning process. And, the nature of the educational process is such that those who receive attention also nurture others. This approach to the development of human resources, then, differs from traditional schemes of schooling which, in a paradoxical way, efface individuality while rewarding and cultivating selfishness. Human resource development is understood as that process which catalyzes the emergence of workers for the Cause who are entirely dedicated to the service of others and committed to the spiritual movement of their people.

- 71 Initially, the Colombian believers conceived the Ruhi Institute as an institution for the development of human resources among a population of about 100,000 villagers in the region of Norte del Cauca, near the city of Cali. Soon the institute expanded its vision to embrace similar populations everywhere in Colombia, especially in the rural areas. Although a modest building was constructed in the town of Puerto Tejada, the connection between the institute and the building became rather tenuous, as most of the courses were moved to villages and towns all over the country. That the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia had decided to create an entity primarily concerned with the development of human resources, and to give it a structure and importance parallel to that of its National Teaching Committee, was a significant

step. The initial implementation of the decision was not limited to the mere creation of a committee which would be left to itself to respond to the demands of a well-written mandate. The order of priorities was reflected in the national budget, which was divided approximately as follows: 30% for teaching, 30% for human resource development, 20% for literature and audio-visual materials, and only 20% for administrative and support expenses. It was also reflected in the pattern of activity of the more experienced Bahá'ís of the country, including the members of the National Assembly and its committees, who devoted their energies more or less according to the same proportions.

XI

**The Educational Programs:
Paths of Service**

72 Any retrospective account of a long-term developmental process, such as the present document, is likely to project a false impression of order. The Colombian friends did not work out their ideas about spiritual education as neatly and clearly as may be implied in the previous section. For that matter, the evolution of their thought never proceeded according to the linear progression this document seems to reflect. Ideas developed independently along parallel lines and only later came together in a consistent framework. Clarity and confusion coexisted from the beginning, and continue to interplay as the community confronts new challenges under changing conditions. It would be well, then, to depart momentarily from the narrative, and examine certain aspects of the educational programs in their more recent stages of development.

73 Although the framework presented in the previous section addresses the spiritual growth of the individual, it is recognized that an individual's spiritual condition and his progress are matters that only God can judge and that human beings should not presume to measure. The Ruhi Institute, therefore, has adopted a pedagogical approach that concerns itself exclusively with ways in which individuals can be helped to increase their capacity to serve. This capacity, while intimately connected with spirituality, operates in relation to it in ways that need

not be defined precisely. It suffices to understand that the field of service represents the environment within which spirituality can be cultivated.

A systematic process of spiritual education is set in motion when believers are accompanied along paths of service which they have chosen to follow, according to their interests and capabilities. Building on experience gained in working among rural populations in Colombia, the Ruhi Institute has marked out specific “paths of service.” Deepening along each path is fostered through a series of courses, some of which impart the skills and attitudes needed to perform acts of service, while others present spiritual teachings and precepts that endow these acts with meaning.

74

During the first few years of its development, the Ruhi Institute devoted its attention entirely to defining the content and methods of the courses associated with the path of “Basic Deepening”. After a great deal of experimentation it was decided that the first act of service on this path should be that of teaching simple Bahá’í classes to a group of children. In addition to a course that offers the content of such classes and imparts the necessary skills to conduct them, it proved necessary to devise four other courses devoted entirely to the development of spiritual understanding and the acquisition of spiritual discipline. The participants in these five courses are usually youth from the villages who have completed at least a few years of secondary school and have expressed interest in teaching children on a weekly basis. The following five sections are devoted to an overview of these courses.

75

XII

Understanding the Bahá'í Writings

76 The first course in the path of Basic Deepening requires only about eight hours of study and discussion. Its purpose is to develop the capacity to read the Bahá'í Writings and to meditate on their meaning in order to fulfill the obligation of studying the Writings every day. As one of the activities in the children's classes is the memorization of short quotations from the Bahá'í Writings, it is felt that the teachers of these classes should, themselves, have learned to study the Writings, beginning with single sentences, and meditate on their meanings. The course consists of some twenty quotations that are studied in small groups and a set of questions and exercises that enhance the participants' ability to think about the meaning and implications of each quotation. The following paragraphs are taken from the introductory material for this course, which is called "Understanding the Bahá'í Writings":

77 The Ruhi Institute uses the term "collaborator" to refer to all who study, teach, or apply its courses, wherever they may reside. These participants are indeed collaborators, because all share an identical purpose: to use the courses as means of serving the Cause and promoting the well-being of humanity. In every study group there is always a more experienced person who acts as a tutor. For the duration of the course, the other members of the group constitute the

“students” who seek the tutor’s help with their studies. However, it is clearly understood by all collaborators that they are engaged in a reciprocal process, one in which everyone learns. The relationship is not that of a learned one with a group of ignorant people.

“Understanding the Bahá’í Writings” is often the first course that a group of collaborators chooses to study. We hope the tutor will carefully study this introduction and discuss with the other collaborators the ideas presented here. Collaborators who are studying this course for the first time should be aware that they will have to analyze these same ideas at a later time, when they themselves will act as tutors of the course for other groups of beginners. 78

To read the Holy Writings every day, at least in the morning and at night, is one of the very important ordinances of our Faith. But reading the Writings is not the same as reading the thousands of pages that a literate person sees during a lifetime. To read the Sacred Word is to drink from the ocean of Divine Revelation. It leads to true spiritual understanding and generates forces that are necessary for the progress of the soul. In order to reach true understanding, however, one must think deeply about the meaning of each statement and its applications in one’s own life and in the life of society. The purpose of this course is to develop in the participants the habit of reading the Writings and thinking about them, beginning at first with one-sentence statements. 79

80 In studying any course of the Ruhi Institute, participants are expected to achieve three levels of comprehension. The first is a basic understanding of the meaning of words and sentences. Thus, for example, after reading the quotation, **“The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct”**, the student is asked, “How can the betterment of the world be accomplished?” At first glance, this type of question may appear too simple. But, before reaching such a conclusion, one should examine the following two observations: Often, the tutor will divide the study group into pairs; one person in each pair is asked to read the quotation aloud, and the other is asked to formulate a question, the answer of which would be the quotation. This task of constructing a question from a sentence does not turn out to be as simple as it appears. The majority of participants need numerous exercises in order to acquire this apparently simple skill. The second observation has to do with the participants who insist on giving their own opinions and strongly resist giving a simple repetition of the quotation as the answer to a question. Clearly, there is nothing wrong in having and expressing one’s own ideas; but an understanding of the Writings must begin by focusing the mind on what is being read before allowing one’s imagination to roam and personal opinions to flow freely. It is quite likely that by first developing in believers who are in the early stages of their study of the Faith a capacity to focus attention on the immediate and explicit meaning of sentences they read from the Holy Writings, we will be contributing to

the achievement of unity of thought in our communities, since such a unity can only be achieved when personal opinions are illuminated by Divine Wisdom.

The second level of comprehension is concerned with applying some of the concepts to one's daily life. For example, exercise number 1 in the first lesson, which asks the participant to identify certain types of conduct as commendable, is easy to answer, yet it requires the group to think about some of the obvious applications of the corresponding quotation. However, not all the exercises of this level can receive immediate and obvious answers. For example, in order to decide if the statement, "There are so few good people in the world that their actions do not have any effect" is true or false, the students have to establish how this statement contradicts the corresponding quotations they have studied from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. 81

The third level of understanding requires the participants to think about the implications of a quotation for situations having no apparent or immediate connection with its theme. The question of whether Bahá'ís may confess their sins to others refers to the prohibition against confession as a means of absolving sin, a deeply rooted practice of Catholicism. The tutor should present this prohibition as the group consults on the implications of the verse, **"Bring thyself to account each day, ere thou art summoned to a reckoning."** 82

83 Many years of experience with the courses of the Ruhi Institute have shown that examining ideas at these three levels of understanding helps collaborators create the conscious basis of a life of service to the Cause. But what may surprise someone who is unfamiliar with this experience is that efforts to prolong consultation on each idea beyond these levels, by introducing too many related concepts, actually diminish to a great extent the effectiveness of the course. This is due in part to the fact that each course should establish a rhythm of progress, so that students will have a distinct sense that they are advancing rapidly according to their own capacities. This does not mean that lessons should be passed over quickly and superficially without careful analysis of the exercises. Groups that have taken this superficial approach, simply filling in answers, have never lasted beyond a few sessions. The point to remember is that once an idea is understood and some insights into its applications have been gained, the group should advance to the next point in the lesson. The second reason for the caution against prolonged discussions has to do with the habit of speculation that unfortunately sometimes develops in some of our communities. It is natural that a verse from the Writings should bring to mind myriads of noble and beautiful ideas. To share these ideas with the friends on appropriate occasions conduces to joy and happiness. But care must be exercised that this practice does not become an exercise in the expression of ego and an insistence on the sovereignty of personal opinion. The experience of the Ruhi Institute has shown that we do not suppress the imagination or the personality of the

participants when we refrain from posing questions such as, "What does this mean to you?" On the contrary, we are helping to nurture the development of communities which look first to the Writings as the principal basis of consultation whenever they are faced with a question. We believe that the simple habit of thinking about the implications of the Writings with the minimum of personal interpretation would eliminate a great share of the disagreements that afflict consultation in many communities, and would make the activities of our communities more effective.

