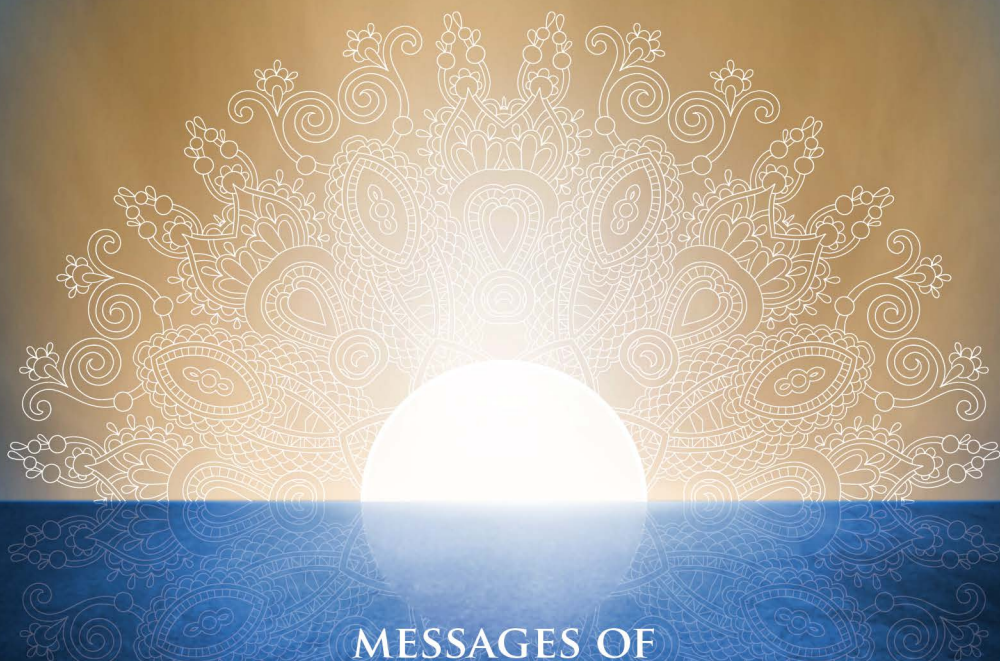


THE NINE YEAR PLAN

— 2022-2031 —



MESSAGES OF
THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

— 180 B.E. EDITION —

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The Nine Year Plan: 2022–2031
Messages of the Universal House of Justice
180 B.E. Edition

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Published January 2022, revised November 2023
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ISBN 978-1-925320-10-7

Distributed by
Bahá'í Distribution Services of Australia
173 Mona Vale Rd, Ingleside, NSW, 2101

bds@bahai.org.au
www.bahaibooks.com.au

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MESSAGES OF THE NINE YEAR PLAN

At Riḍván this year [2021] we described how, over the course of a quarter century, the Bahá'í world underwent a transformation that endowed it with an undreamed-of capacity to learn, to grow, and to serve humanity. But, however bright were the achievements of this period, they must be eclipsed by what is to come. By the conclusion of the new series of Plans recently begun, the Bahá'í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present. In your deliberations over the coming days, you will be occupied with exploring what is required to bring into being such a fortified community.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

28 November 2023

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

On 27 November 2021, in the middle of the still, dark night, nearly six hundred representatives of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils gathered, together with members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre, as well as the staff at the Bahá'í World Centre, to commemorate with due solemnity, in the precincts of His Holy Shrine, the centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Throughout that night, with the turn of the globe, Bahá'í communities worldwide also gathered in reverent devotion, in neighbourhoods and villages, towns and cities, to pay homage to a Figure without parallel in religious history, and in contemplation of the century of achievement that He Himself had set in motion. ¹

This community—the people of Bahá, ardent lovers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—now millions strong, has today spread to some one hundred thousand localities in 235 countries and territories. It has emerged from obscurity to occupy its place on the world stage. It has raised a network of thousands of institutions, from the grassroots to the international level, uniting diverse peoples in the common purpose of giving expression to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for spiritual transformation and social progress. In many a region, its pattern of building vibrant local communities has embraced thousands—and in some, tens of thousands—of souls. In such settings, a new way of life is taking shape, distinguished by its devotional character; the commitment of youth to education and service; purposeful conversation among families, friends, and acquaintances on themes of spiritual and social import; and collective endeavours for material and social progress. The Sacred Writings of the Faith ²

have been translated into more than eight hundred languages. The raising of national and local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs heralds the appearance of thousands of future centres dedicated to worship and service. The world spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith has been established across the twin holy cities of 'Akká and Haifa. And despite the community's current, all too obvious limitations when viewed in relation to its ideals and highest aspirations—as well as the distance separating it from the attainment of its ultimate objective, the realization of the oneness of humankind—its resources, its institutional capacity, its ability to sustain systematic growth and development, its engagement with like-minded institutions, and its involvement in and constructive influence on society stand at an unprecedented height of historical achievement.

3 How far has the Faith come from that moment, a century ago, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá departed from this world! At dawn on that woeful day, the news of His passing spread across the city of Haifa, consuming the hearts with grief. Thousands gathered for His funeral: young and old, high and low, distinguished officials and the masses—Jews and Muslims, Druze and Christians, as well as Bahá'ís—a gathering the like of which the city had never witnessed. In the eyes of the world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been a champion of universal peace and the oneness of humanity, a defender of the oppressed and promoter of justice. To the people of both 'Akká and Haifa, He was a loving father and friend, a wise counsellor and a refuge for all in need. At His funeral they poured out fervent expressions of love and lamentation.

4 Naturally, however, it was the Bahá'ís who most keenly felt His loss. He was the precious gift bestowed by the Manifestation of God to guide and protect them, the Centre and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal. Over the span of His life, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laboured tirelessly in service to Bahá'u'lláh, fulfilling, in its entirety, His Father's sacred trust.

He faithfully nurtured and protected the precious seed that had been planted. He sheltered the Cause in the cradle of its birth and, guiding its spread in the West, established there the cradle of its administration. He set firm the footsteps of the believers and raised up a cohort of champions and saints. With His own hands, He interred the holy remains of the Báb in the mausoleum He raised on Mount Carmel, devotedly tended the twin Holy Shrines, and laid the foundations of the Faith's world administrative centre. He safeguarded the Faith from its avowed enemies, internal and external. He revealed the precious Charter for sharing Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with all peoples across the globe, as well as the Charter that called into being and set in motion the processes of the Administrative Order. His life spanned the entire period of the Heroic Age inaugurated by the declaration of the Báb; His ascension ushered in a new Age whose features were as yet unknown to the believers. What was to befall His loved ones? Without Him, without His continual guidance, the future seemed uncertain and bleak.

Devastated by the news of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, His grandson Shoghi Effendi hastened from his studies in England to the Holy Land, where he received a second stunning blow. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had appointed him as the Guardian and Head of the Faith, entrusting the Bahá'í world to his care. In grief and agony, but sustained by the unfailing solicitude of Bahá'u'lláh's beloved daughter Bahíyyih Khánum, Shoghi Effendi donned the heavy mantle of his office and began to assess the conditions and prospects of the fledgling community.

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The announcement of Shoghi Effendi's appointment as the Guardian was received with relief, gratitude, and declarations of fealty by the body of the believers. The anguish of their separation from the Master was assuaged by the assurances in His Will and Testament that He had not left them alone. A disloyal few, however, challenged 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chosen heir and, motivated by their own ambitions and ego, rose against him. Their betrayal at that critical moment of transition

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was compounded by the fresh machinations of the avowed opponents of the Master. Yet, although hard-pressed by such heartache and trials, and in the face of other formidable obstacles, Shoghi Effendi began to mobilize the members of the widely scattered Bahá'í communities to begin the monumental task of laying the foundations of the Administrative Order. Individuals previously galvanized by the unique personality of 'Abdu'l- Bahá gradually began to coordinate their efforts in a common enterprise under the patient yet resolute guidance of the Guardian.

- 7 As the Bahá'ís began to take on their new responsibilities, Shoghi Effendi impressed upon them how rudimentary was their grasp, as yet, of the sacred Revelation in their possession and how daunting the challenges before them. "How vast is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh! How great the magnitude of His blessings showered upon humanity in this day!" he wrote. "And yet, how poor, how inadequate our conception of their significance and glory! This generation stands too close to so colossal a Revelation to appreciate, in their full measure, the infinite possibilities of His Faith, the unprecedented character of His Cause, and the mysterious dispensations of His Providence." "The contents of the Will of the Master are far too much for the present generation to comprehend", his secretary wrote on his behalf. "It needs at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed." To comprehend the nature and dimensions of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order, he explained, "We must trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications."

- 8 The present moment, following, as it does, the completion of a full century of "actual working", offers a propitious vantage point from which to garner new insights. And so we have chosen the occasion of this anniversary to pause to reflect with you on the wisdom enshrined in the provisions of the Will and Testament, to trace the course of the Faith's unfoldment and

observe the coherence of the stages of its organic development, to discern the possibilities inherent in the processes driving its progress, and to appreciate its promise for the decades ahead as its power to reshape society is increasingly made manifest in the world through the growing impact of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation.

Translating what is written into reality and action

Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is to usher in a new stage in human development—the organic and spiritual unity of the peoples and nations of the world—signalizing thereby the coming of age of the human race and characterized, in the fullness of time, by the emergence of a world civilization and culture. To this end, He revealed His teachings for the inner and outer transformation of human life. “Every verse which this Pen hath revealed is a bright and shining portal that discloseth the glories of a saintly and pious life, of pure and stainless deeds”, He stated. And in countless Tablets He, the Divine Physician, diagnosed the ills afflicting humanity and set forth His healing remedy for “the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth”. Bahá'u'lláh explained that “The summons and the message which We gave were; never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only.” “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding”, He wrote, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.... Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.” 9

The task of building a mature, peaceful, just, and united world is a vast undertaking in which every people and nation must be able to participate. The Bahá'í community welcomes all to join in this endeavour as protagonists in a spiritual enterprise that can overcome the forces of disintegration eroding the old social order and give tangible form to an integrative process that will lead to the unfoldment of a new 10

order in its stead. The Formative Age is that critical period in the Faith's development in which the friends increasingly come to appreciate the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them, deepen their understanding of the meaning and implications of His revealed Word, and systematically cultivate capacity—their own and that of others—in order to put into practice His teachings for the betterment of the world.

- 11 From the beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi guided the Bahá'ís in their efforts to gain a deeper understanding of their mission, which would define their identity and purpose. He explicated for them the meaning of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, His vision for humanity, the history of the Cause, the processes reshaping society, and the part the Bahá'ís must play in contributing to the advancement of humankind. He outlined the nature of the development of the Bahá'í community so the friends would appreciate that it would undergo many transformations, often unexpected, over decades and centuries. He also described the dialectic of crisis and victory, preparing them for the tortuous path they must traverse. He called upon the Bahá'ís to refine their characters and hone their minds to meet the challenges of building a new world. He urged them not to despair when encountering the problems of a nascent and rapidly evolving community or the privations and the deteriorating milieu of a tumultuous age, reminding them that the full expression of the promises of Bahá'u'lláh lay in the future. He explained that the Bahá'ís were to be as a leaven—a permeating and vivifying influence—that could inspire others to arise and overcome entrenched patterns of divisiveness, conflict, and contest for power, so that the highest aspirations of humanity could ultimately be achieved.

- 12 While consolidating these broad areas of understanding, the Guardian also guided the believers, step by step, to learn how to effectively establish the structural basis of the Administrative Order and systematically share Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with others. He patiently directed their efforts by gradually clarifying the nature, principles, and procedures

which characterize that Order, while raising their capacity for teaching the Faith, individually and collectively. On each vital matter, he would provide direction and the believers would consult and strive to apply his guidance, sharing their experiences with him and raising questions when they faced perplexing problems and difficulties. Then, taking into consideration the accumulating experience, the Guardian would offer additional guidance and elaborate the concepts and principles that would enable the friends to adjust their action as needed, until their efforts proved effective and could be applied more broadly. In their response to his guidance, the friends demonstrated an unwavering faith in the truth of the revealed Word, an unfaltering trust in his vision and infallible wisdom, and an unshakeable resolve to transform the various aspects of their lives according to the pattern set out in the Teachings. In this way, a capacity for learning how to apply the Teachings was gradually cultivated within the community. The efficacy of this approach was demonstrated most vividly at the climax of his ministry, when the Bahá'í world combined its forces for the unprecedented achievements of the Ten Year Spiritual Crusade.

The efforts of Shoghi Effendi to set the believers on a path of learning were further extended, after his passing, under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. By the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, the essential aspects of a process of learning that was in a fledgling state at the beginning of that century were consciously grasped and systematically implemented by Bahá'ís worldwide across the full range of their endeavours.

13

Today the Bahá'í community is distinguished by a mode of operation characterized by study, consultation, action, and reflection. It is steadily increasing its capacity to apply the Teachings in a variety of social spaces and to collaborate with those in the wider society who share a yearning to revitalize the material and spiritual foundations of the social order. In the transformative alembic of these spaces, to the extent possible,

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individuals and communities become protagonists of their own development, an embrace of the oneness of humanity banishes prejudice and otherness, the spiritual dimension of human life is fostered through adherence to principle and strengthening of the community's devotional character, and the capacity for learning is developed and directed towards personal and social transformation. The effort to understand the implications of what Bahá'u'lláh has revealed and to apply His healing remedy has now become more explicit, more deliberate, and an indelible part of Bahá'í culture. The conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age. This process will increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual in the years ahead, as the Bahá'í world takes on ever-greater challenges and releases in ever-greater measures the Faith's society-building power.

- 15 In his efforts to assist the friends in their understanding of the development of the Faith and their associated responsibilities, Shoghi Effendi referred to “the triple impulse generated through the revelation of the Tablet of Carmel by Bahá'u'lláh and the Will and Testament as well as the Tablets of the Divine Plan bequeathed by the Centre of His Covenant—the three Charters which have set in motion three distinct processes, the first operating in the Holy Land for the development of the institutions of the Faith at its World Centre and the other two, throughout the rest of the Bahá'í world, for its propagation and the establishment of its Administrative Order”. The processes associated with each of these Divine Charters are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The Administrative Order is the chief instrument for the prosecution of the Divine Plan, while the Plan is the most potent agency for the development of the Faith's administrative structure. Advances at the World Centre, the heart and nerve centre of the administration, exert a pronounced influence on the body of the worldwide community and are in turn affected by its vitality. The Bahá'í world constantly evolves and develops organically as individuals,

communities, and institutions strive to translate into reality the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Now, at the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world is able to apprehend more fully the implications inherent in these immortal Charters for the development of the Faith. And because it has increased its understanding of the process in which it is engaged, it can better appreciate its own experience over the past century and can act more effectively to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's intended purpose for humanity in the decades and centuries that lie ahead.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

To preserve the unity of His Faith, maintain the integrity and flexibility of His teachings, and guarantee the progress of all humanity, Bahá'u'lláh established a Covenant with His followers that is unique in the annals of religious history for its authority and its explicit and comprehensive nature. In His Most Holy Book and in the Book of His Covenant, as well as in other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh instructed that after His passing the friends should turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of that Covenant, to guide the affairs of the Faith. In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá perpetuated the Covenant by laying down the provisions for the Administrative Order ordained in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, thereby ensuring the continuation of authority and leadership through the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, as well as a sound relationship between individuals and institutions within the Faith.