Finally, we suggest that the tutor should examine the course, categorize the exercises according to the three levels of comprehension, and think of additional exercises that will stimulate consultation about each concept.

84

XIII

Prayer

85 The second course in the path of Basic Deepening also requires about eight hours of study and discussion. Its purpose is to help the participants understand the importance of daily prayer, develop the required attitudes towards prayer, and acquire the habit of memorizing prayers. The course on prayer contributes to the spiritual development of the participants, and also prepares them for their first act of service, which includes helping the children to memorize prayers. As in “Understanding the Bahá’í Writings”, the course material is comprised mostly of quotations followed by questions and exercises that enhance understanding. The following paragraphs are from the introduction to the course entitled “Prayer”:

86 “Prayer” is often the second course that collaborators of the Ruhi Institute choose to study. As in all Ruhi courses, one person who has more experience than others is assigned to serve as the tutor of the study group, although it must be remembered that the responsibility for learning rests with each participant. It is the student who undertakes the active work of learning. The tutor facilitates this process, and also gains new insights into the material. The teacher-student relationship that exists in many traditional school systems is avoided in the approach of the Ruhi Institute.

The ideas presented in the introduction to the course entitled “Understanding the Bahá’í Writings” apply equally to the other courses of the institute. The tutor should keep in mind the three levels of comprehension that participants are expected to achieve: a clear understanding of the meaning of words and phrases, of the application of each idea to daily life, and of the implications these ideas have for related situations that have not been explicitly treated in the lessons. It is important to note here that the first level of comprehension never implies a long discussion on the meaning of single words outside the context of the course being studied. In fact, most tutors find that using a dictionary to help the participants understand difficult words actually interferes with their learning. It seems far more useful to help them learn how to infer the meanings of words through discussion of whole phrases and paragraphs.

87

We suggest that in preparing for this course the tutor should think deeply about three principal objectives. The first is to clarify the concept of prayer itself and to help the participants understand its great importance as one of the laws of this Dispensation. In order to achieve this objective, it is sometimes necessary to dissipate doubts and carefully clarify ideas that may have their roots in erroneous interpretations of the past. But above all, this objective implies clear understanding of the necessity to observe this law, a need that is no less essential than that of nourishing our bodies every day.

88

- 89 Beyond observing the law of prayer, each person must feel a profound desire to pray. Therefore, the second objective of this course is to awaken in participants this desire to “converse with God” and to feel the joy of being near to Him. Moreover, from an early age, everyone should develop spiritual habits; the habit of praying daily is among the most important of these.
- 90 The third objective of this course has to do with the attitudes of prayer. Unfortunately, humanity is steadily losing its understanding of how to pray, substituting empty and meaningless rituals for indispensable inner conditions. Therefore, the study groups should consult a great deal on the sections that refer to the attitudes of heart and mind that help one enter the state of prayer, and to the conditions that should be created in one’s surroundings at the time of prayer.
- 91 Finally, we suggest that before the first class the tutor should review the entire course, analyzing each lesson in terms of the three objectives mentioned above.

XIV

Life and Death

The course entitled “Life and Death” has been included 92
in the path of Basic Deepening because an understanding
of the purpose of life is essential for the participants’
pursuit of paths of service. Service needs to be viewed
in the full context of a life which extends beyond earthly
existence, and in light of the soul’s progress through
the worlds of God. The purpose of this course, then,
is to help participants understand that life is not the
changes and chances of this world, and that its true
significance is to be found in the development of the soul.
The material for “Life and Death” is somewhat more
challenging than for the courses mentioned above, and
its completion usually requires about twenty hours of
study and consultation. The following paragraphs come
from the course introduction:

In a process of education, as contrasted with 93
training for specific tasks, it is essential that
participants become increasingly conscious of the
meaning and significance of what they are doing.
As this consciousness emerges, students come to see
themselves as active, responsible “owners” of their
learning, and not as passive recipients of information
given to them by their teachers.

- 94 Each section of this course opens with a thematic statement or quotation from the Bahá'í Writings, and continues with a series of exercises designed to help participants comprehend the language and the concepts of the statement. Unlike most Ruhi Institute courses, which include exercises to help participants think about the application of ideas in their own lives and their communities, here, due to the abstract nature of the material, all the exercises operate at the conceptual level. Only in the last section are participants asked to reflect on the implications of the course in their lives.
- 95 As in all courses of the Ruhi Institute, participants in the course on Life and Death should be encouraged to avoid speculation, and to be content with concrete answers that can be deduced directly from the statements. Yet, a few of the exercises contain questions that cannot be answered quickly or in a clear-cut way. These questions are designed to raise awareness about the subject; if participants simply think about such questions, the objective of learning will be fulfilled.
- 96 It should also be mentioned that the quotations presented in this course use more difficult language than is found in other courses of Level 1. The tutor must be very careful not to give too much attention to difficult words, but to ensure that participants understand the central idea of each quotation, which is precisely what the exercises try to bring out.

In order to achieve good results it is important to avoid bringing too many ideas into a single session. Above all, it is important to follow the sequence of ideas that has been established in the course: 97

1. How life begins, and what is death. 98
 - The soul is a spiritual entity, created by God.
 - Together, the soul and the body constitute the human being.
 - Death is just a change of condition; afterward, the soul progresses eternally.
2. The purpose of our lives. 99
 - The purpose of life is to know God and attain His presence.
 - One who recognizes the Manifestation draws near to God; and one who rejects Him condemns himself to a life of misery and remoteness from God.
 - Just as, while in the womb of the mother one acquires the powers needed for this world, while in this world we should acquire the powers needed for the next world.
3. The nature of the soul. 100
 - The soul is a sign of God.
 - A soul which is faithful to God will reflect His light and be drawn to Him.
 - Worldly attachments and vain desires impede the soul's flight towards God and finally make it weak and impotent.
 - God has bestowed on man the capacity to reflect all His names and attributes.
4. The soul does not progress by itself; it needs the Manifestation of God. 101

- The capacities of the human being are latent; they can only be developed with the help of the Manifestations of God.
- To know the Manifestation of God is to know God.
- Through spiritual education, the treasures hidden within us can be revealed.

102 5. The condition of the soul after death.

- The faithful soul will attain a sublime position and eternal happiness, but the unfaithful soul will recognize its loss and be consumed in eternal remorse.
- No one knows his own end; therefore, we should forgive others and not feel superior towards them
- In the next life, the holy souls become acquainted with all mysteries and behold the beauty of God.
- In the next life, we will recognize our loved ones and enjoy companionship with the friends of God; we will remember the life we had in this material world.

103 6. The appropriate attitude towards the present conditions of our lives.

- Nothing should sadden us in this world, because days of blissful joy await us.

XV

Principles of Bahá'í Education

Yet another course associated with the first act of service in the Basic Deepening path is “Principles of Bahá'í Education”. The following paragraphs from the introduction to this course describe its aims and content: 104

In the Basic Deepening path of the Ruhi Institute, one of the acts of service consists in teaching a simple children's class. It is important for those who teach these classes to study some basic ideas about Bahá'í education. At the present time, as we all know, there does not exist anywhere an educational system that can be properly called Bahá'í. In coming decades, many people in different parts of the world will help to create such a system. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain principles and concepts that should influence any attempt at Bahá'í education, and this course will briefly examine some of them. 105

The structure of the subject matter is similar to that of other conceptual courses at this level. The collaborator who takes on the role of tutor must make sure that each participant understands each lesson at three levels of comprehension: the meaning of the words and sentences, the application of the concepts in one's life and work, and their implications for certain related situations. For a fuller discussion of these three levels of comprehension and how to 106

help participants achieve them, please refer to the section entitled “To the Collaborators” in the course on “Understanding the Bahá’í Writings”.

- 107 A basic concept of the present course is the nobility of man. It is essential for each participant to understand the impact this extremely important principle will have on the type of education he or she will eventually offer. Simply by coming to regard each student as “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value”, the teacher of a beginning children’s class takes an enormous step away from current educational practices. Participants should not only strive to understand well this concept, they should also know enough about spiritual qualities, talents and capacities to be able to discover these gems in their students and actively help to polish them.
- 108 Another aim of the course is to arrive at an initial, working definition of the purpose and objectives of Bahá’í classes for children. Again, the tutor should engage in wide-ranging consultation with each participant so that he or she will see ways to help the children develop the spiritual qualities, habits and manners of a Bahá’í life.
- 109 In general, this course is not complex, and like all Ruhi Institute courses, it is conducted tutorially. This is best done by dividing the participants into small groups and allowing each group to move along at its own pace and according to its own rhythm. This point is extremely important, because efforts

to accelerate or slow down the participant's pace, forcing him to move at the same rate as the others, can hamper the learning process. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the tutor's role, even for the fast learners among the participants. The tutor should discuss all of the lessons with each group of students. In no way should a Ruhi Institute course be treated as an independent study of the participants which is simply checked later by the tutor.

XVI

Children's Classes

110 The course called “Children’s Classes, Age 6” helps the participants develop the ability to carry out the first act of service, that of teaching classes, under very simple conditions, to a small group of children. The participants learn how to teach a prepared set of lessons that has been designed for one year of weekly Bahá’í children’s classes. Each lesson consists of a quotation from the Bahá’í Writings, a song, a story, a game, and a picture to be colored. All of these elements are related to a spiritual quality which is the theme of the lesson. In addition to lesson plans, the course also contains material to help develop in the participants certain skills, such as how to help children memorize prayers and quotations, how to teach a song, how to tell a story, and how to use cooperative games as aids to character development. The following paragraphs are taken from the introduction to the course entitled “Children’s Classes”:

111 Bahá’ís who have taught the Faith in highly receptive areas will not be surprised to see that the Ruhi Institute places a strong emphasis on children’s classes. The expectations of new Bahá’ís, especially in rural areas and neighborhoods on the outskirts of towns and cities, and their insistent desire for Bahá’í teachers to educate their children, are well known. The problem is that there have never been enough teachers to respond to this well-justified demand;

and unfortunately, for some reason or other, many capable Bahá'ís who could teach children have not attached enough importance to this act of service on which the future of new generations depends.

It is important to mention that Bahá'í children's classes are not like the classes of indoctrination which are common in many other religions. Even though children are instructed in the principles, teachings and basic beliefs of the Faith, the emphasis is on learning to think, to reflect and to apply spiritual laws to the life of the individual and society. Especially during the early years of childhood, great emphasis is placed on the development of spiritual qualities and on those beliefs, habits and behaviors that constitute the essential attributes of a spiritual being. 112

The concern for not making the Bahá'í teaching of children the same as common acts of indoctrination or catechism should not be interpreted as a rejection of religious instruction. Doctrines that have disregarded religious education for children and have left them to acquire their standards and beliefs, supposedly by free choice, from their interactions with society, have greatly contributed to the present state of moral disintegration. The proponents of these doctrines do not seem to appreciate the fact that there are political, economic and cultural interests in society which aggressively promote their own desired patterns of thought and behavior. But even if this were not so, humanity left to its own devices without divine guidance has produced nothing more 113

than chaos, injustice and suffering; there is no reason to suppose that any new generation of children will create a better world without an education which is basically spiritual.

114 The objective of this course is to train teachers for children's classes. If this goal is to be met successfully, it is important that the tutor keep in mind the following points:

- 115 • The development of capacity for holding a simple children's class, and the acquisition of the corresponding skills, require great deal of practice. It is to be expected, then, that this course will be long and sometimes even difficult. Teaching a lesson to children requires more than reading the material and understanding its content. The tutor should allow a great deal of time for the future teachers to practice giving the classes as they study the course.
- 116 • The majority of people who wish to teach children generally try to repeat the same patterns which they were exposed to in childhood. To counteract this normal tendency, this course offers detailed suggestions to which the tutor and the participants should pay close attention.
- 117 • It is hoped that children's classes will provide a means for developing in the children attitudes and spiritual qualities that will bring them closer to God. In this first course, the emphasis is on spiritual qualities, and little attention is being given to general knowledge about the Faith. When the foundation of

the child's character has been established, then, in later years, other necessary types of knowledge can be introduced.

- The methodology of the children's classes combines different activities, all focused on the principal goal of motivating the development of attitudes and spiritual qualities. All these activities revolve around the Creative Word, which alone has the power to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in the children, and a strong emphasis is placed on memorization of the Creative Word. Memorization has even greater effect when accompanied by an understanding of what is being memorized. For this reason, each lesson includes material to help children understand the meaning of the quotations and also learn to apply the corresponding attitudes and spiritual qualities in their daily lives. Unfortunately, at this stage, few songs and games have been developed, so it has not always been possible to design activities that directly reinforce the ideas presented in the quotations to be memorized. It is hoped that in the future many more songs and games will be created, and more stories on various spiritual qualities will be compiled, making the work of teachers of Bahá'í children's classes even more fruitful. 118
- It is important to bear in mind that children understand things in very concrete and practical ways. A concept like kindness, for example, is better understood if presented by means of concrete situations, as well as through abstract explanations. 119

The ability to do this is not easily fostered in the teacher. The participants of this course need to dedicate much time to practicing the explanations that accompany the quotations. Other activities in each lesson may also help to demonstrate spiritual qualities in action. The stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are of greatest importance, because He is the Exemplar of the Bahá’í life. Some participants may have trouble learning how to tell stories in a way that brings them to life for the children. The ability to remember the details that give excitement to a story and to present the events of the story in an effective way can be acquired by means of constant practice.

- 120 • The type of children’s classes that are taught in this course require very little in the way of materials and outside resources. Besides the teacher’s knowledge, acquired through the training offered by the institute, only coloring sheets and crayons are needed. The coloring sheets can be simply reproduced by tracing them from the sample sheets provided for each lesson.
- 121 • It is recommended that participants begin putting their new skills into practice as they go through the course. This will allow them to build up gradually to the time when they will take on their own classes. New teachers may feel nervous the first time they face a class of, say, 20 children, so it is advisable to let them start out alongside experienced teachers or with a small number of children—perhaps four or five. It is also possible to hold classes which only teach the quotations at the beginning, without worrying about

stories, songs and other activities. As the teacher develops confidence, more children can be added to the class and other elements can be introduced. It should be remembered that each participant's final goal is to contribute to the success of the teaching plan of the national community, through the establishment of a regular children's class.

- A cassette tape of the songs used in the lessons accompanies this material. Teachers may wish to use the cassette, not only to prepare themselves for the class, but also to help the children learn the songs. 122

XVII

Extracts from the Course on Life and Death

123 The introductory materials from the five courses presented in previous sections describe some aspects of the approach taken by the Ruhi Institute to spiritual education in the context of service. In order to illustrate the content of the courses, and the manner in which they attempt to foster understanding of the quotations from the Writings, some sections from the course entitled “Life and Death” are presented below:

SECTION 5

Bahá'u'lláh says:

124 **“The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence. To this most excellent aim, this supreme objective, all the heavenly Books and the divinely-revealed and weighty Scriptures unequivocally bear witness. Whoso hath recognized the Day Spring of Divine guidance and entered His holy court hath drawn nigh unto God and attained His Presence, a Presence which is the real Paradise, and of which the loftiest mansions of heaven are but a symbol. ... Whoso hath failed to recognize Him will have condemned himself to the misery of remoteness, a remoteness which is naught but utter nothingness and the essence of**

the nethermost fire. Such will be his fate, though to outward seeming he may occupy the earth's loftiest seats and be established upon its most exalted throne.”ⁱ

1. Questions:

125

- a. What was God's purpose in creating man?
- b. Does this purpose change from age to age?
- c. Which books confirm this purpose?
- d. Who is the “Day Spring of Divine guidance?”
- e. To whom are we drawing near when we recognize the Day Spring of Divine guidance?
- f. What is “real Paradise?”
- g. What can we expect if we do not recognize the Day Spring of Divine guidance?
- h. What condition do “utter nothingness” and “nether-most fire” refer to?

SECTION 6

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

“In the beginning of his human life man was embryonic in the world of the matrix. There he received capacity and endowment for the reality of human existence. The forces and powers necessary for this world were bestowed upon him in that limited condition. In this world he needed eyes; he received them potentially in the other. He needed ears; he obtained them there in readiness and preparation for his new existence. The powers requisite in this world were conferred upon him in the world of the matrix.

126

i Bahá'u'lláh, “Gleanings”, XXIX

127

“Therefore in this world he must prepare himself for the life beyond. That which he needs in the world of the Kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the matrix by acquiring forces necessary in this sphere of existence, so likewise the indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially obtained in this world.”ⁱ

128

1. Circle true or false:

- a. We received the capacities and endowments we need for this world in the world of the matrix.
- b. Our condition in the matrix was not limited.
- c. All forces and powers necessary for this world were bestowed upon us in the world of the matrix.
- d. Therefore there is no need to prepare oneself for the next life.
- e. What we need in the world of the Kingdom can be obtained there.
- f. The purpose of this life is to acquire the forces and powers necessary for the next life
- g. True life begins when one dies and goes to the Divine Kingdom.
- h. True life is the life of the soul.
- i. True life begins in this world and continues after physical death.

129

2. Questions:

- a. How does man begin his life?
- b. Where does he receive his capacities and endowments?

i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The Divine Art of Living” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), pp. 18-19

- c. What are some of the things that man needs in this life that are given to him in the world of the matrix?
- d. Which endowments should be obtained here for life after death?