16

History has amply demonstrated that religion can serve either as a powerful instrument for cooperation to propel the advancement of civilization, or as a source of conflict that yields incalculable harm. The unifying and civilizing power of religion begins to decline as the followers come to disagree on the meaning and application of the divine teachings, and the community of the faithful eventually becomes divided

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into contending sects and denominations. The purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is to establish the oneness of humanity and unite all peoples, and this last and highest stage in the evolution of society cannot be achieved if the Bahá'í Faith succumbs to the malady of sectarianism and the dilution of the divine Message witnessed in the past. If Bahá'ís “cannot unite around one point”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes, “how will they be able to bring about the unity of mankind?” And He affirms: “Today the dynamic power of the world of existence is the power of the Covenant which like unto an artery pulsateth in the body of the contingent world and protecteth Bahá'í unity.”

- 18 Foremost among the achievements of the past century is the victory of the Covenant, which both protected the Faith from division and propelled it to embrace and contribute to the empowerment of all peoples and nations. Bahá'u'lláh's penetrating question that lies at the heart of religion—“Where shalt thou secure the cord of thy faith and fasten the tie of thine obedience?”—takes on a new and vital significance for those who recognize Him as the Manifestation of God for this Day. It is a call for firmness in the Covenant. The response of the Bahá'í community has been unyielding adherence to the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's Will and Testament. Unlike relationships of worldly power in which a sovereign entity compels obedience, the relationship between the Manifestation of God and the believers, and between the authority designated by the Covenant and the community, is governed by conscious knowledge and love. In recognizing Bahá'u'lláh, a believer enters voluntarily into His Covenant as an act of free conscience and, out of love for Him, remains steadfast in adherence to its requirements. At the close of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world has come to more fully understand and act upon the provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, and a distinctive set of relationships has been established among the believers that unify and direct their energies in pursuit of their sacred mission. This achievement, like so many others, was the fruit of crises overcome.

The existence of the Covenant does not mean that no one will ever attempt to divide the Faith, cause damage to it, or retard its progress. But it does guarantee that every such attempt is foredoomed to fail. Following the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, some ambitious individuals, including the brothers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, tried to usurp the authority granted to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Bahá'u'lláh and sowed seeds of doubt within the community, testing and at times misleading those who wavered. Shoghi Effendi, during his own ministry, was attacked not only by those who had broken the Covenant and opposed 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but also by some within the community who rejected the validity of the Administrative Order and questioned the authority of the Guardianship. Years later, when Shoghi Effendi passed away, a new attack upon the Covenant emerged when one profoundly misguided individual, despite having served for many years as a Hand of the Cause of God, made an unfounded and futile attempt to claim the Guardianship for himself, in spite of the clear conditions set forth in the Will and Testament. After the election of the Universal House of Justice, it too became a target of the active opponents of the Cause. In more recent decades, a few from within the community, presenting themselves as more knowledgeable than others, fruitlessly sought to reinterpret the Bahá'í teachings pertaining to the provisions of the Covenant in order to cast doubt on the authority of the House of Justice and to claim certain prerogatives, in the absence of a living Guardian, that would enable them to drive the affairs of the Faith in a direction of their own choosing.

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Over a century, then, the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh and perpetuated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was attacked in various ways by internal and external opponents, but ultimately to no avail. While, each time, some individuals were misled or became disaffected, the attacks failed to divert or redefine the Cause or to make a permanent breach in the community. In each instance, by turning to the designated centre of authority at the time—'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian, or the Universal House of Justice—questions were answered

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and problems resolved. As the body of believers grew in its understanding of and firmness in the Covenant, it learned to become impervious to the types of attacks and misrepresentations that, in an earlier era, had threatened the Faith's very existence and purpose. The integrity of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh remains ever secure.

21 Every generation of Bahá'ís, however great their spiritual perception, will inevitably have a circumscribed comprehension of the full implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, owing to the limitations of their own historical circumstances and the particular stage of the Faith's organic development. In the Heroic Age of the Faith, for example, the believers had to navigate what they surely experienced at times as a bewildering and revolutionary series of transitions from the Dispensation of the Báb to that of Bahá'u'lláh, and then to the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá— all of which, with hindsight and the illumination provided by Shoghi Effendi, are now easily comprehended as sequential acts in a single, divinely unfolding drama. So too, today, after the tireless labours of the community over a full century, the first of the Formative Age, it is possible to grasp more completely the significance, purpose, and inviolability of the Covenant—that priceless bequest of Bahá'u'lláh to His followers. The hard-won understanding of the nature of the Covenant and the firmness that such insight engenders and sustains will continue to be essential for unity and progress over the course of the Dispensation.

22 It is now evident and firmly established that Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant provides for two authoritative centres. The first is the Book: the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, along with the body of works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that constitute authoritative interpretation and explication of the Creative Word. With the passing of Shoghi Effendi, more than a century of the extension of that authoritative centre came to a close. Yet the existence of the Book ensures that the Revelation is available to every believer, indeed to all humanity, unadulterated by human misinterpretations or accretions.

The second authoritative centre is the Universal House of Justice, which, as the Sacred Writings affirm, is under the care and unerring guidance of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. “Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains. “God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty”. “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth,” Bahá'u'lláh proclaims. “They, and not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them,” Shoghi Effendi states, “have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.” 23

The powers and duties with which the House of Justice has been invested encompass all that is necessary to ensure the fulfilment of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity. For more than a half century, the Bahá'í world has witnessed first-hand their range and expression, including the promulgation of the Law of God, the conservation and dissemination of the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, the raising of the Administrative Order and the creation of new institutions, the design of successive stages in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, and the protection of the Faith and safeguarding of its unity, as well as efforts conducive to the preservation of human honour, the progress of the world, and the illumination of its peoples. The elucidations of the House of Justice resolve all difficult problems, questions that are obscure, problems that have caused difference, and matters not expressly recorded in the Book. The House of Justice will provide guidance throughout the Dispensation according to the exigencies of the time, thus ensuring that the Cause, even as a living organism, is able to adapt to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society. And it guarantees that no one can alter the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's message or change the essential characteristics of the Cause. 24

25 In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh asks, "What 'oppression' is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" A world largely oblivious to the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation finds itself increasingly divided and disoriented on matters of truth, morality, identity, and purpose, and bewildered by the accelerating and corrosive effect of the forces of disintegration. For the Bahá'í community, however, the Covenant offers a source of clarity and refuge, of freedom and strength. Every believer is free to explore the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, to come to personal conclusions, to humbly share insights with others, and to strive to apply the Teachings day by day. Collective endeavour is harmonized and focused through consultation and the guidance of the institutions, transforming bonds between individuals, within families, and among communities, and fostering social progress.

26 Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and reassured by His explicit instructions, individuals, communities, and institutions find in the two authoritative centres of the Covenant the necessary guidance for the unfoldment of the Faith and the preservation of the integrity of the Teachings. In this way, the Covenant protects and preserves the process of dialogue and learning about the meaning of the Revelation and the implementation of its prescriptions for humankind over the course of the Dispensation, avoiding the detrimental effects of endless contention about meaning and practice. As a result, the balanced relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions are safeguarded and develop along their proper path, while all are enabled to attain to their full potential and exercise their agency and prerogatives. Thus, the Bahá'í community can unitedly advance and increasingly fulfil its vital purpose by investigating reality and generating knowledge, extending the reach of its endeavours, and contributing to the advancement of civilization. After more than a century, the truth of 'Abdu'l- Bahá's affirmation is ever more evident: "the

axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else”.

The unfoldment of the Administrative Order

Beyond its perpetuation of the Covenant, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament laid the foundation for another of the most significant achievements of the first century of the Formative Age: the emergence and development of the Administrative Order, the child of the Covenant. In a single century, the administration, which began with a focus on the establishment of elected institutions, grew in breadth and complexity, unfolding throughout the world until it linked all peoples, countries, and regions. The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that called these institutions into being also provide the vision and spiritual mandate for these institutions to assist humanity in constructing a just and peaceful world. 27

Through the Administrative Order of His Faith, Bahá’u’lláh has associated individuals, communities, and institutions as protagonists in a system without precedent. In keeping with the needs of an age of human maturity, He abrogated the historical practice whereby ecclesiastics held the reins of religious authority, instructing the community of the faithful and directing its affairs. In order to prevent the contest of competing ideologies, He set out the means for cooperation in the search for truth and the pursuit of human well-being. In place of the quest for power over others, He introduced arrangements that would cultivate the individual’s latent powers and their expression in service to the common good. Trustworthiness, truthfulness, rectitude of conduct, forbearance, love, and unity are among the spiritual qualities that form the basis of association between the three protagonists of a new way of life, while efforts for social advancement are all shaped by Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of the oneness of humanity. 28

29 At the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, the institutions of the Faith consisted of a small number of local Assemblies functioning in disparate ways. Only a handful of agencies operated beyond a local level, and there were no National Spiritual Assemblies. Bahá’u’lláh had appointed four Hands of the Cause in Iran, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed their activities for the progress and protection of the Faith, but He did not add to their number beyond four posthumous appointments. Thus, up to that point, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, abundant in spirit and potential, had yet to form the administrative machinery that would enable it to systematize its efforts.

30 In the first months of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi considered establishing the House of Justice immediately. Yet, after reviewing the state of the Faith worldwide, he quickly concluded that the conditions required for the formation of the House of Justice were not yet in place. Instead, he encouraged the Bahá’ís everywhere to concentrate their energies on raising Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. “The National Spiritual Assemblies, like unto pillars, will be gradually and firmly established in every country on the strong and fortified foundations of the Local Assemblies”, he stated. “On these pillars, the mighty edifice, the Universal House of Justice, will be erected, raising high its noble frame above the world of existence.”

31 In helping the friends to understand their work to lay the foundations of their community, Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the Administrative Order was not an end in itself, but an instrument to canalize the spirit of the Faith. He highlighted its organic character, explaining that Bahá’í administration “is only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living” and that “the believers are only just beginning to grasp and practice it properly”. He also explained that the Administrative Order was the “nucleus and pattern” of what would eventually become a new order for organizing the affairs of humanity envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. And thus, as the friends began to raise the administration, they

could appreciate that the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions being established would evolve in complexity, resulting in a growth in capacity over time as the Faith expanded and generated a new pattern of life that could engage ever more broadly the peoples of the world.

Through a steady exchange of correspondence, Shoghi Effendi guided the friends step by step in their efforts to learn to apply the teachings pertaining to the administration, and to deepen their understanding of its purpose, its necessity, its methods, its form, its principles, its flexibility, and the manner of its operation, while confirming for them the explicit basis for such matters in the Bahá'í Writings. He assisted them in developing the process of Bahá'í elections, establishing and administering the Bahá'í Fund, arranging the National Convention, building the relationship between the National and Local Assemblies, and a host of other matters. He dispelled the doubts and hesitancy of those who struggled to appreciate the essential continuity between the culture and practices of Bahá'í life during the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the steps that he, as Guardian, was taking to lay the administrative foundations for the next stage of the Faith's development. As the believers managed their administrative affairs, he patiently answered their questions, resolved problems, and fostered the collective life of the Bahá'í world community. Gradually the friends learned to work in harmony, to uphold the decisions of their institutions and support their progress, and to appreciate that both understanding and capacity for action would increase over time. Local Assemblies began to operate according to consistent procedures for elections, consultation, financial affairs, and the conduct of community life. National Assemblies were initially formed in the British Isles, Germany and Austria, India and Burma, Egypt and the Sudan, the Caucasus, Turkistán, and the United States and Canada. In keeping with the organic nature of the Administrative Order, National Assemblies were often established first at a regional level, encompassing more than one country, and only later at the level of a nation or territory as the number of believers

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and Local Assemblies multiplied. In their wake, a host of different committees were constituted, appointed at both the local and national levels, to advance collective efforts across a range of areas including teaching, translation, publishing, education, pioneering, and organizing Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days.

- 33 After three decades devoted to constructing the administration at the local and national levels, in the final years of his life Shoghi Effendi inaugurated a new stage in the development of the Administrative Order by bringing into being institutions at the international and continental levels. It began with the “long anticipated rise and establishment of the World Administrative Centre of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh in Holy Land”. In 1951, he proclaimed the formation of the International Bahá’í Council. This new institution, he explained, would evolve through various stages preparatory to its transformation and efflorescence into the Universal House of Justice.

- 34 This dramatic development was soon followed, at the end of the same year, by Shoghi Effendi’s appointment of twelve Hands of the Cause of God, equally represented on three continents and in the Holy Land—the first contingent of Hands of the Cause to be raised up in conformity with the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament. These distinguished individuals were appointed to advance the work of the propagation and protection of the Faith. The existence of an institution that plays such a vital role in furthering the interests of the Cause, but which has no legislative, executive, or judicial authority and is entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá’í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past. After many years of nurturing the system of elected Assemblies and their associated agencies, Shoghi Effendi began to shape this appointed institution, and to guide the friends to understand, welcome, and support its unique functions. The appointment, in 1952, of a second contingent of Hands raised their number

to nineteen. The Auxiliary Boards, whose members served as deputies to the Hands in each continent, were established in 1954. Even up to the final days of his life, the Guardian continued to expand this institution, appointing a final contingent of Hands to raise their number to twenty-seven, and establishing an Auxiliary Board for Protection to complement the Board for Propagation.

In reflecting upon their efforts to build up the nascent form of the administration, Shoghi Effendi had explained to the believers that much of what was instituted under his guidance was temporary and that it was the function of the Universal House of Justice “to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration” of the Faith. On another occasion he wrote that “when this Supreme Body will have been properly established, it will have to consider afresh the whole situation, and lay down the principle which shall direct, so long as it deems advisable, the affairs of the Cause”. 35

Following the unexpected passing of Shoghi Effendi in November 1957, responsibility for the affairs of the Cause fell for a brief time to the Hands of the Cause of God. Only a month earlier they had been designated by the Guardian as “the Chief Stewards of Bahá’u’lláh’s embryonic World Commonwealth, who have been invested by the unerring Pen of the Centre of His Covenant with the dual function of guarding over the security, and of ensuring the propagation, of His Father’s Faith”. The Hands faithfully and uncompromisingly adhered to the course laid out by the Guardian. Under their stewardship, the number of National Assemblies was raised from twenty-six to fifty-six, and by 1961 the steps he had described for the transition of the International Bahá’í Council from an appointed to an elected body had been implemented, setting the stage for the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. 36

The organic unfoldment of the administration, so carefully nurtured by the Guardian, was systematically cultivated and further extended under the direction of the House of Justice. The subsequent span of more than half a century witnessed a host of achievements. Among the most prominent of these, the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice, hailed by the Guardian as the “Most Great Law”, was adopted in 1972. Following consultation with the Hands of the Cause, the functions of that institution were extended into the future through the creation of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in 1968 and the International Teaching Centre in 1973. In addition, for the first time, Auxiliary Board members were authorized to appoint assistants to broaden the reach of their ministrations for propagation and protection at the grassroots. The number of National and Local Assemblies multiplied, and their capabilities developed to serve the Bahá’í community and extend their influence through engagement with the wider society. Regional Bahá’í Councils were introduced in 1997 to help address the growing complexity of the issues facing National Spiritual Assemblies while maintaining the balance between centralization and decentralization in a community’s administrative affairs. The system of teaching committees established in the time of the Guardian gradually gave way to structures that could take responsibility for planning and decision making at more decentralized levels, penetrating as far as neighbourhoods and villages. More than three hundred training institutes, over two hundred Regional Councils, and administrative arrangements in more than five thousand clusters were established. At Ridván 1992 the law of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* was applied universally across the Bahá’í world and its institutional structure subsequently consolidated through the establishment of a network of Boards of Trustees and Representatives at the regional and national levels, as well as, in 2005, through the appointment of an International Board of Trustees. Following the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the construction of Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs in Uganda, Australia, Germany, and Panama was completed, and others were eventually raised in Samoa, India, and Chile; in 2012, the

process of establishing Houses of Worship was extended to the national and local levels.