SECTION 7

Bahá'u'lláh says:

“The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man’s hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and others even a gallon-measure.”ⁱⁱ 130

1. Questions: 131
 - a. Mention some of the blessings you have received from God.
 - b. Give examples of how man keeps himself from receiving his portion of God’s grace.
 - c. Why should we not consider “the largeness or smallness” of our receptacle?
2. Circle true or false: 132
 - a. Only the great philosophers have the capacity to know God.
 - b. To serve God, we need to forget our weaknesses and trust in Him.
 - c. If in this world we do not develop what God has given us, our souls will be weak when we arrive in the next world.

ii Bahá'u'lláh, “Gleanings”, V

SECTION 8

133

“Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him. If it be faithful to God, it will reflect His light, and will, eventually, return unto Him. If it fail, however, in its allegiance to its Creator, it will become a victim to self and passion, and will, in the end, sink in their depths.”ⁱ

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1. Fill in the spaces:

- a. The soul is a of God.
- b. is a heavenly gem.
- c. is the first to declare the excellence of its Creator
- d. The soul will return to God if it is
- e. The soul will become a victim of self and passion if
- f. If it becomes a victim of self, the soul will sink in the depths of
- g. A soul reflects the light of God if it is

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2. Circle true or false:

- a. “To unravel” means to find out
- b. Among all created things, the first to recognize God is the mind.

i Bahá'u'lláh, “Gleanings”, LXXXII

- c. Acute means sharp.
- d. A learned person understands the mystery of the soul.
- e. It is not necessary to meditate about the soul because we will never be able to understand it

XVIII

Further Development of the Basic Deepening Path

136 During the early stages of the development of the Ruhi Institute, two more acts of service were identified which operate at a level of complexity similar to that of teaching simple children's classes. The first was the sharing of a booklet, entitled "I am a Bahá'í", with new believers. The other was the sharing of a series of deepening booklets with Bahá'í families over a period of a few months. The courses were developed to help participants acquire the necessary skills to carry out these acts of service and also gain more knowledge about the Faith. For a while, it was felt that the seven courses that have been mentioned up to this point could form the first level of the path of Basic Deepening; however, it soon became apparent that the first level lacked a Bahá'í history course, which is so much needed to develop the believers' sense of identity as they begin to walk their paths of service. A detailed course on the life of the Báb was then added to the first level.

137 A second shortcoming became apparent when the results of the three acts of service were evaluated over a period of a few years. It was noticed that although some of the friends kept up regular family visits, others were not constant and soon lost enthusiasm. 'The difference seemed to lie in their relative consciousness of the fact that the joy of teaching is in the act itself and not so much

in the feeling of success or praise, or in the satisfaction that one seeks in superficial excitement. A ninth course was then developed, called “The Joy of Teaching”, which tries to convey this important concept through the study of appropriate quotations from the Writings. Together, these nine courses now comprise Level 1 of the path of Basic Deepening.

Three more acts of service form the nucleus of another set of nine courses that constitute Level 2 of the Basic Deepening path. These are teaching two more years of children’s classes (for seven- and eight-year-olds), individual teaching, and participation in teaching campaigns aimed at expansion and consolidation among entire, extended families. The six courses that are to help the participants gain spiritual insight and develop the qualities that would make these acts spiritually meaningful are: “The Covenant”, “Studying and Understanding Passages from the Writings”, “The Spiritual Path”, “The Bahá’í Family”, “The Life of Bahá’u’lláh”, and “Giving: The Spiritual Basis of Prosperity”. 138

Development work has begun on courses for two further levels of the Basic Deepening path, but final definitions must await more consultation, experimentation, and reflection. 139

XIX

The First Specialized Path: Education of Children

140 Early in the 1980s, one of the Auxiliary Board members in Colombia entered into a process of consultation with several rural communities around the town of Puerto Tejada in order to help them identify steps they could take to improve their own social conditions. From the diverse ideas put forward in these meetings of consultation, one theme stood out: the desire of every community to establish kindergartens for the five- and six-year-old children, and nurseries for the younger ones. This was an understandable aspiration, as the Colombian government had succeeded in establishing primary schools in almost every village; but, at the time, the Ministry of Education was only beginning to consider the question of preschool education.

141 The results of the consultations, analyzed in light of the capabilities of the Bahá'í community at that time, led to a small pilot program to learn about small village kindergartens. Working in cooperation with the Ruhi Institute, the Auxiliary Board member who had initiated the consultations organized a group of young women selected from a few villages, helped them establish small kindergartens, visited their villages regularly, and offered them a weekly training course at the institute. Parallel to these efforts, a small group of believers who had backgrounds in the sciences and education began

to analyze the ongoing experience and to develop a curriculum for the kindergartens.

For the first time, the Ruhi Institute was confronting the challenge of providing secular education in a Bahá'í setting. Initially, the friends explored the possibility of a curriculum that would consist of a few hours of moral education added to preschool materials which were easily available from internationally promoted programs. Soon, however, it was realized that an opportunity existed to create a curriculum in which the concepts of the Faith would pervade all the learning processes. They set out to develop materials and methods that would help the pupils acquire scientific, mathematical, and artistic abilities, as well as certain skills known to contribute to the ability to read and write, all in a spiritual context.

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The pilot project went on for about four years. Each year the curriculum was revised and materials were rewritten on the basis of the previous year's experience. By 1987, the program had advanced well enough to permit the institute to establish the first specialized path of service, that of "Education of Children". The courses so far developed for this path are devoted to the training of teachers for Bahá'í village kindergartens. Further courses are envisioned for the training of educational agents for the primary level, but little work has yet been done in that direction. Unlike the courses of the Basic Deepening path, the initial training of kindergarten teachers, which lasts for eight weeks, is centralized in Puerto Tejada. Participants are mainly youth from villages throughout Colombia. It is assumed that, in

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their regions, they will already have studied the first five courses of the Basic Deepening path; those who have not, attend a two-week preparatory session before starting the kindergarten course. The training does not stop at the end of the eight-week term. Teachers who live near Puerto Tejada attend monthly discussion meetings at the institute; in other places, collaborators of the Ruhi Institute are asked to hold similar meetings for the kindergarten teachers in their areas.

XX

The Second Specialized Path: Community Development

A goal of the Ruhi Institute, from its inception, has been to increase the national community's capacity to meet the perennial challenge of developing local Bahá'í communities. The acts of service in the Basic Deepening and Education of Children paths certainly contribute to this objective; however, analysis of successful and failed efforts to develop local communities has led to the establishment of a separate path of service in "Community Development". The courses of this path are directed especially to youth who are offering a year of service to the Faith to be followed by a few years of home-front pioneering. 144

For a long time, the Colombian friends understood community development exclusively in terms of the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies. When thoughts are entirely focused on the Local Assembly, it is natural that community workers will expend most of their energies on the adults, especially those who have been elected to Assemblies. In Colombia, it was often admitted that the most joyful and productive hours were those spent in the education of children and youth, particularly those between the ages of 12 and 16, but the implications of this fact were seldom discussed in the consultations on community development 145

146 As more experience was gained with community development, there was a growing sense that it was impractical to insist on a “functioning” Local Spiritual Assembly in places where one could hardly pretend that a Bahá’í community existed. The friends began to question the wisdom of making the functioning of the Local Assembly a pre-condition for every other development. They gradually came to accept that, in early stages, one may have to be content with a Local Assembly that is elected once a year and meets occasionally whenever a community worker from outside visits the village. To concentrate so much energy directly on the Local Assembly was clearly not the best way to develop that institution, and in fact, the Assembly could best be strengthened in the context of efforts to develop, in parallel fashion, a number of community structures and processes.

147 As logical as such an approach may seem, and although there was every evidence to support it, for most of the believers it was at first difficult to feel comfortable with these ideas, and something akin to a feeling of guilt assailed them for failing to give the Local Spiritual Assembly what they felt was its proper due in the order of priorities. Yet, as this approach began to be implemented and experience with it grew, its validity became more and more accepted. The courses on the path of service called “Community Development”, then, do not begin with the Local Assembly but with developing in community workers the capability to form and maintain youth groups in the villages.

The curriculum for this path of service has been developed in a similar fashion to that of Education of Children. Again in the early 1980s, an Auxiliary Board member was asked to experiment with the formation of village youth groups. His approach was to ask one of the older and more deepened youth in each village to organize a youth group which would not rely much on his own direct involvement. As he observed the successes of these youth and the difficulties they faced, he formulated a conceptual framework which he shared with the Ruhi Institute. The institute was then asked to define specific acts of service and corresponding courses for the training of "Animators of Youth Groups" who would later progress to undertake other aspects of community development. As experience was gained, it became clear that to be an Animator of Youth Groups was a much more demanding task than originally envisioned. The participants in these courses needed to work under supervision and to receive help from experienced workers for a number of months before they could actually sustain the excitement of the youth and be able to deepen them in the Faith. For this reason, the first few courses of the Community Development path, which are concerned with youth groups, have been incorporated in the Year of Service program. Each year an increasing number of youth offer a year of service to the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia, which assigns the majority of them to the Ruhi Institute. During this year they study levels 1 and 2 of the Basic Deepening path, the first few courses of the Community Development path, and the courses of the Education of Children path, up to the kindergarten

teacher level. During the first weeks of the year of service, they receive most of their training at the Ruhi Institute in Puerto Tejada, but gradually spend more time in the villages to practice what they have learned, returning to the institute for regular meetings of consultation about their services.

- 149 As to the Community Development path, itself, courses are being developed beyond those concerned with youth, to include work with other structures such as families and informal women's groups, finally leading to work with the formal structures of the community, especially the Local Spiritual Assembly.