Over the century, then, through a series of developmental stages, the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions have progressively evolved into ever more complex forms, and the foundations of the administration have been extended, its methods continually adapted, and arrangements for collaboration clarified and continually refined. What began at the start of the first century of the Formative Age as a network of elected bodies had become, by the end of that century, a vast constellation of institutions and agencies stretching from the grassroots to the international level, uniting the Bahá'í world in thought and action within a common enterprise across a diversity of cultural contexts and social settings.

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Today, although the administration has not yet reached its full maturity, the system inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh evinces a new pattern of interactions and a marked dynamism in the relationships among the three protagonists as they engage in the common purpose of working for the organic development of the Faith and the betterment of the world. In the company of like-minded co-workers and in the various settings of study, of reflection, and of numerous other social interactions, individuals express their views and seek out the truth through a process of consultation, without insisting upon the correctness of their own ideas. Together, they read the reality of their surroundings, explore the depths of available guidance, draw relevant insights from the Teachings and from accumulating experience, create cooperative and spiritually uplifting environments, build capacity, and initiate action that grows in effectiveness and complexity over time. They attempt to differentiate those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative from those which fall to the institutions alone, and with heart and soul they welcome the guidance and direction of their institutions. Across advanced clusters and within villages and neighbourhoods that are centres of

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intense activity, a community emerges with a sense of common identity, will, and purpose, providing an environment for nurturing the capacity of individuals and uniting them in a range of complementary and mutually reinforcing activities that welcome all and seek to uplift everyone. Such communities are increasingly becoming distinguished by the sense of unity among their members, their freedom from prejudices of all kinds, their devotional character, their commitment to the equality of women and men, their selfless service to humanity, their educational processes and cultivation of virtue, and their capacity to systematically learn and contribute to the material, social, and spiritual progress of society. Those community members called upon to serve on institutions endeavour to be conscious of their duty to set aside their own likes and dislikes, to never consider themselves to be the central ornaments of the Cause or superior to others, and to eschew any attempt to exercise control over the thoughts and actions of the believers. In carrying out their responsibilities, the institutions facilitate creative and collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community and strive to build consensus, to overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience the most efficacious ways to pursue the community's aims and purposes. Through various means, including the establishment of educational agencies, they help foster the spiritual and intellectual development of the believers.

- 40 As a result of these new relationships and capacities of the three protagonists, the circle of those with the ability to think and act strategically has widened, while assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance are extended wherever needed. Experience and insight are shared throughout the world, from the grassroots to the international level. The pattern of life created by this dynamic engagement encompasses millions of souls from all walks of life, animated by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a united world. In country after country, it has drawn the attention of parents, educators, traditional leaders, officials, and leaders of thought to the power of His

system to address the world's pressing needs. Naturally, not every community exhibits the characteristics of the most advanced; indeed, in Bahá'í history this has ever been so. Nevertheless, the appearance of new capacities in any one place signals an evident advance and serves as an augury that others will surely follow in that path.

In the epochs and centuries ahead, the Administrative Order will continue its organic evolution in response to the growth of the Faith and the exigencies of a changing society. Shoghi Effendi anticipated that as "its component parts, its organic institutions, begin to function with efficiency and vigour," the Administrative Order will "assert its claim and demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind". Thus, as Bahá'u'lláh's system crystallizes, it will present humanity with new and more productive ways of organizing its affairs. In the course of this organic evolution, relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions will inevitably unfold in new directions and sometimes unexpected ways. Yet, the unfailing divine protection that encompasses the House of Justice will ensure that, as the Bahá'í world navigates the turmoil of a most perilous period in humanity's social evolution, it will follow undeviatingly the course set by Providence.

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The worldwide spread and development of the Faith

From its inception, the community raised by Bahá'u'lláh, though small in numbers and geographically circumscribed, was galvanized by His lofty teachings and arose to share them liberally with all those seeking a spiritual path to personal and social transformation. In time, the friends learned to work closely with like-minded people and organizations to uplift the human spirit and contribute to the betterment of families, communities, and society as a whole. Receptivity to Bahá'u'lláh's message was found in every land, and through

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devoted and sacrificial efforts over many generations, Bahá'í communities emerged around the globe, in far-flung cities and villages, to encompass the diversity of the human race.

43 During the Dispensation of the Báb, the Faith was established in two countries. In the time of Bahá'u'lláh it extended to a total of fifteen, and by the close of the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá it had reached some thirty-five countries. During the tumultuous years of world war, 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed one of His priceless legacies, the Tablets of the Divine Plan, His grand design for the spiritual illumination of the planet through the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This precious Charter raised a call for collective and methodical endeavour; yet by the time of the Master's passing, it had scarcely penetrated the thought and action of the community, and only a few extraordinary heroes of the Faith, foremost among them Martha Root, had arisen in response.

44 For twenty years after the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, its execution was held in abeyance until such time as the friends, guided by Shoghi Effendi, were able to create the administrative machinery of the Faith and foster its proper functioning. Only when the initial administrative structure was firmly in place could the Guardian begin to articulate a vision of the unfoldment of the Faith based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan. Just as the administration evolved through distinct stages of increasing complexity, so too did the effort to share and apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings evolve organically, giving rise to new patterns of community life that could embrace ever-larger numbers, enable the friends to take on greater challenges, and contribute to an increased measure of personal and social transformation.

45 To begin this systematic endeavour, Shoghi Effendi called upon the communities in the United States and Canada—the chosen recipients of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, whom he had designated, respectively, as its chief executors and their allies—to devise a “systematic, carefully conceived, and

well-established plan” which was to be “vigorously pursued and continuously extended”. This call resulted in the launching of the first Seven Year Plan in 1937, which carried the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh to Latin America, followed by the second Seven Year Plan, beginning in 1946, which emphasized the development of the Faith in Europe. Shoghi Effendi similarly encouraged the teaching work in other national communities, which subsequently adopted national plans under his watchful eye. The National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma adopted its first plan in 1938; the British Isles in 1944; Persia in 1946; Australia and New Zealand in 1947; Iraq in 1947; Canada, Egypt and Sudan, and Germany and Austria in 1948; and Central America in 1952. Each of these plans followed the same basic pattern: teaching individuals, establishing a Local Assembly and raising a community, and opening additional localities on the home front or in another land—and then repeating the pattern once more. When a sound foundation was built in a country or territory, a new National Assembly could be raised.

During these years, Shoghi Effendi constantly encouraged the friends to carry out their responsibility to teach the Faith within the context of the plans adopted by their National Assemblies. Over time, methods such as pioneering, travelling teaching, fireside gatherings, summer schools, and participation in the activities of like-minded organizations proved to be effective in certain places, and he urged the friends in other parts of the world to adopt them. Expansion efforts were matched by an emphasis on the internal development necessary to consolidate the identity and character of the Bahá’í Faith as a distinct religious community. This transformative process was carefully cultivated by the Guardian, who expounded for the believers the history of their Faith, facilitated the use of the Bahá’í calendar, emphasized regular participation in Feasts and the commemoration of Holy Days, and patiently guided them to embrace the obligation of obedience to Bahá’í laws, such as the provisions of Bahá’í marriage.

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Gradually, the Faith emerged as a world religion, taking its place among its sister religions.

47 Along with the inauguration of international institutions, the collective endeavours of the Faith in the teaching field moved into the arena of international cooperation. In 1951, five national communities collaborated in the execution of the “highly promising” and “profoundly significant” African Campaign to extend the spread of the Faith across that continent. And in 1953, the Ten Year Crusade was initiated, uniting the efforts of all twelve existing National Assemblies in one common global Plan—the first of its kind. In this crowning stage of the ministry of the Guardian, the network of administrative bodies the friends had raised and the proven teaching methods they had developed were employed in a collective spiritual enterprise the like of which the Bahá’í community had never before witnessed.

48 As the believers travelled far and wide to share their precious Faith, they found among divers peoples a great receptivity to its principles and teachings. These populations discovered within the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh a deeper meaning and purpose for their lives, as well as fresh insights that would enable their communities to overcome challenges and advance spiritually, socially, and materially. A divine light, initially disseminated gradually from individual to individual, thus began to be diffused rapidly among the masses of humanity. The harbinger of the phenomenon of entry by troops foretold by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became evident in the enrolment of hundreds of believers in Uganda, the Gambia, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, and later, in Indonesia and Cameroon. Before that Plan drew to a close, the process had begun in a number of other countries, with those individuals embracing the Faith reaching into the tens of thousands or even more.

49 After the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Hands of the Cause ensured the successful completion of the Ten Year Crusade by following undeviatingly the path he had outlined. By applying

the lessons learned under the guidance of the Guardian, more was accomplished in the teaching field over a single decade than in the previous century. The Faith spread to 131 new countries and territories, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided surpassed eleven thousand, with a total of fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies and more than 3,500 Local Assemblies. The enterprise culminated in the election of the Universal House of Justice by the members of those National Assemblies, according to the provisions set down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

After its establishment, the House of Justice continued the systematic prosecution of the Divine Plan, inaugurating its second epoch by gradually broadening and augmenting the range of activities cultivated by the Guardian, adding to or extending various aspects of the work, and coordinating and unifying the activities of all the National Assemblies. Among the areas of emphasis that emerged or received increased attention were the universal participation of individuals in service to the Cause and the deepening of individuals' understanding of the laws and teachings. In addition, the process of strengthening the institutions emphasized collaboration between the newly constituted Boards of Counsellors and the National Assemblies, as well as between the Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies. Community life was enhanced through a focus on children's classes, the introduction of activities for youth and women, and the regular holding of Assembly meetings. Other initiatives included the extensive proclamation of the Faith and its promotion through the media; the development of centres of learning, including summer schools and teaching institutes; greater involvement in the life of society; and the fostering of Bahá'í scholarship.

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As a result of all these efforts, by the 1990s the Faith had spread to tens of thousands of localities and the number of National Assemblies more than tripled to some 180. During this time, the development of national communities followed two broad patterns which were largely contingent upon the

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response of the wider population. In the first, local communities tended to be small in size, and only some grew to number a hundred believers or more. These communities were often characterized by a strong process of consolidation that allowed for a broad range of activities and the emergence of a strong sense of Bahá'í identity. Yet, it increasingly became evident that, though united in shared beliefs, characterized by high ideals, and proficient in managing its affairs and tending to its needs, such a small community— however much it prospered or attempted to serve others through its humanitarian efforts—could never hope to serve as a model for restructuring the whole of society.

52 The second pattern took shape in those countries where the process of entry by troops began, resulting in an exponential increase in membership, new localities, and new institutions. In several countries the Bahá'í community grew to comprise more than one hundred thousand believers, while India reached some two million. Indeed, in a single two-year period in the late 1980s, more than one million souls embraced the Faith worldwide. Yet, in such places, despite the creative and sacrificial efforts that were made, the process of consolidation could not keep pace with expansion. Many became Bahá'ís, but the means did not exist for all these new believers to become sufficiently deepened in the fundamental verities of the Faith and for vibrant communities to develop. Classes for Bahá'í education could not be established in numbers large enough to serve an ever-increasing number of children and youth. Over thirty thousand Local Assemblies were formed, but only a fraction of them began to function. From this experience, it became apparent that occasional educational courses and informal community activities, though important, were not sufficient, for they resulted in raising up only a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause who, no matter how dedicated, could not provide for the needs of thousands upon thousands of new believers.

By 1996, the Bahá'í world had reached the point where the many areas of activity that had previously contributed to so much progress over so many years needed reassessment and reorientation. Individuals, communities, and institutions needed to learn not only how to initiate a mode of action that could reach large numbers, but also how to rapidly increase the number of individuals who could engage in acts of service so that consolidation could keep pace with accelerating expansion. The effort to introduce the Faith to the many populations of the world had to become more systematic. The call in the Four Year Plan for a "significant advance in the process of entry by troops" was intended to acknowledge that the circumstances of the Faith, as well as the conditions of humanity, allowed for, and even required, sustained growth of the Bahá'í world community on a large scale. Only then could the power of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to transform the character of humankind be increasingly realized.

At the outset of the Four Year Plan, the friends in each region were encouraged to identify the approaches and methods that applied to their specific conditions and to set in motion a systematic process of community development in which they would review their successes and difficulties, adjust and improve their methods accordingly, learn, and move forward without hesitation. When the course of action was unclear, a range of approaches to the specific challenges identified by the Plan could be tested in different places; when an initiative in a particular area proved, through experience, to be effective, its features could be shared with institutions at the national or international level and then be disseminated to other places and even become a component of future Plans.

Over a quarter century this process of learning about growth gave rise to a range of concepts, instruments, and approaches which continually enhanced the community's evolving framework for action. Among the most prominent of these features was the creation of a network of training institutes—offering educational programmes for children,

junior youth, and youth and adults—for empowering the friends in large numbers and enabling them to enhance their capabilities for service. Another was the construct of clusters, which facilitated the systematization of the teaching work in manageable geographic areas through the initiation and gradual strengthening of programmes of growth, and accelerated the spread and development of the Faith within each country and across the world. Within such programmes of growth, a new pattern of community life emerged, beginning with the multiplication of four core activities that served as portals for the entry of large numbers, combined with a range of other efforts, including individual and collective teaching, visiting homes, hosting social gatherings, observing Feast and Holy Days, administering community affairs, and promoting activities for social and economic development—all of which together would effect a change in the spiritual character of the community and strengthen social ties among individuals and families.

- 56 In looking back over a century of efforts to execute the provisions of the Divine Plan, it becomes apparent that the Bahá'í world has experienced a significant advance at the level of culture. Ever greater numbers have become engaged in a process of consciously learning to apply the Teachings pertaining to growth and development within a framework for action that evolves through the experience of the friends and the guidance of the House of Justice. The rise in capacity for engaging in this process of learning is evident in characteristics that are increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í community: maintaining a humble posture of learning, whether celebrating successes or persevering in the face of obstacles and setbacks; strengthening Bahá'í identity while preserving an orientation welcoming to all; and acting in ever-wider spheres of endeavour while continuing to foster an approach to the work of the Cause that is systematic and coherent. In thousands of clusters, growing numbers of people have come to view themselves as protagonists in the acquisition, generation, and application of knowledge for their own development and progress. They are

engaging in discussions as families, friends, and acquaintances on elevated spiritual themes and matters of social import; initiating activities that shape a pattern of life distinguished by its devotional character; providing education for young people and increasing their capacity for service; and contributing to the material and social progress of their communities. They are empowered to contribute to the betterment of their local community and to the world as a whole. As they think and act in this way, they have gained a deeper appreciation of the purpose of religion itself.

Involvement in the life of society

Yet another dimension of the unfoldment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan is a greater involvement of the Bahá’í community in the life of society. From the inception of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi drew the attention of the friends again and again to the power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation to effect an organic change in society—a process which would ultimately result in the emergence of a spiritual civilization. Bahá’ís, therefore, had to learn to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings not only for personal spiritual transformation but also for material and social change, beginning within their own communities and then gradually extending their efforts to embrace the wider society.

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During the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, some Bahá’í communities in Iran, along with a few others in nearby countries, had reached a size and attained conditions that enabled them to pursue systematic endeavours for social and economic development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá worked tirelessly with the friends to guide and foster their progress. For example, He encouraged the believers in Iran to establish schools open to girls as well as boys, from all sectors of society, that would offer training in good character as well as in the arts and sciences. He dispatched believers from the West to assist with this development work. To the Bahá’í villages of nearby ‘Adasiyyih and far-off Daidanaw He offered guidance for both the spiritual

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and material flourishing of these communities. He directed that dependencies be created for education and other social services around the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád. At His encouragement, schools were founded in Egypt and the Caucasus. After His passing, Shoghi Effendi provided guidance to expand these efforts. Activities promoting health, literacy, and the education of women and girls spread throughout the Iranian community. Spurred by the initial impulse that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had provided, schools continued to be opened in cities and villages across that country. These schools flourished for a time, contributing to the modernization of that nation, until 1934 when they were compelled to close by the government.

59 Elsewhere, however, Shoghi Effendi advised the friends to concentrate their limited human and financial resources on teaching and on raising the Administrative Order. A letter written on his behalf explained that “our contributions to the Faith are the surest way of lifting once and for all time the burden of hunger and misery from mankind, for it is only through the system of Bahá'u'lláh—Divine in origin—that the world can be gotten on its feet”. Others “cannot contribute to our work or do it for us”, the letter continued, “so really our first obligation is to support our own teaching work, as this will lead to the healing of the nations”. While individuals found personal avenues in which they could contribute to material and social development, generally the Bahá'ís focused their resources on growth and on building their community. In the early years following the election of the House of Justice, guidance continued for a time in this same vein. Thus, although the concept of social and economic development is enshrined in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, owing to the circumstances of the Faith throughout the Guardian's ministry and the years that followed, it was impracticable for most of the Bahá'í world to undertake development activities.

60 In 1983, after decades of unrelenting effort in the teaching field and as a consequence of significant growth in many countries across the world, the community of the Greatest

Name had attained the stage at which the work of social and economic development could be—indeed, had to be—incorporated into its regular pursuits. The friends were urged to strive, through their application of spiritual principles, rectitude of conduct, and practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus take responsibility as agents of their own development. The Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the World Centre to assist the House of Justice to promote and coordinate the activities of the friends in this arena throughout the world, and over time it evolved to facilitate a global process of learning about development. Individual believers arose to initiate various activities embracing not only Bahá'ís but also the wider community.

Within a decade, hundreds of development activities had been initiated around the world, addressing a range of concerns such as the advancement of women, education, health, mass communication, agriculture, economic activity, and the environment. Activity ranged along a spectrum of complexity. Fairly simple activities of short duration in villages and towns were organized in response to specific problems and challenges faced in those localities. Sustained projects, such as schools and clinics, were established to meet social needs over an extended period of time, often along with organizational structures to ensure their viability and effectiveness. And finally, by 1996, a few Bahá'í-inspired organizations with relatively complex programmatic structures were founded by individuals to learn to systematically pursue a coherent approach to development, within a population, that would result in a significant impact in a region. In all these efforts, the friends sought to apply spiritual principles to practical problems.

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As Bahá'í-inspired agencies as well as agencies directly under the authority of Bahá'í institutions began to appear in one country after another, the impact of their efforts within the community and the wider society became increasingly evident, manifesting a dynamic coherence between the

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material and spiritual dimensions of life. Advances occurred not only in action, but also at the level of thought. The friends came to understand a set of fundamental concepts: The world is not divided into categories of developed and underdeveloped—all are in need of transformation and an environment that provides the spiritual, social, and material conditions necessary to their security and flourishing. Development is not a process carried out by one people on behalf of another; rather, people themselves, wherever they reside, are the protagonists of their own development. Access to knowledge and participation in its generation, application, and diffusion is at the heart of the endeavour. Efforts start small and grow in complexity as experience accumulates. Programmes whose effectiveness has been demonstrated in one region can be systematically introduced into others. As these principles and concepts are applied within a particular setting, the friends become increasingly adept at analysing their social conditions, drawing insights from the Writings and from various relevant fields of knowledge, and initiating activities that are fully integrated with the work of community building.

- 63 By 2018, the extensive spread and increasing complexity of Bahá'í development efforts around the world had prompted the establishment of a new institution in the Holy Land—the Bahá'í International Development Organization. This global institution assumed, and further extends, the functions and mandate previously carried out by the Office of Social and Economic Development, reinforcing the efforts for social action of individuals, communities, institutions, and agencies everywhere. Like the Office that preceded it, its primary purpose is to facilitate the global process of learning about development that is unfolding in the Bahá'í world, by fostering and supporting action and reflection, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the teachings of the Faith. Ultimately, it seeks to foster a distinctly Bahá'í approach to development.

Parallel with the systematic unfoldment of the processes of expansion and consolidation and of social and economic development, another major area of action emerged: greater participation in the prevalent discourses of society. In an increasing number of social settings where deliberations on human problems occur, Bahá'ís seek to share relevant insights drawn from the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It was Bahá'u'lláh Himself Who initially proclaimed His healing remedy directly to the world's leaders and appealed for its adoption by all humanity. Notwithstanding the failure of the kings and rulers to respond affirmatively to the divine nature of His claim, He called upon them to apply His principles for the establishment of world peace: "Now that ye have refused the Most Great Peace, hold ye fast unto this, the Lesser Peace, that haply ye may in some degree better your own condition and that of your dependents." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Writings such as the Tablets to The Hague, and especially in talks delivered during His travels to the West, unceasingly proclaimed His Father's teachings to the powerful and the masses grappling with the myriad difficulties facing humanity.

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Early in his ministry, Shoghi Effendi, cognizant of the vital importance of making known to the peoples and leaders of the world the insights and wisdom enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings, fostered initiatives for this purpose. These included, among others, the opening in 1925 of a Bahá'í information bureau in Geneva, the publication of the volumes of *The Bahá'í World*, and the call for knowledgeable Bahá'ís to correlate the Teachings with contemporary thought in relation to the manifold pressing problems of the world. After the founding of the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community was established in 1948 as a non- governmental organization representing Bahá'í communities throughout the world and became increasingly engaged in aspects of the work of that international body. This opened a new chapter in the Faith's continuing relationship with governments, global institutions, and agencies of civil society in the international sphere. While never allowing this area of endeavour to

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overshadow the primary importance of the teaching work, the Guardian encouraged the friends to acquaint the wider society with the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. "Collateral to this process of reinforcing the fabric of the Administrative Order and of widening its basis," he wrote to one national community, "a resolute attempt should be made" for the establishment of closer contact with, among others, "the leaders of public thought". Stressing association rather than affiliation, and urging the believers to remain untainted by any participation in political affairs, he encouraged them to engage with kindred organizations concerned with social issues and to acquaint them with the aims and purposes of the Faith and the nature of its teachings on such matters as the establishment of world peace.

- 66 After the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, this process of participation in the discourses of society was further extended. At timely moments, the House of Justice itself arranged for widespread dissemination of the principles of the Faith, as in its message addressed to the peoples of the world, "The Promise of World Peace". The Bahá'í International Community strengthened its position at the United Nations, ultimately securing a more formal association with various UN agencies in the 1970s. It published statements on world affairs and created a unique space for engagement with governments as well as non-governmental organizations. Recognized by those with whom it associated as harbouring no self-interested agenda but working for the well-being of all peoples, it played a constructive role in various international symposia, including the Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, and the Millennium Forum in New York. Following the Iranian Revolution and the renewal of persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, several national communities were impelled to enter into closer dialogue with various national and international institutions and agencies. They consequently established national offices of external

affairs to reinforce efforts at the international level to defend the Faith.

As the twenty-first century began, the organic progress of the Cause had created conditions for a more systematic engagement in the discourses of society. International and national Bahá'í websites dramatically extended the presentation of the Teachings spanning a range of topics. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity was established to conduct research into the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for pressing social issues; in time it also initiated a series of seminars to promote understanding and develop capacity among Bahá'í university students. The work of the Bahá'í International Community, initially centred in New York and Geneva, was extended to regional centres in Addis Ababa, Brussels, and Jakarta. At the national level, offices of external affairs increasingly learned how to participate in specific national discourses in a systematic manner on behalf of their respective communities. Among the topics addressed intensively across various nations were the advancement of women, the role of religion in society, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, the promotion of justice, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Today, a global process of learning from the experience of contributing to these national discourses is facilitated by the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre. And at the grassroots in neighbourhoods and villages, and in their professions and other social spaces in which they participate as individuals, the friends are learning to offer concepts from the Bahá'í Writings as a contribution to the evolution of thought and action among their compatriots that is necessary to bring about constructive change.

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Involvement at all these levels of society becomes more pressing as the process of the disintegration of the old world order intensifies and discourse becomes increasingly coarsened and polarized, leading to the recrudescence of conflict among the competing factions and ideologies that divide humanity. In keeping with their understanding that

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the transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh calls for the participation of everyone, Bahá'ís seek to work with the many sympathetic individuals and organizations who pursue common objectives. In such collaborative efforts, the friends share insights from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as practical lessons gained in their own community-building efforts, while at the same time learning from the experience of their collaborating partners. In working with individuals, communities, and organizations both civic and governmental, the friends maintain awareness that the discourse on many social issues may become contentious or entangled with political ambitions. In all settings where Bahá'ís become more deeply engaged with the wider society, they seek to foster consensus and unity of thought, and to promote collaboration and a common search for solutions to humanity's pressing problems. To them, the means by which the end is attained is as important as the end itself.

- 69 As the process of becoming ever more involved in the life of the wider society took root in Bahá'í communities worldwide, it initially unfolded side by side with the teaching work and the development of the administration. In recent decades, however, the efforts for social action and involvement in the discourses of society have achieved marked coherence with those related to expansion and consolidation as the friends have increasingly applied the elements of the conceptual framework for action of the global Plans. As the friends labour in their clusters, they are inexorably drawn into the life of the society around them, and the learning process that propels efforts for growth and community building is extended to an expanding range of activities. Community life is increasingly characterized by its contribution to material, social, and spiritual progress as the friends cultivate their capability to understand the conditions of society around them, create spaces in which to explore concepts from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and from relevant fields of human knowledge, bring insights to bear upon practical problems, and build capacity among the believers and within the wider community. As a

result of this burgeoning coherence across the various areas of endeavour, the most basic grassroots activities for social and economic development grew from a few hundred in 1990 to several thousand by 2000, and to tens of thousands by 2021. Bahá'í engagement in social discourse has been met with a resoundingly affirmative response in countless settings, from neighbourhoods to nations, as a humanity baffled and divided by the manifold problems resulting from the operation of the forces of disintegration eagerly seeks new insights. At all levels of society, leaders of thought increasingly associate the Bahá'í community with fresh conceptions and approaches sorely needed by an ever more disunited and dysfunctional world. The society-building power of the Faith, mostly latent at the start of the first century of the Formative Age, is now increasingly discernible in country after country. The release of this society-building power resulting from a new consciousness and a new capacity for learning among individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide is destined to be the hallmark of the current and next several stages in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

The development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Parallel with the growth of the Faith and the unfoldment of the administration, equally significant developments occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during the first century of the Formative Age, set in motion by the impulse of another Charter, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Carmel. Mention has already been made of the interplay among the processes associated with the three Charters, including the emergence of institutions and agencies of the administrative centre of the Bahá'í world. To this account can now be added some reflections on the development of its spiritual centre. 70

When Bahá'u'lláh's footsteps touched the shore of 'Akká, the climactic chapter of His ministry began. The Lord of Hosts was manifested in the Holy Land. His arrival had been 71

presaged through the tongues of the Prophets thousands of years before. The fulfilment of that prophecy, however, was not the result of His own volition but was compelled by His persecution at the hands of His avowed enemies, culminating in His exile. “Upon Our arrival,” He stated in one Tablet, “We were welcomed with banners of light, whereupon the Voice of the Spirit cried out saying: ‘Soon will all that dwell on earth be enlisted under these banners.’” The spiritual potency of that land was immeasurably enhanced by His presence and the interment of His sacred remains and, soon after, those of His Herald, Himself a Manifestation of God. It is now the point to which every Bahá’í heart is drawn, the focal centre of their devotions, the goal of every aspiring pilgrim. The Bahá’í Holy Places welcome the peoples of the Holy Land, and indeed the peoples of every land. They are a precious trust held for all humanity.

- 72 Yet, tenuous was the hold of the Bahá’ís on the spiritual centre of their Faith at the close of the Heroic Age and for many years thereafter. How difficult it was, at times, for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá even to offer prayers at His Father’s resting place. How dire was His situation, being falsely charged with sedition for raising the structure in which, at the command of Bahá’u’lláh, the earthly remains of the Báb were laid to rest after the long journey from the place of His martyrdom. The perilous and insecure condition of the World Centre persisted into the ministry of the Guardian, as evinced when the keys of the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh were seized by the Covenant-breakers shortly after he assumed his responsibilities. Thus, among the first and most vital duties of Shoghi Effendi, pursued throughout his ministry, were the protection and preservation, the extension and beautification of the twin Holy Shrines and other Holy Places. To achieve this aim, he had to navigate a period of tumultuous change in the Holy Land— including global economic disruption, war, repeated political transition, and social instability— while upholding, like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá before him, the immutable Bahá’í principles of fellowship with all peoples and respect for established governmental authority.

At one time, he even had to contemplate the transfer of the remains of Bahá'u'lláh to a suitable setting on Mount Carmel to ensure their protection. And he steadfastly remained in Haifa during times of tumult and strife, even as he directed the small band of local believers to disperse to other parts of the world. This taxing yet tirelessly pursued obligation continued to his final days, when the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh was finally recognized as a Bahá'í Holy Place by the civil authorities, and the Bahá'í world was at last free to preserve and beautify its most sacred site.

In the course of his efforts to acquire, restore, and secure the Holy Places, the Guardian significantly expanded the properties surrounding the Holy Shrine and the Mansion at Bahjí and initiated what would eventually become extensive formal gardens. On the Mountain of God, he brought to its long-delayed completion the Shrine of the Báb, begun by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, adding three additional rooms, creating its arcade, raising its golden dome, and surrounding it with verdure. He traced "the far-flung arc around which the edifices of the World Bahá'í Administrative Order" were to be built; raised at one end of that arc its first structure, the International Archives Building; and situated, at its heart, the resting places of the Greatest Holy Leaf, her brother, and their mother. The Guardian's labours for the development of the World Centre were continued under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. Additional land and Holy Places were acquired and beautified, the buildings on the Arc raised, and terraces extended from the bottom to the top of Mount Carmel, as originally envisioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and begun by the Guardian. Before the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the property in the vicinity of the Shrine of the Báb was increased to over 170,000 square metres, while a series of land exchanges and acquisitions extended the property immediately surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh from some 4,000 to over 450,000 square metres. And in 2019 construction began in 'Akká, near the Riḍván Garden, on a fitting Shrine to serve as the final resting place of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

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74 Over the course of the century, the pace of the development of the Bahá'í administrative centre also accelerated. For many years, early in his ministry, the Guardian longed for the assistance of capable helpers, but the Bahá'í world was then too small to provide the necessary support. As the community grew, however, the House of Justice was increasingly able to benefit from a continuous stream of volunteers to establish the departments and agencies vital to a rapidly developing Faith, serving the needs at the World Centre as well as of the communities multiplying worldwide. Questions and advice, insights and guidance, visitors and pilgrims now flow ceaselessly between all parts of the planet and the heart of the Bahá'í world. In 1987, after decades of change and uncertainty, the patient efforts begun much earlier by Shoghi Effendi to establish good relations with the civil authorities in Israel culminated in the formal recognition of the status of the Bahá'í World Centre as the spiritual and administrative centre of the worldwide Bahá'í community, operating under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice.

75 Just as the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions have evolved over time, building upon previous achievements and rising to meet new challenges, the same can be said of the Bahá'í World Centre and its relations with the Bahá'ís across the world. The intimate and inseparable association of the spiritual and administrative centre with the development of the Bahá'í world was captured in the 24 May 2001 message we addressed to the believers gathered for the events marking the completion of the projects on Mount Carmel: "The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the Cause we serve. They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal

institutions of a unique and unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community's life. In the transformation that has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá'í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God's good time, bring about the reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it."