XXI

The “General Studies” Path

In addition to the courses of the three paths of service already mentioned, the Ruhi Institute offers to its participants, according to their interests and circumstances, certain courses for their intellectual development and the development of their capability to serve some of the material needs of the community, in fields such as health, agriculture, and village-level technology. These courses were actually developed by another institution, FUNDAEC, which, although not Bahá’í, has been deeply influenced by Bahá’í ideals and has developed in parallel with the Ruhi Institute. They are part of the Rural University program of FUNDAEC, and a discussion of their characteristics is beyond the scope of this document 150

XXII

Important Characteristics of the Ruhi Institute

- 151 The material presented up to this point will have given a general impression of the Ruhi Institute, the setting in which it developed, its conceptual framework, and the nature of its programs. It may prove useful to expand on certain aspects of what has already been mentioned in order to highlight some of the institute's salient features.
- 152 1. Deepening programs may be founded on any of several concepts which offer equally valid approaches to the organization of knowledge and the development of curricula. These could include, for example, "the acquisition of knowledge for personal growth and transformation", or "the development of individual potentials", or "the preparation of individuals for appropriate functioning within the Bahá'í community". From among various possibilities, the Ruhi Institute has chosen "service to the Cause" as the organizing principle of its educational activities. The programs of the institute do, of course, address the importance of knowledge, the development of human potential, the need for personal transformation, and the appropriate functioning of Bahá'í communities, just as Bahá'í courses founded on any of the other concepts named above would also address "service". Nevertheless, the choice of an organizing principle is not a trivial one,

for the resulting educational activities, the attitudes they foster towards learning, and indeed the sum of all that emerges from the educational process, will be strongly influenced by that choice.

A believer's possibilities for service to the Cause of God are enhanced by the development of certain capabilities, such as the capability to teach on an individual basis, to participate in teaching campaigns organized by the community, to study the Writings in progressively more meaningful ways, to participate effectively in consultation, to help deepen new believers, and to educate children and help youth channel their energies. These are only a few from a wide range of capabilities that each Bahá'í may choose to acquire, in greater or lesser degrees, according to his or her interests and talents. A capability is not a simple skill; in fact, each of those mentioned above requires the acquisition of numerous skills and abilities. Moreover, the development of a given capability implies certain spiritual qualities, knowledge, proper attitudes, and an ever-deepening spiritual understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Hence, the programs of the Ruhi Institute are not "training programs" in the sense that the term is generally used, namely to describe programs for the development of well-defined and discrete skills and the acquisition of specified information. Their purpose, rather, is the spiritual education of the friends, with service as the central and explicit concern of every

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educational activity. In the vocabulary of curriculum development, it can be said that service is the axis around which the diverse elements of the curriculum are integrated.

- 154 2. In all the courses of the Ruhi Institute the principal approach to learning is through study of the Bahá'í Writings. For courses which are concerned principally with the development of spiritual knowledge, qualities and attitudes, the materials may consist almost exclusively of extracts from the Writings. For courses that are concerned with the acquisition of skills and abilities, proportionately more expository materials are included, but these materials are also presented in the explicit context of the Bahá'í teachings. Every effort is made to help the participants learn to rely on the Word of God and to recognize its transforming power. Passages such as the following have had the greatest influence on the development of the institute's educational ideas:

155 **“O friend of mine! The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked. No sooner had but a glimmer of its effulgent splendour shone forth upon the mirror of love than the blessed word ‘I am the Best-Beloved’ was reflected therein. It is an**

ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things. Every thing which can be perceived is but an emanation therefrom. High, immeasurably high is this sublime station, in whose shadow moveth the essence of loftiness and splendour, wrapt in praise and adoration.”ⁱ

“The vitality of men’s belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it? Is it within human power, O Hakim, to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change.”ⁱⁱ

“That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the

i Bahá’u’lláh, “Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh”

ii Bahá’u’lláh, “Gleanings”, XCIX

active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different. Thus doth the Great Announcement inform thee about this glorious structure. Such as communicate the generating influence and such as receive its impact are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof. Verily thy Lord is the Expounder, the All-Wise.

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“Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God—exalted be His glory—is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things. It hath never been withheld from the world of being. It is God’s all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate. It is an entity far removed above all that hath been and shall be.”ⁱ

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Small groups of participants, working with the assistance of a tutor, meet together in an atmosphere of joy, calm and meditative serenity to engage in close study of the course materials. The tutor’s role is that of a facilitator of learning, and seldom that of a lecturer. The responsibility

i Bahá’u’lláh, “Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh”

for learning rests with the participants; they are active learners, who are constantly thinking, analyzing, formulating ideas and answering questions. The participants are not the recipients of knowledge bestowed by the tutor, rather, the tutor helps the participants study the course materials and reach certain conclusions about their content and meaning. The tutor does not deliver answers to the participants, neither does he pretend not to know what is to be learned from each unit of study. He guides discussions and actively contributes to the movement of the group's understanding towards a set of predetermined objectives, but welcomes whatever additional insights and realizations the group may reach.

The central goal of the learning process is for the participants to achieve understanding. Activities are not organized simply for the purpose of building excitement, and efforts are made to ensure that motivation for study does not arise from false expectations. Yearning for understanding, when awakened, is the greatest of all motivators. Joy and inner motivation, engendered through the attainment of true understanding, seem sufficient to spur on most of the participants to lives of learning and sustained service to the Faith. 160

“Know thou that, according to what thy Lord, the Lord of all men, hath decreed in His Book, the favors vouchsafed by Him unto mankind have been, and will remain, limitless in their range. First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a 161

gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation.”ⁱ

162 “The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. ...”ⁱⁱ

163 The Ruhi Institute has not subscribed to a particular educational theory, nor has it pretended to contribute to the formulation of a “Bahá’í theory of education”, an endeavor which probably must await a distant future when the results of efforts by large numbers of people to apply the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh to educational practice, all over the world, can be integrated into a consistent body of knowledge. What the collaborators of the institute have tried to do is to ensure that at any given moment their educational practice reflects their

i Bahá’u’lláh, “Gleanings”, XCV

ii Bahá’u’lláh, “Kitáb-i-Iqán”

best understanding of the guidance and inspiration enshrined in the Bahá'í Teachings.

The methodology for the elaboration of courses and educational materials has grown from the institute's historical roots. In the early 1970s, as described above, a small group of people who were personally engaged in large-scale expansion and consolidation entered into a process of consultation about the successes and failures of their efforts. By reflecting on their own service and growth, they hoped to gain new insights into the dynamics of the spiritual movement of entire populations. As this nucleus of people began to advance in their own paths of service and to discover certain spiritual requirements of these paths, they became engaged in an educational process that would prepare an increasing number of individuals to similarly dedicate themselves to the spiritual movement of their own people. Naturally, the courses and educational materials took shape through the same process of consultation/action/reflection that had evolved as the group's method of learning and service. Such an approach to curriculum development is clearly rooted in action. Curriculum is never seen as an instrument through which those who know will teach those who are ignorant, but as an instrument through which all participants can be empowered to serve, together, in a common learning process.

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The approach to curriculum development can be summarized simply, in the following terms. Once an educational need is identified, a small group of people,

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working at the grass roots, consult among themselves, develop a set of ideas for educational activities, and put them into practice. The results of this practice are reviewed, evaluated and consulted upon; in light of this consultation, a modified set of educational activities is put into practice, and subjected to reflection that leads to further modification and revision. At no time in this process of curriculum development does action await the final preparation and evaluation of educational materials. At every stage, educational activities proceed with the best materials at hand, in the conviction that it is only through practice and reflection, both pursued in light of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, that more appropriate curricula can gradually evolve. Yet, this is not a setting in which a few individuals are developing materials for their own use, and it does become necessary at some point to finalize the structure and content of each unit so that it may be used with confidence by others. The decision to release a final version of the materials for a given course is made simply when it is noticed that modifications are becoming negligible. It is important to note that the various aspects of this process of consultation, action and reflection are carried out parallel with one another, and not performed in a linear sequence which would be inherently artificial.

XXIII

Presenting the Institute to Those Outside the Bahá'í Community

In 1988 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia decided to seek legal recognition for the Ruhi Institute by incorporating it as a non-profit organization with its own Board of Directors appointed by the Assembly. This decision has opened up avenues for more extensive interactions with other organizations in Latin America and possibilities of greater access to financial resources. In introducing itself to a wider audience, the institute has described itself in somewhat different language than has been used here. The perusal of a few paragraphs from these more general presentations, while it will entail some degree of repetition, is necessary to complete the present analysis of the institute. 166

The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution, operating under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia, which dedicates its efforts to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people. Although its center is in the town of Puerto Tejada in the department of Cauca, its area of influence includes the majority of the rural areas of Colombia and is being gradually extended to several other countries in Latin America. 167

168 Like any other institution involved in the process of education for development, the Ruhi Institute has formulated its strategies within a special framework and a philosophy of social change, development and education. In this case, that understanding has emerged from a consistent effort to apply Bahá'í principles to the analysis of social conditions:

- 169 • The Bahá'í Faith sees the present state of human affairs as a natural stage in an organic process which will finally lead to the unity of the human race within one social order. Humanity as a whole has gone through evolutionary stages similar to those experienced by an individual; having passed through infancy and childhood, it is now experiencing the difficult culminating moments of a turbulent adolescence. The present state of confusion, doubt, and belligerence is simply to be understood as the condition of an adolescent who strongly desires growth and maturity, but is still attached to childish attitudes and customs. Yet the moment is ripe for this adolescent to take a final step and enter the constructive and dynamic but balanced state of maturity and adulthood.
- 170 • In analyzing the rapid changes occurring in the world today, Bahá'ís identify two parallel processes operating at all levels—village, town, nation, and global society. On the one hand, it is clear that human society is suffering from a process of disintegration that manifests itself in wars, terrorism, chaos, physical and psychological insecurity, and a widespread

condition of material poverty. On the other hand, forces of integration are moving individuals and groups toward the adoption of new values, new forms of organization, and appropriate structures that can lay the foundation for the establishment of a new social order. The Ruhi Institute defines its basic aim as that of becoming a channel for the spiritual forces of our time to be applied to the lives of the masses of humanity, empowering them to contribute to the establishment of a new world civilization.