Prospect

A few weeks before He passed away, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was at His home with one of the friends. "Come with me", He said, "that we may admire together the beauty of the garden." Then He observed: "Behold, what the spirit of devotion is able to achieve! This flourishing place was, a few years ago, but a heap of stones, and now it is verdant with foliage and flowers. My desire is that after I am gone the loved ones may all arise to serve the divine Cause and, please God, so it shall be." "Ere long", He promised, will appear those "who shall bring life to the world."

Dearly loved friends! At the close of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world finds itself endowed with capacity and resources only dimly imagined at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. Generation after generation has laboured, and today a multitude has been raised up that stretches across the globe—consecrated souls who are collectively building the Faith's Administrative Order, widening the reach of its community life, deepening its engagement with society, and developing its spiritual and administrative centre.

This brief review of the past hundred years has illustrated how the Bahá'í community, in striving to systematically execute the three Divine Charters, has become a new creation, as anticipated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Just as the human being passes through various stages of physical and intellectual growth and development until it reaches maturity, so too the Bahá'í

community develops organically, in size and structure, as well as in understanding and vision, embracing responsibilities and strengthening relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions. Over the course of the century, in local settings as well as on a global scale, the series of advances experienced by the Bahá'í community has enabled it to pursue purposeful action across an ever-wider range of endeavours.

79 When the Heroic Age drew to a close, the community faced fundamental questions about how to organize its administrative affairs in order to respond to the requirements of the Divine Plan. The Guardian guided the friends in learning how to address those initial questions, a process that culminated in the nascent international arrangements that were in place at the time of his passing. The capacity that was built during that period allowed the Bahá'í world to take on a host of new questions about how it was to carry on the work of the Faith at a greater level of breadth and complexity under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. Then, yet again, after making marked progress over several decades, even more questions about still greater opportunities concerning the future direction of the Cause emerged before the beginning of the Four Year Plan, which set out a new challenge for a further period of development centred on achieving a significant advance in the process of entry by troops in all parts of the world. It is this growing capacity to resolve complex questions and then to take on still more complex questions that characterizes the process of learning that is propelling the progress of the Faith. Thus, it is evident that with every step forward in its organic unfoldment, the Bahá'í world develops new powers and new capacities that enable it to take on greater challenges as it strives to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity. And so it shall continue to be, despite the changes and chances of the world, through crisis and victory, with many an unexpected turn, through countless stages of the Formative and Golden Ages to the end of the Dispensation.

By the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, a common framework for action had emerged that has become central to the work of the community and which informs thought and gives shape to ever more complex and effective activities. This framework continually evolves through the accumulation of experience and the guidance of the House of Justice. The pivotal elements of this framework are the spiritual truths and cardinal principles of the Revelation. Other elements that also contribute to thought and action involve values, attitudes, concepts, and methods. Still others include the understanding of the physical and social world through insights from various branches of knowledge. Within this continually evolving framework, Bahá'ís are learning how to systematically translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action to realize His high aims for the betterment of the world. The significance of this increased capacity for learning, and its implications for the advancement of humanity at the current stage of its social development, cannot be overestimated.

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How much the Bahá'í world has achieved! How much remains to be done! The Nine Year Plan outlines the tasks that lie immediately ahead. Among the areas of focus are the multiplication and intensification of programmes of growth in clusters worldwide and increased coherence in the work of community building, social action, and participation in prevalent discourses through the concerted efforts of the Plan's three protagonists. The training institute will be further strengthened and will continue to evolve as an educational organization that develops capabilities for service. The seeds it sows within the hearts of succeeding cohorts of young people will be nurtured by other educational opportunities to empower each soul to contribute to social progress and well-being. The movement of youth will be complemented worldwide by the unprecedented advancement of women as full partners in community affairs. The capacity of Bahá'í institutions will be fostered at all levels, with particular attention to the establishment and development of Local Assemblies and to enhancing their engagement with the wider society

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and its leaders. The intellectual life of the community will be cultivated to provide the rigour and clarity of thought required to vindicate to a sceptical humanity the applicability of the healing remedy of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And all these efforts will continue through a series of Plans comprising a challenge, spanning no less than a generation, that will carry the Bahá'í world across the threshold of its third century.

82 The determined efforts to gain a fuller understanding of, and to live in accordance with, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings take place within the larger context of the twofold process of disintegration and integration described by Shoghi Effendi. Attaining the objective of the current series of Plans—the release of ever-increasing measures of the society-building power of the Faith—calls for an ability to read the reality of society as it responds to, and is shaped by, these twin processes.

83 A plethora of destructive forces and events, including environmental degradation, climate change, pandemics, the decline of religion and morals, the loss of meaning and identity, the erosion of the concepts of truth and reason, unbridled technology, the exacerbation of prejudices and ideological contention, pervasive corruption, political and economic upheaval, war and genocide, have left their traces in blood and anguish on the pages of history and the lives of billions. At the same time, hopeful constructive trends can also be discerned, which are contributing to that “universal fermentation” which Shoghi Effendi said is “purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established”. The diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity, a greater consciousness of global interdependence, the embrace of collaborative action among individuals and institutions, and a heightened longing for justice and peace are profoundly transforming human relationships. And thus, the movement of the world towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision advances in countless halting steps, in occasional dramatic leaps, and with intermittent stretches where progress stalls or is even

reversed, as humanity forges the relationships that constitute the foundations of a united and peaceful world.

The destructive forces that buffet the world do not leave the Bahá'í community untouched. Indeed, the history of every national Bahá'í community bears their mark. As a result, in various places and at various times, the progress of a particular community was retarded by insidious social tendencies or temporarily restricted or even extinguished by opposition. Periodic economic crises reduced the Faith's already limited financial resources, hindering projects for growth and development. The effects of world war paralysed for a time the ability of most communities to implement systematic plans. The upheavals that have reshaped the political map of the world have created obstacles to the full participation of some populations in the work of the Cause. Religious and cultural prejudices once thought to be receding have re-emerged with fresh vehemence. Bahá'ís have striven to address such challenges with perseverance and resolve. Yet, over the past century, no nobler response to the hostile forces unleashed to oppose the advance of the Cause has been witnessed than that of the Bahá'ís of Iran.

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From the earliest years of the Guardian's ministry, the persecution which the Bahá'ís of Iran had endured throughout the Heroic Age continued as waves of violent repression swept over that community, escalating in intensity in the attacks and systematic campaign of oppression which followed in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and which continues unremittingly to the present day. Despite all they have endured, the Bahá'ís of Iran have responded with unbowed courage and constructive resilience. They have won imperishable distinction through such achievements as the establishment of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education to ensure the education of succeeding generations, their efforts to transform the views of the fair-minded among their compatriots—whether inside or outside the country—and above all, their endurance of countless injustices, indignities, and privations in order to protect

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their fellow believers, maintain the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith in His beloved homeland, and safeguard its presence in that land as a benefit to its citizens. In such expressions of unswerving fortitude, of consecrated devotion and mutual support lie essential lessons for how the Bahá'í world must respond to the acceleration of the destructive forces that can be expected in the years ahead.

- 86 At its heart, the challenge presented by the interplay of the processes of integration and disintegration is the challenge of holding fast to Bahá'u'lláh's description of reality and to His teachings, while resisting the pull of controversial and polarizing debates and beguiling prescriptions that reflect futile attempts to define human identity and social reality through limited human conceptions, materialist philosophies, and competing passions. "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy", Bahá'u'lláh states. "We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions." Yet, He adds, "They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices." If Bahá'ís become entangled in the delusory notions of contending peoples, if they emulate the values, attitudes, and practices that define a self-absorbed and self-serving age, the release of those forces necessary to redeem humanity from its plight will be delayed and obstructed. Rather, as the Guardian explains, "The champion builders of Bahá'u'lláh's rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension, and distress. Let them forge ahead into the future serenely confident that the hour of their mightiest exertions and the supreme opportunity for their greatest exploits must coincide with the apocalyptic upheaval marking the lowest ebb in mankind's fast-declining fortunes."

None can anticipate precisely what course the forces of disintegration are destined to take, what violent convulsions will yet assail humanity in this travailing age, or what obstacles and opportunities may arise, until the process reaches its culmination in the appearance of that Great Peace that will signalize the arrival of the stage when, recognizing the unity and wholeness of humankind, the nations will “put away the weapons of war, and turn to the instruments of universal reconstruction”. One thing, however, is certain: The process of integration will also accelerate, knitting together ever more closely the efforts of those who are learning to translate Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings into reality with those in the wider society who seek justice and peace. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi explained to the Bahá’ís of America that, given the restricted size of their community and the limited influence it wielded, they must focus, at that time, on its own growth and development as it learned to apply the Teachings. He promised, however, that the time would come when they would be called upon to engage their fellow citizens in a process of working for the healing and betterment of their nation. That time has now come. And it has come not only for the Bahá’ís of America, but for the Bahá’ís of the world, as the society-building power inherent in the Faith is released in ever-greater measures.

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Releasing such power has implications for the decades to come. Every people and every nation has a part to play in the next stage in the fundamental reconstruction of human society. All have unique insights and experiences to offer for the building of a unified world. And it is the responsibility of the friends, as the bearers of Bahá’u’lláh’s restorative message, to assist populations to release their latent potentialities to achieve their highest aspirations. In this effort, the friends share this precious message with others, strive to demonstrate the efficacy of the divine remedy in the lives of individuals and communities, and work together with all those who appreciate and share the same values and aspirations. As they do so, Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a unified world will offer a hopeful and

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clear direction to peoples whose perception has been distorted by the confusion prevailing in the world, and a constructive path for cooperation in the search for solutions to long-standing social maladies. As the spirit of the Faith increasingly permeates the hearts to enkindle love and reinforce the shared identity of humanity as one people, it instils a sense of loyal and conscientious civic responsibility and, in place of the pursuit of worldly power, redirects energies towards disinterested service in the pursuit of the common good. Populations increasingly adopt the method of consultation, action, and reflection to displace endless contest and conflict. Individuals, communities, and institutions across divers societies increasingly harmonize their efforts in common purpose to overcome sectarian rivalries, and spiritual and moral qualities foundational to humanity's progress and well-being take root in human character and social practice.

- 89 The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. As the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh advances into the second century of the Formative Age, let all take inspiration from the words of the beloved Guardian, whose guiding hand immutably shaped the century past. Writing in 1938 about the execution of the first stage of the Divine Plan, he said: "The potentialities with which an almighty Providence has endowed it will no doubt enable its promoters to achieve their purpose. Much, however, will depend upon the spirit and manner in which that task will be conducted. Through the clearness and steadiness of their vision, through the unvitiated vitality of their belief, through the incorruptibility of their character, through the adamant force of their resolve, the matchless superiority of their aims and purpose, and the unsurpassed range of their accomplishments, they who labour for the glory of the Most Great Name ... can best demonstrate to the visionless, faithless, and restless society to which they belong their power to proffer a haven of refuge to its members in the hour of their realized doom. Then and only then will this tender sapling, embedded in the fertile soil of a Divinely appointed Administrative Order, and

energized by the dynamic processes of its institutions, yield its richest and destined fruit.”

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

1 We feel tremendous joy to be addressing a community whose high-mindedness and high resolve are befitting of its high calling. How great, how very great is our love for you, and how our spirits soar as we see your sincere and devoted striving to live lives shaped by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to proffer the life-giving waters of His Revelation to a world that is sore athirst. Your strong sense of purpose is plain to see. Expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society proceed apace, and the natural coherence of these undertakings at the level of the cluster is becoming ever more visible. Nowhere is this clearer than in places where growing numbers are becoming engaged in a range of endeavours, each one a means to release the society-building power of the Faith.

2 In the twelve months that have elapsed since the commencement of the Nine Year Plan, we have been delighted to see how this global spiritual enterprise has inspired and galvanized the friends and given impetus to particular lines of action. An immediate focus has been to put into effect plans which ensure that, in each country and region, there emerges at least one cluster where the third milestone has been passed: a place where large numbers of people are working together and contributing to the life of a vibrant community. Conscious, however, that the goal for this twenty-five-year period is to establish an intensive programme of growth in every cluster in the world, the believers have also set about opening new clusters to the Faith as well as intensifying their efforts in places with an existing programme of growth. There is a heightened awareness of the opportunity for pioneers

to arise in all parts of the world—many devoted souls are considering how they might respond to this opportunity, and many others have already filled posts, noticeably on the home front but increasingly in the international field as well. This is one of several ways in which, as we had hoped, a spirit of mutual support is being expressed by the friends everywhere. Communities where strength has been built have committed themselves to supporting the progress being made in a different place—in another cluster, region, country, or even continent—and creative means have been found to offer encouragement from afar and enable experience to be shared directly. Meanwhile, the basic approach of capturing what is being learned in a cluster, so that it can inform plans made locally and elsewhere, is widely practised. We have been gratified to see that particular attention is being paid to learning how to enhance the quality of the educational experience offered by the institute. When the institute process takes root in a community, its effects are dramatic. Witness, for instance, those centres of intense activity where the inhabitants have come to regard the training institute as a powerful instrument that is theirs: an instrument for whose sound development they have assumed principal responsibility. Knowing well that the doors of the Faith always stand wide open, the believers are learning how to give encouragement to those who are poised to enter. To walk with such souls, and to help them cross the threshold, is a privilege and a special joy; in each cultural context, there is much to be learned about the dynamics of this resonant moment of recognition and belonging. And that is not all. While in many clusters efforts to contribute to social transformation are at their earliest stages, National Spiritual Assemblies, ably supported as ever by the Counsellors, are actively seeking to learn more about how these efforts emerge from the community-building process. Discussions about the social and material well-being of a people are being cultivated within groups of families and in communities, while the friends are also finding ways to participate in meaningful discourses that are unfolding in their immediate surroundings.

3 Amid all we have described, the actions of the youth shine resplendent. Far from being mere passive absorbers of influence—whether the influence be benign or otherwise—they have proven themselves bold and discerning protagonists of the Plan. Where a community has seen them in this light and created conditions for their progress, the youth have more than justified the confidence shown in them. They are teaching the Faith to their friends and making service the foundation of more meaningful friendships. Frequently, such service takes the form of educating those younger than themselves—offering them not only moral and spiritual education, but often assistance with their schooling too. Charged with a sacred responsibility to strengthen the institute process, Bahá'í youth are fulfilling our cherished hopes.

4 The setting for all these efforts is a deeply unsettled age. There is widespread acknowledgement that the present-day structures of society are ill-prepared to address the needs of humanity in its current travails. Much that was widely assumed to be certain and unshakeable is being questioned, and the resulting ferment is producing a longing for a unifying vision. The chorus of voices raised in support of oneness, equality, and justice shows how many share these aspirations for their societies. Of course, it is no surprise to a follower of the Blessed Beauty that hearts should long for the spiritual ideals which He propounded. But we nevertheless find it striking that, in a year when the prospects for humanity's collective progress have seldom seemed gloomier, the light of the Faith shone with astonishing brilliance in more than ten thousand conferences, attended by nearly one and a half million people, focused on the means of promoting those same ideals. Bahá'u'lláh's vision, and His exhortation to humankind to work in unity for the betterment of the world, was the centre round which diverse elements of society eagerly gathered—and no wonder, for as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained, "Every community in the world findeth in these Divine Teachings the realization of its highest aspirations." Some well-wishers of humanity might first be drawn to the Bahá'í community as a place of refuge, a shelter

from a world polarized and paralysed. Yet beyond a shelter, what they find are kindred souls labouring together to build the world anew.

Much could be written about the geographic spread of the conferences, the extraordinary impetus they imparted to the new Plan, or the heartfelt expressions of joy and enthusiasm they evoked from those who attended. But in these few lines we wish to draw attention to what they signified about the development of the Cause. They were a reflection of a Bahá'í community that sees kinship, not difference. This outlook made it natural to explore the Nine Year Plan at gatherings to which all were welcome. The friends considered the Plan's implications for their societies in the company of not only individuals and families, but local leaders and authority figures as well. Bringing together so many people in one place created the conditions for a transformative conversation about spiritual and social progress, one that is unfolding the world over. The special contribution that such gatherings—at once open, uplifting, and purposeful—can make to an expanding pattern of community development in a cluster is a valuable lesson for Bahá'í institutions to bear in mind for the future.

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And so the company of the faithful enter the second year of the Plan with a fresh perspective and a profound insight into the significance of what they seek to achieve. How different actions look when viewed in light of the society-building power they release! This expansive prospect allows a sustained activity to be seen as much more than an isolated act of service or just a data point. In place after place, the initiatives being pursued reveal a population learning how to take increasing responsibility for navigating the path of its own development. The resulting spiritual and social transformation manifests itself in the life of a people in a variety of ways. In the previous series of Plans, it could be seen most clearly in the promotion of spiritual education and collective worship. In this new series of Plans, increasing attention needs to be given to other processes that seek to enhance the life of a community—for example, by improving public health, protecting the

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environment, or drawing more effectively on the power of the arts. What is required for all these complementary aspects of a community's well-being to advance is, of course, the capacity to engage in systematic learning in all these areas—a capacity that draws on insights arising from the Teachings and the accumulated store of human knowledge generated through scientific enquiry. As this capacity grows, much will be accomplished over the coming decades.

- 7 This expanded, society-building vision has far-reaching implications. Each community is on its own path towards its realization. But progress in one place often has features in common with progress in another. One feature is that, as capacity increases and a local or national community's powers multiply, then, in the fullness of time, the conditions required for the emergence of a *Mashriqu'l-Adhikár*, set out in our *Riḍván* 2012 message, will eventually be fulfilled. As we indicated in our message to you last *Riḍván*, we will periodically identify places where a Bahá'í Temple is to be raised up. We are delighted to call, at this time, for the establishment of local Houses of Worship in Kanchanpur, Nepal, and Mwinilunga, Zambia. Beyond this, we call for a national House of Worship to be raised up in Canada, in the vicinity of the long-established National *Ḥaḏíratu'l-Quds* in Toronto. These projects, and others to be initiated in the future, will benefit from the support provided to the Temples Fund by the friends in every land.

- 8 Copious are the blessings that a benevolent Lord has chosen to bestow upon His loved ones. Lofty is the calling, magnificent the prospect. Pressing are the times in which we have all been summoned to serve. Impassioned, then, are the prayers with which, on your behalf and for your tireless efforts, we supplicate at the Threshold of Bahá'u'lláh.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2022

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A year of preparation and reflection, as well as of great exertion, has concluded, distinguished by the efforts of the friends worldwide to mark the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, including by sending representatives to participate in a special event honouring Him in the Holy Land. Through these efforts, the inspiration offered by the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has been felt by countless souls and not only Bahá'ís. His concern for every member of the human family, His teaching work, His promotion of undertakings for education and social well-being, His profound contributions to discourses in both the East and the West, His heartfelt encouragement of projects to construct Houses of Worship, His shaping of early forms of Bahá'í administration, His cultivation of varied aspects of community life—all these complementary facets of His life were a reflection of His constant and complete dedication to serving God and serving humanity. Beyond being a towering figure of moral authority and surpassing spiritual insight, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a pure channel through which the forces released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh could act upon the world. To comprehend the society-building power possessed by the Faith, one need look no further than the achievements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His ministry and the transformative effects of the guidance that flowed unceasingly from His pen. So many of the marvellous advances made by the present-day Bahá'í community—which were surveyed in our message to you last Riḍván—trace their origins to the actions, decisions, and directions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

2 How fitting, then, that the Bahá'í community's collective tribute to its perfect Exemplar should form the prelude to its commencement of a major undertaking focused on the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The areas of endeavour that fall within the scope of the Nine Year Plan, and of the current series of Plans, are directed towards the fulfilment of this overarching objective. It is also the focus of the more than 10,000 conferences being held across the globe to mark the launch of this great spiritual enterprise. These conferences, expected to welcome unprecedented numbers of participants, are bringing together not only Bahá'ís but many other well-wishers of humanity who share with them a longing to foster unity and better the world. Their determination and strong sense of purpose are reflected in the spirit generated at the gatherings that have already occurred, where the participants have been galvanized as much by the dynamic consultations to which they have contributed as by the collective vision explored at these joyful events. We look with eager anticipation to what the coming months and years will bring.

3 Since we addressed our 30 December 2021 message to the Counsellors' Conference, National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils have been earnestly assessing the possibilities for intensifying the process of growth in the clusters within their jurisdiction during the Nine Year Plan. We feel it would be helpful, for the purpose of gauging the progress made over time, to view the Plan as unfolding in two phases of four and five years' duration, and National Assemblies were invited to consider the advances they expect to see in their respective communities by Riḍván 2026 and then by Riḍván 2031. This exercise also involved a re-evaluation of cluster boundaries, and the outcome of these adjustments is that the total number of clusters in the world has risen by a quarter and now stands at over 22,000. Judging by the forecasts received, it is estimated that, by the end of the Plan, a programme of growth at some level of development will exist in around 14,000 of these clusters. From among

them, the number where the programme of growth could be considered intensive is projected to climb to 11,000 over the same time period. And of these, it is anticipated that the number of clusters where the third milestone has been passed will rise above 5,000 by 2031. Without question, to make such advances will entail colossal effort over the entire duration of the Plan. Yet we find these to be worthy aspirations towards which to strive, for they represent an ambitious but serious appraisal of what lies within reach.

This is telling. Such objectives could not be realistically contemplated if administrative institutions and agencies had not evolved markedly, endowing them with significantly heightened capacity to manage the affairs of a community whose activities have multiplied so quickly, embracing a vast and growing number of kindred souls. It would not be possible to aspire to such growth if a desire to learn—to act, to reflect, to capture insights, and to absorb the insights emerging elsewhere—had not been cultivated at all levels, extending to the grassroots of the community. And the effort implied by such projections would hardly be feasible if a systematic approach to the teaching work and to human resource development had not become increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í world. All this has brought about an advance in the Bahá'í community's awareness of its own identity and purpose. A determination to be outward looking in the process of community building had already become an established aspect of culture in many, many places; it has now blossomed, in a rising number of communities, into a sense of real responsibility for the spiritual and material progress of larger and larger groups within society, well beyond the membership of the Bahá'í community itself. The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles. The significance of the developments we have described, reaching this point one hundred years after

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the inauguration of the Administrative Order, cannot be overlooked. In the extraordinary rise in capacity that has occurred in the last two decades— and which has made it possible for the Bahá'í world to view its endeavours in terms of the release of the society-building power of the Faith—we see incontrovertible evidence that the Cause of God has entered the sixth epoch of its Formative Age. We announced last Ridván that the widespread phenomenon of large numbers participating in Bahá'í activities, being kindled by faith, and acquiring the skills and abilities to serve their communities signalled that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan had commenced; thus, the One Year Plan, at its inception then and at its conclusion now, has come to mark a set of historic advances made by the company of the faithful. And at the threshold of a new, mighty undertaking, this united body of believers stands ready to seize the possibilities wide open before it.

- 5 A prominent feature of the epoch that now ends was the erection of the last of the continental Houses of Worship and the initiation of projects to establish Houses of Worship at the national and local levels. Much has been learned, by Bahá'ís the world over, about the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and the union of worship and service it embodies. During the sixth epoch of the Formative Age, much more will be learned about the path that leads from the development within a community of a flourishing devotional life—and the service which it inspires—to the appearance of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. Consultations are beginning with various National Spiritual Assemblies, and as these proceed, we will periodically announce places where a Bahá'í House of Worship will be raised up in the coming years.

- 6 Our joy at seeing the community of the Greatest Name go from strength to strength is tempered by our deep sorrow at seeing the persistence of conditions and conflicts in the world that create misery and desperate suffering—in particular, at observing the recrudescence of destructive forces that have disordered international affairs while visiting horrors upon

populations. We know well and are reassured that, as Bahá'í communities have repeatedly demonstrated in many different contexts, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are committed to offering relief and support to those around them, no matter how straitened their own circumstances. But until humanity as a whole undertakes to establish its affairs on foundations of justice and truth, it is, alas, fated to stagger from one crisis to another. We pray that, if the recent outbreak of war in Europe is to yield any lessons for the future, it will serve as an urgent reminder of the course that the world must take if it is to attain genuine and enduring peace. The principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh to the monarchs and presidents of His time, and the weighty responsibilities with which He charged rulers past and present, are perhaps even more pertinent and imperative today than when they were first recorded by His Pen. For Bahá'ís, the inexorable advance of the Major Plan of God—bringing with it ordeals and upheavals, but ultimately impelling humanity towards justice, peace, and unity—is the context within which the Minor Plan of God, with which the believers are chiefly occupied, unfolds. The dysfunctional state of present-day society makes the need for the release of the society-building power of the Faith abundantly clear and pressing. We cannot but expect that, for now, convulsions and disturbances will continue to afflict the world; you will no doubt appreciate, then, why every earnest supplication we offer for all God's children to be relieved from bewilderment and bitter hardship is coupled with an equally heartfelt prayer for the success of the much-needed service you are rendering for the Cause of the Prince of Peace.

In every cluster where the activities of the Plan are gaining momentum, we see the development of communities with the noble characteristics we described in the 30 December 2021 message. As societies experience stresses of various kinds, the followers of the Abhá Beauty must stand out more and more for their qualities of resilience and rationality, for their standard of conduct and their adherence to principle, and for the compassion, detachment, and forbearance they

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demonstrate in their pursuit of unity. Time and again, the distinctive characteristics and attitudes shown by the believers in periods of acute difficulty have prompted people to turn to Bahá'ís for explanation, counsel, and support, especially when the life of a society has been upset by peril and unforeseen disruptions. In sharing these observations, we are mindful that the Bahá'í community itself also experiences the effects of the forces of disintegration at work in the world. Moreover, we are conscious that the greater the friends' efforts to promote the Word of God, the stronger the countervailing forces they will encounter, sooner or later, from various quarters. They must fortify their minds and spirits against the tests that are sure to come, lest these impair the integrity of their endeavours. But the believers know well that whatever storms lie ahead, the ark of the Cause is equal to them all. Successive stages of its voyage have seen it weather the elements and ride the waves. Now it is bound for a new horizon. The confirmations of the Almighty are the gusts that fill its sails and propel it towards its destination. And the Covenant is its lodestar, keeping the sacred vessel set on its sure and certain course. May the hosts of heaven send blessings upon all who sail within.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

4 January 2022

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We are at this moment with the company of the Continental Counsellors—the great majority of them present in the Holy Land, while some who could not travel here join from a distance—and the sixth and final day of their conference, focused on the upcoming Nine Year Plan, is about to conclude. There is so much that could be shared with you about the spirit of this conference, as seen in its participants. Steeped in experience, they have been eyewitnesses to the rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world, and they brim with confidence about what you can further accomplish. We could not have wished for a keener, more insightful grasp of what is called for in the next Plan than was demonstrated in the consultations of these consecrated souls. But this, of course, is just the beginning. When the Counsellors return to the countries of five continents, they will bring to you and those who serve with you all that they have absorbed. They and their auxiliaries will be at your side as you prepare for this immense collective enterprise—especially through your participation in the wave of conferences soon to sweep across the globe, where Bahá'u'lláh's universal summons to work for the betterment of the world will galvanize the assembled well-wishers of humanity. 1

A confluence of circumstances in the world at large and within the Faith has made this a charged moment. The global challenges now facing humanity are a severe test of its willingness to put aside short-term self-interest and come to terms with this stark spiritual and moral reality: there is but one, interconnected human family and it shares one precious homeland. At this same moment, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are examining anew the possibilities before them to release the 2

society-building power of the Faith. This Plan will test their stamina, their willpower, and the strength of their love for those who dwell alongside them. They will help to nurture, in every place, communities of common purpose that recognize the power of unity to heal, to transcend. Within these communities, every soul may find sanctuary, and in the friends' many endeavours for worship and praise, for education, for social transformation, for the development of communities—in all these, every soul may find room to grow and to serve. We are stirred by the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The small shall be made great, and the powerless shall be given strength; they that are of tender age shall become the children of the Kingdom, and those that have gone astray shall be guided to their heavenly home."

- 3 When Bahá'u'lláh sent forth His glad tidings, the devoted believers who could carry His message to humanity were so few in number. Today, praise be to God, the devotion of the friends is undimmed and their numbers have soared. May their hearts be fortified through the power of His Word and, on every occasion and in every space, may they shine with the light of the splendours of heaven. Such will be the prayer on our tongues and the hope in our breasts when, today, with the Counsellors, we enter the Shrine of the Blessed Beauty to supplicate on your behalf.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

3 January 2022

To the Auxiliary Board members throughout the world

Dearly loved Friends,

On this day that we had awaited with so much anticipation 1
to welcome you all in the Holy Land for a joint conference with
the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we
feel moved to write to you and express our sadness that, owing
to world conditions, this longed-for gathering could not take
place. The sentiments that we had hoped to express to you in
person must now be conveyed from afar. But distance does not
diminish the intensity of the love we have for each one of you.

It is one hundred years to the day since the first public 2
reading of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In that
precious Document, He set out the obligations of the Hands
of the Cause of God, for whose support the Auxiliary Boards
for Propagation and Protection were originally created.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá summoned the Hands of the Cause “to diffuse
the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote
learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all
times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from
earthly things.” Reading these words at this time evokes for
us the service that each of you are carrying out across the
Bahá’í world. Indeed, the worldwide Bahá’í community owes
a debt of gratitude to the entire institution of the Counsellors,
including all those who have served as Continental
Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, and assistants in
years gone by. Without such devoted service from so many,
the marvellous advances made in recent decades, which are
evident in the world today, could not have occurred. And
an indispensable contribution to that progress has been the
guidance and encouragement provided by the International
Teaching Centre: an institution agile and perspicacious, and
wholly indefatigable.

3 By now you have had the opportunity to become acquainted with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan and to ponder its implications. As will be apparent, the range of fields in which the believers are being asked to serve within their clusters, in order to release the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures, has broadened. Correspondingly, the range of matters to which you must give serious attention has broadened as well. Your efforts are integral to the work of developing capacity to contribute to the Bahá'í community's various areas of endeavour, and your efforts are just as integral to helping the friends demonstrate in action the capacity they have acquired. In attending to both of these needs, and more generally in fulfilling your responsibilities for education and the improvement of character, you of course rely a great deal on the efficacy of the institute process. Ever since its creation, the institute has been an essential instrument for your work, and equally, your energetic support has been essential to its development. It brings us much joy, then, to see the pronounced, earnest spirit of collaboration that characterizes your relationship with all those responsible for coordinating the institute's endeavours.