- In its efforts to understand and contribute to a process of social change, the Ruhi Institute tries to avoid two sets of theories that have dominated the discourse on development and change for too many decades. On the one hand, it disagrees with concepts of social change that are entirely individualistic in their outlook, which analyze society only in terms of the psychological make-up, the skills, and the behavior of the individual, and which assume that social structures somehow will change by themselves once the individual is saved or correctly trained through religious conversion or secular education. On the other hand, it also rejects theories that consider the human being entirely as a product of society, and claim that no improvement is possible unless social structures, especially those related to political and economic power, are changed first. There are too many examples of participation by the “righteous” and the “highly trained” in the structures of oppression to allow any objective observer of social

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processes to accept proposals of change based entirely on the redemption of the individual without direct attention to social forces and structures. At the same time, history has already shown the evils of systems that deny individual freedom and derive their moral and social codes from a perception of the necessity of change in the structures of power, a change their proponents believe should be achieved at any cost.

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The Ruhi Institute tries to understand the process of the transformation of human society in terms of a far more complex set of interactions between two parallel developments: the transformation of the individual, and the deliberate creation of the structures of a new society. Moreover, just as it does not view the human being as a mere product of interactions with nature and society, it does not identify structural change only with political and economic processes. Rather, it sees the necessity of change in all structures—mental, cultural, scientific and technological, educational, economic and social—including a complete change in the very concepts of political leadership and power. It is understood that individuals, all of whom possess a more or less developed spiritual nature, may be illumined by divine teachings, even under the influence of the most oppressive social forces. These individuals, then, by no means perfected, try to walk the path of social transformation, a path which, nevertheless, is not one of individual salvation but one which implies a constant effort to create and strengthen the institutions of a new social order.

These new institutions, even when designed perfectly, may not function perfectly at first, but they do make it possible for an increasing number of human beings to walk further along the path of spiritual growth and transformation. This continuous interaction, between the parallel processes of the spiritualization of the individual and the establishment of new social structures, describes the only dependable path of social change, one that avoids both complacency and violence and does not perpetuate the cycles of oppression and illusory freedom that humanity has experienced in the past. According to this vision of social change, the Ruhi Institute directs its present efforts to develop human resources within a set of activities that conduce to spiritual and intellectual growth, but are carried out in the context of each individual's contribution to the establishment of new structures—for now, mostly, in villages and rural regions.

- Yet another important element of the conceptual framework of the Ruhi Institute is the concept of participation. Although by now most programs concerned with development and change accept the importance of participation by the local community in its own path of development and most try to avoid imposing their own projects and ideas, there usually is little clarity and agreement as to the nature, the form, and the extent of this participation. The Ruhi Institute, following the ideas presented in the previous paragraphs, asserts that effective participation which

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will not easily degenerate into political manipulation requires a systematic learning process within each community and region so that the community itself experiments with new ideas, new methods, and new technologies and procedures, rather than being the object of the social experimentation of others. Thus, one of the first steps in establishing participatory development processes in a region is to promote intensive participation by an increasing number of individuals in learning, in a constant effort to apply knowledge to improve the conditions of community life and to create and strengthen the institutions of a new world order.

- 174 • Guided by universal participation, both as a principle and as a goal, the Ruhi Institute tries to design and carry out educational activities that combine classroom learning and personal study with acts of service in the community. Each educational activity is to be, in itself, an enabling experience which helps participants develop further the qualities, attitudes, capabilities, and skills of a new type of social actor whose energies are entirely directed towards promoting the well-being of the community, and whose actions are inspired by the vision of a new world civilization which will embody in all its structures and processes the fundamental principle of the unity of the human race.

- At the Ruhi Institute, the design and implementation of educational activities are always guided by a profound conviction in the basic nobility of the human being. The Bahá'í Writings state: 175

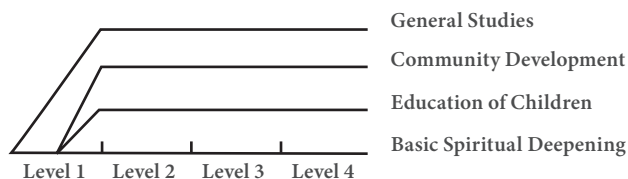
“Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”ⁱ 176

Education, then, is not simply seen as the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills, but also as the development of vast and powerful potentialities inherent in the very nature of every human being. Again, the development of these potentialities and talents, which is considered a God-given right and responsibility of the individual, attains fruition when it is pursued in the spirit of service to humanity and in the context of creating a new world civilization. 177

Each participant in the programs of the Ruhi Institute acts as a student in certain educational activities, and as a tutor in others. The institute, then, uses the term “collaborator” to refer to all who take part in its programs. 178

i Bahá'u'lláh, “Gleanings”, CXXII

Based on the conditions and the needs of the population served by the institute, courses are designed along a series of “paths of service” which a collaborator follows according to personal interests and capacities. At the beginning of each path of service collaborators mostly learn and develop new concepts and skills. Later on, they participate in courses that prepare them to act as tutors of the earlier courses, thus creating a unique and dynamic environment for the development of human resources. The courses that have been designed, or are in the process of being developed and tested, now fall along four paths of service, as shown in the following diagram.



- 179 In order to illustrate the program described above, it may be useful to relate the experience of one young collaborator of the Coast region of Colombia. She began her association with the Ruhi Institute at the age of 16 when she enrolled in a two-week seminar being offered in the North Coast and completed the first five courses of level one of ‘Basic Deepening’. Following the seminar she went on to successfully complete more courses along the path, and soon afterwards established a bi-weekly children’s class in a village near the city of Cartagena, where she was attending high school. She was assisted in this work by the Bahá’í regional committee of the

North Coast, as well as by other collaborators of the Ruhi Institute in that region.

Over the next two years, she took part in various conferences and community development activities and continued with courses of the 'Basic Deepening' path, including some of the second level. After finishing high school she decided to offer a year of service beginning in January 1988. During this time she participated in a one-month course for kindergarten teachers and took part in the courses and the practices of the 'Community Development' path of service and learning. She successfully started and guided two youth groups in a village near the Ruhi Institute and assisted them in their studies and acts of service. She also served as an adviser to another youth who had started a kindergarten and helped a group of women with their projects in another village. 180

After finishing her year of service she returned to the North Coast, established herself in a small town, and with support from the local and regional Bahá'í committees is assisting the development of nearby communities. 181

The policies and programs of the Ruhi Institute are overseen by a Board of Directors that presently consists of seven from among the individuals involved in its development during the past decade. The Board, however, seldom arrives at a decision without ample consultation with the growing body of the institute's experienced collaborators, who are becoming increasingly involved in the organization and implementation of different 182

educational programs. The day-to-day activities of the institute are managed by an administrator in close collaboration with the secretary-treasurer of the Board of Directors.

183 Services rendered to the Ruhi Institute are entirely voluntary and generally are not remunerated, although expenses for travel to other regions to visit youth groups and centers of excellence, and to participate as tutors in different courses, are reimbursed for collaborators who cannot afford to meet such expenses from their own resources. Recently, an agreement was made with FUNDAEC to jointly develop and test courses for community groups in certain villages. This has made it necessary for the institute to ask three of its collaborators to become full-time workers for a limited period, and for the first time a modest remuneration is being paid for such services.

184 The budget of the Ruhi Institute, then, is dedicated to the actual implementation of programs, and is spent almost entirely on participants' travel expenses, food and lodging, and on materials for their courses. A significant portion of the budget is dedicated to expenses of youth who are giving a year of service to the institute. They act as animators of youth groups and advisers to the growing network of kindergarten teachers, and promote the gradual development of community centers of excellence.

185 The institute offers each year one or two one-month programs for the year-of-service volunteers, many of whom come from other countries in Latin America.

Ten to fifteen experienced collaborators living in nearby towns offer a block of time each week to act as tutors for a specific course in this one-month program. Given the importance of the event, some of the collaborators from other regions are also invited to help make the program a success. Each year similar programs are conducted once or twice for new groups of village kindergarten teachers.

After the one-month program, some participants return to a year of service in their own countries, but many of the Colombian youth stay at the institute and follow a program of supervised service and study. During the first months of this period, the youth work in nearby villages, under the guidance of more experienced collaborators, and also take part in courses along the 'Community Development' path. Later in the year they travel, helping collaborators in other regions, and finally settle down in an area where they can earn a living and join the body of collaborators in that region.

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Not all the collaborators of the institute, however, need go through the Year of Service program. The institute continuously sponsors courses in different regions to help old and new collaborators to move along the various paths of service. In fact, the institute in Puerto Tejada is mostly used for the development of new courses which, once proven effective, are transferred to other areas by specially trained tutors. For example, for many years now, the first level of the 'Basic Deepening' path has seldom been taught at the site of the Ruhi Institute; the corresponding courses are usually offered regionally to groups gathered from several communities, and even to small groups in a single village.

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Lost Momentum

188 This brief analysis of the conceptual framework and programs of the Ruhi Institute began with a description of the history of large-scale expansion and consolidation in Colombia. Having examined the institute in its present stage of development, it may be worthwhile to return to the historical account and make a few comments about how teaching has progressed in that country as a consequence of the impetus lent by the institute to the development of human resources.