4 You have no doubt read the description we presented, in our message to the Counsellors a few days ago, of how you must help the friends to find a fitting response to each of the many challenges they encounter in their pursuit of the Plan. In this regard, we feel sure you are conscious that, however beneficial the influence of your counsel, the influence of your example will be greater still. A notable strength of your office is that it connects the believers with the different levels of Bahá'í administration and reinforces the spirit of cooperation that binds them together. You have a vital duty to help raise consciousness of the purpose of Bahá'í administration and to assist with the establishment and proper functioning of new Local Spiritual Assemblies. You keep the friends connected with the plans and projects of Bahá'í institutions operating at the local, regional, and national levels. Ultimately, you strengthen the connection between the friends and the

Universal House of Justice by encouraging and leading the study of messages as they emerge. The believers look to you for a sound understanding of the Plan and for a courageous example of how to put its provisions into effect, especially in teaching the Faith. Your strong familiarity with the reality of circumstances in various clusters, combined with your thorough grasp of what is required for the Cause to advance, puts you in an ideal position to make thoughtful, creative, and timely contributions to consultations about how to release the society-building power of the Faith in every setting.

In addition to the foregoing, we wish to draw attention to your special role in encouraging the youth. So many youth who are now winning victories for the Cause were inspired by an Auxiliary Board member or assistant whose enthusiastic support and spirit of devotion taught them to rely on the power of divine confirmations and boldly enter the arena of service. Your responsibilities extend even further to the promotion of the education of children and junior youth, to the upliftment of the young, and to the strengthening of a pattern of family life that will produce generation after generation of consecrated souls, faithful followers of Bahá'u'lláh who have chosen the betterment of the world over the advancement of personal interests. The youth who, in the final year of the Nine Year Plan, will be carrying out acts of service to ensure its ultimate success are in many cases the children who, today, need to be nurtured in their love of the Blessed Beauty and their understanding of His mission. 5

Beloved friends, in your moments of prayer, be assured that all your entreaties to Bahá'u'lláh are accompanied by our own supplications in the Holy Shrines on your behalf. May your movement and your stillness be guided by the gentle winds of His Will, and may He bestow upon you the enduring bounty of being enabled to serve Him in accordance with His wish. 6

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 January 2022

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

1 Over the twenty-five-year period that ended at Ridván 2021, the endeavours of training institutes to help the friends enhance their capacity for service were central to progress. When, at the beginning of the last series of global Plans, we called for systematic attention to be given to devising methods for training large numbers of believers, institutes faced the task of developing their own materials or selecting from those readily available. Generally, institutes found it challenging to develop new materials; however, those that adopted the courses prepared by the Ruhi Institute were able to make rapid progress. Therefore, as was stated in our message to you of 28 December 2005, we determined that the books of the Ruhi Institute, which had proven their efficacy, would constitute the main sequence of courses of institutes everywhere at least for the remainder of that series of Plans. The extensive use of these courses, as well as of the lessons and texts for the spiritual education of children and junior youth, expedited the advance of the institute process across the globe. Now, with the Bahá'í world embarked on a new series of global Plans, we have considered again the question of the materials of training institutes and wish to convey our conclusions.

2 The knowledge and insights, the spiritual qualities and attitudes, and the skills and abilities for service treated in the courses of the Ruhi Institute remain vital to the efforts of Bahá'í communities. Therefore, these materials will continue to be a prominent feature of the educational endeavours of all training institutes during this new series of global Plans. We are aware that the Ruhi Institute will, during the Nine Year Plan, seek to complete the preparation of all the materials it

has outlined for use in children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, and the revision of published editions as necessary in light of experience. However, beyond what it has already delineated, it is not expected to develop new materials to be used worldwide.

In our message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we highlighted how pleased we have been to observe the rich body of knowledge and insights which the friends, labouring in diverse social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of the community-building process. The friends are also becoming increasingly adept at identifying needs related to growth that are emerging naturally from efforts at the grassroots. These developments have implications for the systems for preparing and refining educational materials. We have thus concluded that it would now be propitious for more attention to be paid to extending the capacity to prepare educational materials, particularly in relation to supplementary materials and branch courses. 3

When we addressed the question of materials for the education of children and junior youth in our message* to you of 12 December 2011, we indicated that, beyond the materials that are the core of each of these programmes, teachers and animators would, often in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level, determine whether or not additional elements would be required to reinforce the educational process. The impressive advances in many parts of the world with regard to offering spiritual education to large numbers of children and junior youth have certainly involved a growing capacity of teachers and animators to wisely supplement the study of the lessons and texts with appropriate elements on the basis of their specific circumstances. Notable in this respect are elements related to artistic activity and service projects. Nonetheless, when the need to supplement the study of a particular topic has been felt across a country 4

* See 12 December 2011 message, paragraphs 16-20 on "Educational materials".

or region, some institutes have themselves developed or adopted additional materials and have arranged for them to be disseminated more extensively. These supplementary items have, for the most part, been simple elements, such as songs or stories. A similar experience is unfolding in relation to the main sequence of courses, although the additional materials that some institutes have introduced in this connection, which include compilations from the Bahá'í writings on specific topics and case studies of relevant experience, tend to be of a more complex nature.

- 5 The flourishing of a vibrant process of spiritual education in growing numbers of clusters will require of institutes a well-developed ability to oversee the appropriate introduction of supplementary elements. In this, institutes must be as much concerned with reinforcing the educational process as with maintaining its integrity. They will thus need to bear in mind the various cautions we set out in our 12 December 2011 message. They must, of course, also guard against overwhelming the friends with diverse additional elements that, by their sheer volume, might inadvertently detract from the effective delivery of the principal materials.

- 6 Concerning branch courses, how they are to emerge must be understood in the context of the dynamics in countries and regions where the community-building process is advancing with intensity. As many more friends dedicate themselves to promoting the various activities to which the study of institute courses gives rise, distinct areas of learning associated with each of these activities steadily take shape in the life of a population. Some of these areas of learning, such as those concerned with collective worship, deepening, and teaching, are supported by Area Teaching Committees, while others related to the spiritual education of children, junior youth, and youth and adults are fostered by the training institutes. Additional areas of learning supported by other agencies also gradually come into place as more and more people study the higher courses of the institute's sequence. As the endeavours in each of these areas are sustained by growing numbers of friends,

fresh insights are generated that are distinctive in that they arise from systematic effort undertaken in a particular social and cultural setting. There is an increasing understanding of what other concepts, approaches, abilities, and attitudes are essential to advancing an aspect of the community-building process. These become objects of conversation in periodic gatherings held to consult and reflect on the experience being gained. Aside from the initiatives individuals or institutions and agencies may take to respond to these needs, the institute might decide to promote the use of a supplementary material as described above. Over time, what is learned is captured by the institutions and agencies of the Faith in various documents, narrative accounts, and case studies which, in their totality, constitute a record of unfolding experience. When a sizeable body of knowledge accumulates, it becomes possible to further systematize it by developing a branch course.

We have in the past likened the main sequence to the trunk of a tree that supports other courses branching from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. The preparation of such branch courses would necessarily occur over time through a pattern marked by action and reflection and in which conceptualization and activity in the field go hand in hand. For training institutes that take on this task, there are several requisites. They will need to be able to understand profoundly the content of the institute's main sequence and the pedagogical principles involved, analyse clearly the experience arising at the grassroots as activities advance, collaborate with teams of friends dedicated to the progress of specific aspects of the community-building process, operate in a learning mode, and draw into their work individuals with abilities needed for preparing materials. Once in place, the branch course would help the friends promoting the related activity to further strengthen their capacity, and it would contribute to extending the associated process of learning in the life of the population. The course would also serve as a repository of the accruing knowledge and as a means for its propagation.

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- 8 Developing materials of this nature is a complex exercise, and it is of course not a goal that every training institute develop its own branch courses. Training institutes, in consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Counsellors, will determine when it is timely to develop or adopt such additional educational materials. Many institutes will simply select branch courses appropriate to their needs from those of proven effectiveness created by other institutes. Beyond branch courses, it is anticipated that institutes will in the future prepare or adopt other types of courses, which may be integrated in some way into the main sequence or be offered separately. This will, naturally, require the acquisition of even greater capacity by the institutes. However, notwithstanding the far-reaching effects of their efforts, institutes are not expected to address all the educational needs of the Bahá'í community. Within divers populations, large-scale growth will lead to new educational endeavours to address other pressing demands.
- 9 We are confident that, as the friends labour in all regions to release the society-building power of the Faith, the years ahead will witness a significant further expansion of the capacity of training institutes to provide spiritual education to large numbers and to generate, apply, and disseminate knowledge. As part of its mandate to watch over the process of human resource development, we have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow closely the raising of capacity for preparing educational materials. It will establish mechanisms for supporting the institutes and for ensuring that what is learned is appropriately propagated.
- 10 We will beseech the Blessed Beauty in the Holy Shrines that the operations of training institutes, these vital agencies of the Faith, may ever receive His unfailing blessings and confirmations.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

30 December 2021

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

At Riḍván this year we described how, over the course of a quarter century, the Bahá'í world underwent a transformation that endowed it with an undreamed-of capacity to learn, to grow, and to serve humanity. But, however bright were the achievements of this period, they must be eclipsed by what is to come. By the conclusion of the new series of Plans recently begun, the Bahá'í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present. In your deliberations over the coming days, you will be occupied with exploring what is required to bring into being such a fortified community.

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Bahá'u'lláh states that “the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.” He has revealed teachings that make this possible. Building a society that consciously pursues this collective purpose is the work of not only this generation, but of many generations to come, and Bahá'u'lláh's followers welcome all who labour alongside them in this undertaking. It means learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities; it means those communities learning how to bring about spiritual and material progress; it means learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress. These areas of endeavour are, naturally, familiar ones. Seen from one perspective, they are quite distinct, each having its own characteristics and imperatives. Yet they all represent ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society. Together, they are means of

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releasing what the Guardian described as “the society-building power” of the Faith. This inherent power possessed by the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh is visible even in the fledgling efforts of a Bahá’í community learning to serve humanity and promote the Word of God. And though the world society foreshadowed in His Revelation is of course far distant, communities that are earnestly learning to apply His teachings to their social reality abound. How immensely blessed are those souls who, alive to the greatness of this Day and the significance of their actions, strive for the emergence of a society shaped by the divine teachings.

- 3 The series of global Plans that began at Ridván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá’í Era and conclude at Ridván 2046. During this period, the Bahá’í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity”; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.

- 4 The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan are seeking to gain an ever more profound understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings—“the sovereign remedy for every disease”—and to apply them to the needs of their society. They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that

the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. In places where growing numbers are helping to build communities of this character, the power of the Cause to transform people's social existence, as well as their inner lives, is becoming increasingly visible. Earnest pursuit of the Plan's central aim will, we are sure, cause many, many such communities to emerge.

The movement of clusters

- 5 A greater expression of the society-building power of the Faith requires, first and foremost, still further advances in the process of entry by troops in every part of the world. The essentially spiritual undertakings of diffusing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ever more widely and extending the roots of His Faith ever more deeply into the soil of society have measurable outcomes: the number of clusters where a programme of growth has been initiated and the degree of intensity that each has reached. The means now exist for a swift advance in relation to both measures. The goal that the community of the Greatest Name must aspire to fulfil during the current series of global Plans is to establish intensive programmes of growth in all the clusters in the world. This formidable objective implies a broadening and intensification of activity on a scale never witnessed. Rapid progress towards this goal must be achieved in the course of the Nine Year Plan.

- 6 As a preliminary step, we ask that you assist National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils to determine whether their schemes for dividing their territories into clusters would benefit from any adjustments. As you know, a cluster defines an area where the activities of the Plan can be stimulated in a manageable and sustainable way. Over the last twenty-one years, much has been learned about the size of cluster that is "manageable" in different contexts and in different parts of the world; in some countries, modifications have already begun to be considered, occasioned by the effects of growth. In many instances this reassessment will not lead to any change, but in some it will result in a cluster being divided or reduced in size, and occasionally a cluster might become larger. Areas that are sparsely populated owing to the natural terrain may be excluded from the clustering scheme. Of course, any believers who reside in such places would adopt as many elements of the framework for action as are applicable to their circumstances.

The movement of clusters along a continuum of development will remain the basic model for the expansion and consolidation of the community. The features of the developmental path that should be followed, and in particular the first, second, and third milestones that mark progress along the way, are already well known to the friends from our previous messages and from their own experience, and we feel no need to reiterate what we have stated before. By the close of the One Year Plan we anticipate that programmes of growth will be under way in over 6,000 clusters, that in close to 5,000 of these the second milestone will have been passed, and that in 1,300 of these the believers will have advanced further. These figures must climb considerably over the coming nine years. Once any adjustments to the clustering scheme in each country have been determined, we ask that you work with National Assemblies and Regional Councils to forecast the numbers of clusters where progress could be made past the first, second, and third milestones, respectively, during the Plan. It should be borne in mind that these are only intended to be well-informed estimates; they can be refined later as necessary and need not be laboured over at length. As such, we request that the results of these assessments be sent to the Bahá'í World Centre by Naw-Rúz. At Ridván, we will then be able to set out the total collective aspirations of the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan.

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We are conscious that there are some regions and countries where the Faith remains at an early point of development, and there is a pressing need to ensure that what the Bahá'í world has learned about accelerating the growth process benefits these places as well. One important lesson that has become clear is the immense value, to a region, of a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. Once the friends in a given cluster have developed the range of capacities that such progress implies, and the means to disseminate insights and share experience about community-building endeavours are in place, then a swift acceleration of the work of expansion and consolidation in surrounding clusters becomes possible.

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With this in mind, it is imperative that during the Nine Year Plan the process of growth reach this level of intensity in at least one cluster in every country and every region. This constitutes one of the Plan's chief objectives and it will call for the concentrated effort of many a consecrated soul. The International Teaching Centre is ready to work with you to implement several strategies to bring this about. Foremost among these will be the deployment of teams of international and homefront pioneers who are familiar with the framework for action and are prepared to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to serving the Cause over a number of years. You will need to impress upon National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils the urgency of encouraging believers who, following in the footsteps of so many heroic souls of the past, can arise to ensure that the light of the Faith shines bright in every territory. We look in particular to countries, regions, and clusters where strength and experience have accumulated to generate a flow of pioneers to places where help is needed, and also to provide support by other means. This flow of support is one more way in which the spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance, so essential for progress, manifests itself in systematic action.

- 9 The accomplishments of the previous series of Plans—particularly the last Five Year Plan—could not have occurred without a tremendous advance in the teaching work. An important dimension of this work is the capacity to engage in conversations on spiritual themes, a capacity which was explored in our message* to your 2015 conference, where we described how it is developed through participation in institute courses and by gaining practical experience. It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Over time, many such souls

* See 29 Dec 2015 message, paragraphs 14 and 15, with further refernece to “conversation” in paragraphs 18, 23, 24, 32, 35, and 49.

begin to identify themselves with the Bahá'í community, especially as they gain the confidence to participate in community life through service. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

We ask you and your auxiliaries to help the believers, wherever they reside, reflect periodically on effective ways of teaching the Faith in their surroundings, and to fan within their hearts a passion for teaching that will attract the confirmations of the Divine Kingdom. Souls who have been given the blessing of faith have a natural wish to share this gift through conversations with relatives, friends, classmates, co-workers, and those previously unmet, seeking in every place and at every moment a hearing ear. Different settings and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process

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of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are.

Learning from the most advanced clusters

- 11 Six years ago we described for you the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone* along the continuum of growth. To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building. In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live. It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus. Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong—networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind—and by accompanying others who arise to serve alongside them. These efforts have tremendous merit. Even when a cluster contains a number of flourishing centres of intense activity, efforts being made across the rest of the cluster might still represent a large proportion of all the activity that is occurring. We also acknowledge, in this connection, the steps being taken in some clusters to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster. This can be seen as a specialized form of the community-building work, and one which continues to show great promise. As participation in the work of the Plan in all its forms increases, many opportunities

* See 29 December 2015 message, paragraphs 22-33 on “Embracing large numbers and managing complexity”.

emerge for the friends to learn from each other's experience and to kindle within one another the joy of teaching.