189 Even before the institute acquired its modest building in Puerto Tejada, other facilities were used to conduct one- or two-month courses for youth from nearby villages. During these courses the participants completed early versions of what would become the first level of the Basic Deepening path. The transformation that occurred in these village youth in a very short time was truly astounding. Having entered the institute with very little knowledge of the Faith, they emerged as confirmed Bahá'ís who had achieved a high degree of clarity about their newly acquired beliefs. Children's classes and Nineteen Day Feasts began to multiply in communities whose youth had benefitted from the courses of the institute. But this initial success proved to be a mixed blessing for the Colombian Bahá'í community.

The tired community members who had helped to initiate and sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation reached the conclusion that the time had come to relax from the pressures of the past several years. The era of regional and national campaigns, which had consumed so much energy and required so much sacrifice, could quietly be put to an end. The community was finally achieving a level of maturity that would allow it to rely upon the initiatives and activities of individuals in local communities to meet the challenges of expansion and consolidation. All that had to be done was to train a few people for each village at the Ruhi Institute, and to ensure that the National Assembly remained responsive to the needs of the local communities and supportive of their plans of action.

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Unfortunately, it was gradually discovered, one may become confirmed in one's beliefs without necessarily acquiring a great deal of initiative in the process. The village youth who had participated in the institute courses were ready to carry out activities in service to the Faith as long as they were spurred on by their teachers, but their activities would dwindle as they took on the burdensome responsibilities of village life in Colombia. As the intensity of the collective projects of the national community decreased—and these had included regular visits to some 200 villages and towns—the number of youth who participated in the courses of the institute also diminished. Devoted individuals, of course, continued with their services to the Faith, and a few communities dutifully attended to basic functions. But the momentum

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that had been built up over a period of seven years was lost in the short span of a few months. The decision to revert to what was referred to at the time as a “normal lifestyle” proved to have far-reaching consequences for the community’s future development. The ensuing period of slow, uneven and discontinuous growth, characterized by bursts of activity followed by months of quiet, lasted for about three years. When the results were finally analyzed and the implications of a more relaxed approach to the organization and promotion of teaching were understood, the National Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members realized that the process of rebuilding collective consciousness and enthusiasm might well be the most difficult challenge they had ever faced.

- 192 The event that marked the beginning of a gradual process of change was, unfortunately, the premature passing of the Hand of the Cause Rahmat’ulláh Muhájir in December of 1979. He had been a source of inspiration and courage to the Colombian friends since his first visit to that country in the 1960s, and had encouraged them every step of the way through crises and victories. He had laid the cornerstone of the building of the Ruhi Institute in Puerto Tejada, declaring unexpectedly that a future university was being established there. He had been somewhat displeased by the community’s decision to teach the Faith without the pressure of highly disciplined and intensive campaigns; his message to the National Spiritual Assembly on this subject had been a single sentence: “The less you expect, the less

you achieve". The believers were anxiously waiting for his next visit to consult with him on the direction of their future activities, but he passed away in Ecuador a few days before he would have reached Colombia and revitalized that community through his wise counsel and the inspiration of his words and example.

In a series of meetings of prayer and consultation, filled with the memory of Dr. Muhájir, the Colombian friends decided to dedicate eighteen months to intensive teaching in his name. But the mood of the community was still not inclined towards intensive campaigns. Thirty-six individuals arose, greatly moved by their love for Dr. Muhájir, and pledged to enroll at least five hundred new believers each. So that the pressures of high numerical goals would not lower the quality of teaching, the National Assembly asked the teachers to make at least three visits to each new believer within a few weeks after declaration and share with them a number of deepening booklets. During the next months, the thirty-six volunteers taught on their own, using their weekends and vacations, with such a high degree of devotion that by the middle of 1981 the number of adult Bahá'ís in Colombia had increased by another fifteen thousand, raising the total to about forty-five thousand.

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Being acutely aware of the limitations of large-scale expansion without proportionate increase in the number of active teachers, the National Assembly asked the thirty-six individuals to form teams with as many believers as showed enthusiasm for teaching. Unlike groups of teachers that would come together only for

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the duration of a campaign, these would be permanent teams to which new believers who expressed the desire to serve would be constantly invited. The more experienced members of each team would endeavor to deepen the newer ones in an atmosphere of love and fellowship and help them reach ever-greater heights of devotion. As the number of team members approached twenty, they would be asked to divide into two teams, each carrying out the basic functions of deepening and teaching in communities easily accessible to them. The members of the National Assembly and the Auxiliary Board either joined a team or undertook the task of encouraging several teams by attending some of their weekly deepening meetings and participating in their weekend teaching projects.

- 195 This new method of organizing the teaching work once again mobilized the Colombian Bahá'í community. About a hundred youth who had already attended the courses of the Ruhi Institute quickly rallied behind the new plan of action. The permanent team structure now offered the institute the opportunity to decentralize its courses and hold them in towns and villages throughout the country. In fact, during this period the more experienced members of the teams, all of whom had close ties with the Ruhi Institute as its collaborators, initiated the development of several courses along various paths of service. The membership of some thirty teams did grow rapidly, and expansion and consolidation in the country gained considerable momentum. Yet the division of teams and formation

of new ones proved far more difficult than expected. While the new members of the teams, like those who had attended the courses in Puerto Tejada before them, did become confirmed in their faith and developed love for teaching, the problem of initiative presented itself again. To increase the membership of a team to about twenty was easy, but to find individuals with enough maturity and dedication to form the nucleus of a new team, even after a year, was almost impossible. This essential difficulty finally forced the National Assembly to give up the idea of permanent teaching teams and explore alternative schemes to mobilize the national community for teaching. Yet it must be emphasized that once again in this new stage of growth, remarkable victories were won for the Faith in the country. Numerically, during the three years when permanent teams constituted the main component of the organization of teaching in Colombia, another ten thousand new believers joined the ranks of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh and the total number of adult Bahá'ís rose to about fifty-five thousand. Qualitatively, the community gained invaluable experience, especially in the administration of teaching plans, and took important strides towards greater spiritual maturity.

The difficulties that the permanent teaching teams faced as they tried to grow and multiply were quite puzzling to the institutions of the Faith in Colombia. It seemed clear to the institutions that they had discovered an excellent approach to the spiritual education of capable youth, as well as a simple scheme that would organize these youth to serve the Faith. By offering only a portion of the Ruhi

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Institute program—the first level of the Basic Deepening path—which required about eighty hours of group study and discussion, it was possible to inspire village youth to arise and participate effectively in the plans of the national community. Indeed, the receptivity of these youth was so great that the number of teachers who could be assisted through this straightforward deepening process seemed limitless. But growth continued to be relatively slow, now because of the scarcity of individuals who could coordinate groups and, at one level or another, administer the plans of expansion and consolidation. It was understood, of course, that other levels and paths of the institute's evolving program would lead to the gradual increase in the number of such capable workers. Yet the time-scale was not satisfactory. Now that the challenge of increasing the number of teachers had been met, was there not a way to accelerate the maturation of these teachers and help a few of them assume quickly the more demanding responsibilities of coordination and administration?

XXV

Commitment and Intensity

By now it will be clear that throughout its short history the Colombian community, like every other Bahá'í community in the world, has been continually challenged by the tasks of fostering devotion and cultivating the believers' capacity to serve the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. Its experience demonstrates that accelerated growth is achieved whenever successful efforts are made to develop human resources and endow the believers with new insights into the spiritual dynamics of growth and with new capabilities for service. But each success brings an expanded range of opportunities and a need for larger numbers of individuals able to render more specialized or complex services to the community. Such a pattern is, of course, natural to a healthy process of expansion and consolidation and is not a fault to be lamented. What is needed is a systematic response to these needs, bearing in mind that there will always be more opportunities than the community can possibly exploit.

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It should be mentioned here that the development of human resources in the Faith cannot be pursued in accordance with certain control-oriented theories which are prevalent in the world today. Such theories hold that through prescribed diagnostic and planning procedures it is possible to determine the needs of a developing society for every type of expertise and labor, design the corresponding training programs, and deliver

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the specified human resources to run the society. Their application leads to rigid structures within which certain types of professionals dominate and control the destiny of those who are somehow below them in a false hierarchy of capacities. Their proponents put undue emphasis on professionalism, even to the point of equating the word “professional” with “excellent”, thus denying the excellence that can characterize every person’s contribution to society. The value of the Ruhi Institute derives precisely from its ability to respond systematically to the community’s growing needs for human resources without pretending to control the development of the Faith in Colombia through the creation of blueprints for growth or the establishment of cadres of “experts” and “skilled laborers”. The progress of the Faith in any country proceeds according to the dictates of Bahá’u’lláh’s mighty Will; individuals have the bounty of responding to His call and arising to serve Him. There is no need to predict every eventuality and train individuals for every type of service. Yet, the challenge of accelerating the development of capacity for increasingly complex types of service to the Faith has to be addressed by the institutions of a country.

- 199 Two assets of the experience of the Colombian community in recent years may contribute to a deeper appreciation of this challenge. One aspect has to do with the initial commitment of those who enter the Faith in a process of large-scale expansion. Despite their decision at an early stage to teach the Faith thoroughly, which proved essential to the ability to sustain large-scale

enrollments over the years, the friends in Colombia made few explicit efforts to teach the people of greater capacity within the villages and neighborhoods. Anyone who accepted the Faith during the first contact was visited repeatedly and deepened; from among these believers, and especially from among their children and youth, the Ruhi Institute identified highly capable people and helped them become gifted servants of the Cause. Yet, insufficient thought was given to the potential benefits of making systematic plans for the enrollment of people who, though they might accept the Faith only after three or four visits, would enter it with a deeper commitment. Although it is only a hypothesis that needs to be tested through experience, adding such a component to large-scale teaching plans might have increased the number of individuals who could render complex services after a short period of deepening and orientation.

A word of caution may be in order concerning the concept of “capacity” as used in the paragraph above. In deliberations on the implications of this concept it is well to ask, “Capacity to do what?” and “How will the community use the capacity that is to be gained?”. It is clear that for its growth the Bahá’í community needs people with highly diverse capacities. In order to reach effectively all strata of society and influence the direction of social processes, the Faith must count among its followers individuals of such diverse backgrounds that its voice may be heard in every social setting. Yet, capacity need not be identified solely with social prestige, material resources, academic degrees, or access to the

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power structures of society, although it is indispensable that Bahá'í communities reach out to people of prestige and academic distinction. As far as large-scale expansion among the masses is concerned, the capabilities that have proven to be limiting factors, and which the Ruhi Institute has only managed to develop slowly in its participants, are unfortunately not taught in schools and universities and have little to do with wealth and power. The spiritual attributes which enable a person to work effectively among the oppressed masses of the world, those special qualities of leadership that permit one to coordinate a team of teachers who are working with devotion and sincerity in the villages for months on end, the ability to envision large-scale movements and processes of transformation, the intellectual tools one needs in order to contribute to strategic planning towards those ends: none of these endowments is related, at this stage in history, to one's position in society or one's level of formal education. For this reason, while the search for people of capacity is relevant to the problems that the Colombian Bahá'í community has faced in the coordination and administration of large-scale expansion and consolidation, let it not be forgotten that the entire analysis could only be pursued within a framework that is unique to the Faith and does not subscribe to the values of the societies in which we live.

A second aspect of the experience in Colombia which sheds light on the challenge of building capacity for increasingly complex service to the Faith concerns the matter of intensity. When the Colombian friends

analyzed the different stages of their short history they were led to an interesting realization. It seemed to them that during the early stages, when campaigns and activities were carried out with a great deal of intensity and demanded a high level of sacrifice, some of the believers became imbued with such a strong sense of purpose and dedication that they did not waver throughout the triumphs and trials of their service to the Faith. When, through the Ruhi Institute, they learned how to help a larger number of believers to walk the beginnings of their paths of service, in a process that was slower and more relaxed, the number of confirmed believers and willing workers for the Cause increased, but only a few experienced the accelerated maturation that had characterized the lives of the teachers who entered the arena of service a decade before them. Intensity of experience, then, seemed to be another all-important factor that the community had missed for a few years and, once again, would have to incorporate in the plans of action.

Based on this new insight, the National Spiritual Assembly decided to add to the plans another component: highly intensive national campaigns of expansion and consolidation, to be held once or twice a year. In these campaigns, which have been carried out regularly in Colombia since 1983, groups of five to ten teachers visit one of the 300 communities where a Local Spiritual Assembly exists, and pursue a program of activities that includes the deepening of the teachers themselves, visits to homes in an effort to

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enroll entire families in the Faith, classes for children and youth, and dramatizations of diverse aspects of Bahá'í life presented in large community meetings. Where possible, all of these activities are carried out in consultation with the Local Spiritual Assembly. All the participants are conscious that the campaigns are not only concerned with expansion and consolidation of the communities, and that their greatest value lies in the unique opportunities they offer to the teachers to renew their sense of dedication to the Faith. The coordinators of the groups, therefore, are asked to create a very high sense of spiritual discipline and sustain it throughout the week. Participants accept that for a week or two they will live frugally, eating as the poorest among the villagers do and staying as guests in the humble homes which are generously opened to them. From early morning until late at night, the group is entirely focused on spiritual matters and constantly immersed in the Writings, whether sharing them with others or studying among themselves. Yet, it must be remembered that this is the discipline of joy and happiness, and an experienced coordinator does not have to impose it on the participants. Nor is the desire to strive for high levels of sacrifice and detachment induced through emotional appeals designed to whip up superficial excitement. It arises from a collective decision of the community to leave behind the concerns of daily life for a few weeks each year, and render service to His Threshold with such intensity that souls may be endowed with new capacities and powers. The National Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members have done everything possible

to ensure that expansion-consolidation campaigns remain a regular and organic element of community life in Colombia. Their success can be measured by the simple fact that while only eight people participated in the first campaign in 1983, during the summer of 1989 the national campaign enlisted the participation of more than 400 dedicated teachers.

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Conclusions

202 The story of large-scale teaching endeavors is certainly not unique to Colombia. Numerous communities throughout the world have responded creatively to the challenges of growth in the past few decades, and the Cause has advanced with remarkable rapidity since the opening years of the Ten Year Crusade. The question that often arises when a specific initiative is under scrutiny is whether it has succeeded in winning lasting victories for the Faith. What the story of the Ruhi Institute demonstrates is that this deceptively straightforward question cannot be answered by applying simplistic criteria of success and failure. How does one measure the success of a process that in each country is destined to culminate in the conquest of the hearts of a majority of the inhabitants and in the establishment of the structures of a new world order? How does one speak of successes and failures of men and women who, cognizant of their utter weakness and impotence, try to contribute, no matter how modestly, to a spiritual drama which only unfolds according to the all-pervading Will of God? It is in recognition of this difficulty, inherent to the analysis of Bahá'í efforts, that the dialectic of crisis and victory, rather than an assessment of success and failure, emerges as the organizing parameter within which to examine a national community's experience in large-scale teaching. Thus, to complete the analysis of the Ruhi Institute, what remains is to decide whether, at the beginning of the

decade of the 1990s when these pages are being written, the Colombian Bahá'í community finds itself at a point of crisis or stands at one of its moments of victory. To a reader who is well aware of the dynamic interplay between crisis and victory, it should not be disappointing to find out that this, in fact, is a time of crisis.

Let it not be assumed from the foregoing statement that the community is burdened with problems or caught in a state of stagnancy. On the contrary, at this moment Colombia stands out as a healthy and vibrant Bahá'í community. There is a high degree of unity and the friends are working in concert to pursue parallel lines of action for the spiritual enrichment of their lives, the education of children, the promotion of a youth movement, proclamation, teaching at individual and collective levels, the strengthening of local, regional and national institutions, and the application of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to some of the problems of their society. Expansion-consolidation campaigns are carried out regularly, and with each campaign a few thousand new Bahá'ís join the community. The Youth Year of Service program is highly successful, as is the work with junior youth in dozens of villages. Under the guidance of the Continental Board of Counsellors, the Ruhi Institute has even reached out to other Bahá'í communities in Latin America, helping them train workers for the Cause and assisting with the development of their permanent institutes. Yet, none of these achievements is very satisfying when one considers both the opportunities and the need for large-scale expansion of the Faith in Colombia.

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204 A spiritually refreshing campaign that brings two or three thousand new believers into the Faith is truly exhilarating, but in a Latin American country, the annual addition of three thousand people to a community of fifty to sixty thousand merely compensates for the mortality rate. The existence of some 150 children's classes, compared with the number of such classes in other national communities of similar size, is praiseworthy, but it involves only about three thousand children from among the fifty thousand or more that should correspond to the number of adult believers. What, then, are some of the additional steps that the Colombian community has to take in order to achieve its twenty-year dream of sustained, accelerating expansion of the Faith?

205 It should be emphasized that in questioning their own achievements the Bahá'ís of Colombia are not denying themselves the joy of witnessing the fruits of their services nor failing to appreciate the confirmations and blessings that they continuously receive from Bahá'u'lláh. But so great are the opportunities and so compelling the cry of the masses in this country, subjected as it has been to a most grievous process of disintegration, that the Colombian community cannot rest on the accomplishments of the past nor abandon the aspirations that have animated its development for the past two decades.

206 It is not possible at this point to know what insights will help the Colombian Bahá'í community to emerge from its present state of crisis. Yet, from among the different

ideas being explored, a few thoughts are beginning to crystallize and may suggest courses of action for the future. It is clear from the foregoing account that the accomplishments of the Colombian community have mainly resulted from the spiritual empowerment of individuals. There is no doubt that through the Ruhi Institute the institutions of the Faith have learned how to raise the level of consciousness of an increasing number of individuals from among the masses and imbue them with qualities and capabilities that enable them to arise and serve the Faith. But comparable results have not been achieved in the development of local Bahá'í communities. For this reason it has been extremely difficult for individuals, and even for many of the collaborators of the Ruhi Institute, who are scattered throughout a vast and difficult country, to maintain a high level of energy when their local institutions are weak and tentative, and when there is no collective will of a local community from which the believer can receive direction and support. It is true that, in the long term, through the education of children and youth, communities can be developed and Local Spiritual Assemblies gradually strengthened. But the challenge of community development cannot be entirely postponed to a distant future. Is not the next step for the Bahá'ís of Colombia, then, to search for powerful methods that would imbue entire local communities with a sense of mission, raise their collective consciousness, and create environments conducive to individual and social transformation?