Of course, the work undertaken in receptive neighbourhoods and villages has been a special focus of attention in recent years. As the inhabitants of such locations begin to participate in Bahá'í activities in large numbers, more consideration needs to be given to coordination in order to cope with the inherent complexity involved. Within each centre of intense activity, collaborative arrangements emerge among groups of families, who organize community-building activities among themselves with a view to widening the embrace of such activities to many nearby households; an informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours under way. The character of daily life in such places is adapting to the rise of a culture in which worship and service are cherished activities involving many people at once. Uplifting, well-prepared community gatherings—extending in some cases to camps and festivals—occur with increasing frequency, and music and song feature prominently on such occasions. Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of acquainting those in the wider society with the principles of the Cause. And naturally, there remains a strong focus on being outward looking: finding ways to continually share the fruits of a thriving pattern of action with souls who are as yet unfamiliar with the Faith.

Amid all this, we have observed a specific, heartening phenomenon, whose early glimpses we described in our message to your 2015 conference as representing a new frontier. Although learning how to embrace large numbers is a characteristic of any cluster where the third milestone has been passed, the focus of the friends necessarily begins to broaden as they approach a point where a significant proportion of the population of a particular area is taking

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part in community-building activities. This might be true for only a specific residential area in a cluster, or for several such areas, or for a single village; other parts of the cluster might not yet share the same reality. But in such locations, the thoughts of the friends labouring at the grassroots are increasingly occupied with the progress and well-being of everyone dwelling in the vicinity. Bahá'í institutions feel more keenly their responsibility for the spiritual education of an entire generation of children and junior youth, most or even all of whom might already be engaged in community activities. Local Spiritual Assemblies strengthen their relationships with authorities and local leaders, even entering into formal collaborations, and growing attention is given to the multiplying initiatives of social action arising from groups of junior youth, youth, women, families, or others who are responding to the needs around them. The sheer level and variety of activity requires Auxiliary Board members to appoint multiple assistants to serve a single village or neighbourhood; each assistant might follow one or more lines of action, offering counsel and support as necessary, and lending momentum to the processes in motion.

- 14 In places where the activities of the Plan have reached such a degree of prevalence, the inhabitants now possess a substantially increased capacity to steer the course of their own development, and the institutions and agencies of the Faith there now have an expanded vision of their responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities still include having robust systems in place to continually build capacity and support those taking initiative. But the advancement of the community depends, to a greater extent than before, on local institutions and agencies being conscious of the social forces at work in the environment and acting to preserve the integrity of the community's many endeavours. Meanwhile, the relationship of the Bahá'í community to the surrounding society undergoes profound change. As represented by its formal structures of administration and informal collaborative arrangements, the Bahá'í community has become a highly visible protagonist

in society in its own right, one that is ready to shoulder important responsibilities and intensify a broad, collective process of learning about spiritual and material progress. At the same time, as the wider society embraces many aspects of Bahá'í community life and imbibes its unifying spirit, the dynamics thus created allow diverse groups to come together in a combined movement inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity. To date, the number of places where a Bahá'í pattern of community life has attained such prevalence is modest, yet it is growing. Here is witnessed a release of the society-building power of the Faith unlike anything that has been seen before.

Naturally, prevalence of Bahá'í activity on this scale is not a prospect everywhere. It is necessary to appreciate the difference that is made by the conditions in a cluster or in parts of a cluster and by the characteristics of a people—that is, by the reality of circumstances. Accordingly, the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary. But regardless of the extent to which Bahá'í community life embraces those who reside in a particular area—regardless, even, of the intensity of a programme of growth in a cluster or the level of activity in a neighbourhood or village—the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles? You and your auxiliaries are ideally placed to put this question and to ensure that appropriate strategies are identified. Much can be learned from the experience of the friends in similar clusters, for a community that is a step further along the same path can provide valuable insights about the goal to strive for next. As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it. Looking ahead on this path, might we not perceive Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the

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reins of humanity's affairs in one hand, His other beckoning all to hasten, hasten?

Contributing to social transformation

16 The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is concerned with the transformation of both humanity's inner life and social environment. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi describes how the social environment provides the "atmosphere" in which souls can "grow spiritually and reflect in full the light of God" shining through the Revelation. A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

17 As the intensity of community-building work in a cluster increases, the friends there inevitably become more conscious of social, economic, or cultural barriers that are impeding people's spiritual and material progress. Children and junior youth lacking support in their education, pressures on girls resulting from traditional customs related to early marriage, families needing help with navigating unfamiliar systems of healthcare, a village struggling for want of some basic necessity, or long-standing prejudices arising from a legacy of hostility between different groups—when a Bahá'í community's efforts in the field of expansion and consolidation bring it into contact with these situations and many others, it will be drawn to respond to such realities as its circumstances permit. In reflecting on such situations it becomes evident that, within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a

single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society. All these efforts are pursued according to a common framework for action, and this above all else brings coherence to the overall pattern of activity.

The initial stirrings of grassroots social action begin to be seen in a cluster as the availability of human resources increases and capacity for a wider range of tasks develops. Villages have proven to be notably fertile ground from which social action initiatives have emerged and been sustained, but in urban settings too, friends living there have succeeded in carrying out activities and projects suited to the social environment, at times by working with local schools, agencies of civil society, or even government bodies. Social action is being undertaken in a number of important fields, including the environment, agriculture, health, the arts, and particularly education. Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, and especially as the study of specific institute courses stimulates greater activity in this area, we expect to see a proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a people. Some of these community-based initiatives will require basic administrative structures to sustain their work. Where conditions are propitious, Local Spiritual Assemblies will need to be encouraged to learn how best to cultivate new, fledgling initiatives and to foster efforts that show promise. In some cases, the needs associated with a particular field of endeavour will warrant the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, and we anticipate the appearance of more such organizations during the coming Plan. For their part, National Spiritual Assemblies will have to find ways in which they can stay well informed about what is being learned at the grassroots of their communities and analyse the experience being gained; in some places this will call for the creation of an entity dedicated to following social action. Looking across the Bahá'í world, we are delighted to see how much momentum has already been generated in this area of endeavour through the encouragement and support of the Bahá'í International Development Organization.

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Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs. However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts. This has particular implications for Local Spiritual Assemblies. In places where the activities of the Plan have attained a degree of prevalence, the Assembly begins to be viewed more widely as a source of moral insight. Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation. We are pleased with the steps that have already been taken to learn how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and from the experience of Bahá'í communities can be brought to bear upon pressing social issues at the local level; much more is sure to be learned in this regard during the Nine Year Plan.

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations. Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

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Educational endeavours and the training institute

The importance of education to a Bahá'í conception of spiritual and social transformation can hardly be overestimated. "Consider", Bahá'u'lláh states, "the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings dependeth upon it." The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Pre-eminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional

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training institutes operating with such proficiency around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans. Building capacity for service within communities by enabling ever-increasing numbers of individuals to benefit from the institute process will continue to be a central feature of the Plans in the present series. The capacity for community development that has already emerged, represented by hundreds of thousands of individuals who are able to serve as tutors, animators, or children's class teachers, is a resource of historic consequence.

- 22 When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever-deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release. Although the task of developing curricular materials to support this purpose is a long-term undertaking, existing materials already aim to build capacity for a broad range of initiatives. Moreover, they offer a seamless coherent educational experience from the age of five, upwards to the age of junior youth, and through into adulthood, and they serve as a direct counterpart to the pattern of activities unfolding at the grassroots. In relation to this, we have been pleased to see the rich insights that the friends in different parts of the world, in a variety of social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of community development. If these insights, and those still to emerge, are to benefit Bahá'í communities more widely, systems for the preparation and refinement of educational materials will need to be extended. With this in mind, we will soon set out the approach that will guide this work over the coming years.

With respect to raising the capacity of institutes to deliver each of the three stages of the educational process, we are glad to see that attention is increasingly being given to enhancing the quality of the educational experience itself, in addition to expanding the system for its delivery. A critical requirement is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections. Many training institute boards have been supported in this regard by the collaborative groups described in our message^{*} to your 2015 conference. In places, separate teams have also begun to focus respectively on children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, identifying factors that contribute to their effectiveness and finding ways to assist the friends involved in each avenue of service to further raise their own capacity. The Auxiliary Board members in a region and their assistants are often the first to see to it that what is being learned reaches a wider number of friends across adjoining clusters and within centres of intense activity. Individuals with a depth of experience in the promotion of institute activities are serving as resource persons, and they have proved instrumental in helping institutes at an earlier point of development to advance. Nevertheless, in general it is Counsellors who are ensuring that each institute becomes familiar with the many essential insights being generated by their sister agencies in neighbouring countries and regions. Counsellors have arranged for institutes to be organized into groupings of varying sizes to enable the lessons that are being learned by the most experienced institutes to be shared more widely, increasingly through the means of formal seminars. All these arrangements will need to be strengthened during the next Plan. In places where a site for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme is operating, collaboration between the learning site and associated institutes has already proved extremely fruitful, and it

* See 29 December 2015 message, paragraph 44, and more generally paragraphs 40-48 on "Enhancing institutional capacity".

should intensify; their pursuit of a common goal and their shared desire to see clusters advance create ideal conditions for the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance to flourish. The knowledge that has now accumulated about factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the institute process is extensive, and we look to the International Teaching Centre to organize what has been learned and make it available to you.

- 24 What we have described above is an educational system in a state of constant refinement. This requires many individuals to lend their support to its further development; it also requires institutes, and Bahá'í institutions more generally, to plan ahead and ensure that individuals who have developed considerable capacity in supporting the community's educational endeavours are able to sustain their service and can, when their life circumstances change, continue to be involved in the work of the institute in other meaningful ways. Appreciating the effectiveness of the institute process, every follower of Bahá'u'lláh will feel a desire to contribute to its advancement in some way—not least, the Bahá'í youth. Institutes know well that releasing the potential possessed by young people is, for them, a sacred charge; we now ask that Bahá'í youth view the future development of the institute in the very same light. At the vanguard of a nine-year, community-wide endeavour to bring the institute to a higher level of functioning, we expect to see a broad movement of youth setting the standard. They should seize every opportunity—in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction—to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute's programmes. Some youth will be able to devote a period of service—perhaps even successive years—to the provision of education, especially to those younger than themselves; for many, support for the institute's activities will be an ever-present dimension of their lives throughout their own education and as they seek a livelihood from their calling in this world; but for none should it be anything less than a cherished commitment.

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In many parts of the world, a natural outcome of the participation of individuals and families in the institute process has been an increased consciousness of the importance of education in all its forms. Friends serving as children's class teachers take a keen interest in the broad educational development of those they teach, while friends serving as tutors and animators are naturally concerned with the extent to which those approaching or entering adulthood—girls and boys alike—can access and benefit from education of many kinds, not limited to the courses offered by the institute itself. For instance, they can encourage young people to look towards apprenticeships or university studies. We have been struck by how, in many communities, engagement in the institute process by large numbers has gradually reshaped this aspect of culture within a population. The institutions of the Faith will need to take responsibility for ensuring that, as consciousness is raised in this way, the noble aspirations that arise in young people as a result—aspirations to acquire the education and training that will allow them to offer a lifetime of meaningful service to their society—can be fulfilled. The long-term development of a community and, ultimately, of a nation, from generation to generation, depends to a large degree on the effort made to invest in those who will assume responsibility for collective social progress.

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This exploration of the centrality of education to a community founded on Bahá'í principles would be incomplete without a further observation. Shoghi Effendi has laid great stress on the importance of striving, through "constant endeavour", to obtain "a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation". The training institute has no parallel as an instrument for the systematic exposure of limitless numbers of souls to the life-giving waters of the Revelation and the inexhaustible meaning of the Word of God. But the friends' efforts to increase their understanding of the Faith and its teachings are of course not limited to participation in the institute process. Indeed, one strong indicator of an institute's effectiveness is the thirst it cultivates within

those who engage with its materials to continue to study the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh—individually, but also collectively, whether in formal spaces created by the institutions or in more informal settings. Beyond the study of the Revelation itself, the implications that the teachings hold for countless fields of human endeavour are of great importance. A notable example of one form of education through which young believers are becoming better acquainted with a Bahá'í perspective on issues relevant to the progress of humanity is participation in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. Given the vastness of the ocean of the Revelation, it will be apparent that exploring its depths is a lifelong occupation of every soul who would tread the path of service.

- 27 As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.

Raising capacity for administration at all levels

- 28 Eighty years ago, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian described Bahá'í administration as “the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living”. Today, at the beginning of the second century of the Formative Age, the shape of Bahá'í administration has developed considerably, and its continued development will be essential for the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

The administration of the Faith at the grassroots is, of course, intimately connected with the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies. These nascent Houses of Justice are described by Shoghi Effendi as “the chief sinews of Bahá’í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure”, and he greatly emphasizes the importance of their formation. In 1995, we called for the reinstitution of the practice that required all Local Assemblies, including those being newly formed, to be elected on the First Day of Ridván rather than at any other time of year. This development was related to the fact that, while believers from outside a locality could assist with the electoral process, the primary responsibility for electing any Assembly and maintaining its operations rests with the Bahá’ís of that place; much depends on their readiness for undertaking administrative activity. It has been seen, in recent years, how a sense of Bahá’í identity can gradually gain strength in an area as a pattern of action grounded in the teachings becomes established among individuals and families living there. Thus, a community will often have attained a certain level of capacity in relation to community-building endeavours by the time the formation of a Local Assembly becomes possible. As this point approaches—and it should not be unduly delayed—efforts have to be made to cultivate an appreciation for the formal aspects of community life associated with Bahá’í administration. The Local Assembly that emerges in such a milieu is likely to be well aware of its responsibility to encourage and strengthen those activities which help to sustain a vibrant community. However, it will also need to gain proficiency in discharging a wide range of other responsibilities, and the support provided to it by your auxiliaries and their assistants will be vitally important. In our message* to your 2010 conference, we described the developmental path of such an Assembly, and we referred to various dimensions of its functioning that would need to receive attention, including its ability to manage and develop a Local Fund and, in time, to support initiatives of social action

* See 28 December 2010 message, paragraphs 17-27 on “Enhancing administrative capacity”.

and to interact with agencies of local government and civil society. The benefits that accrue to a community being served by such an Assembly need no elaboration.

30 In your interactions with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, we ask that you devote attention to the matter of establishing Local Spiritual Assemblies and consolidating their operations, especially in areas where this aspect of growth may have received less emphasis. We anticipate this will contribute to a rapid rise in the number of Local Assemblies formed year on year. In some countries, your consultations will need to include consideration of whether in rural areas existing arrangements for defining the boundaries of each locality are adequate.

31 One compelling insight which has emerged is that the extent to which the station and leadership of a Local Assembly is recognized in a community is related to how deeply the believers appreciate the sacredness of the electoral process and their duty to participate in it, in an atmosphere wholly free from the taint of suasion or worldly attitudes about power. As consciousness is raised in a community about the spiritual principles underlying Bahá'í elections, a new conception is formed of what it means for someone to be called to serve on an institution, and understanding grows of how the individual, the community, and the Local Assembly and its agencies relate to one another. Where systematic effort has been made to stimulate conversations in a community about the formation of the Local Assembly and its purpose, and to sustain those conversations year after year, the strength of the elected body and the dynamism of community life reinforce each other.

32 This reciprocal effect has been especially noticeable over the last two years in places where we have approved the adoption of a two-stage electoral process for a Local Spiritual Assembly, an approach which traces its origins to instructions given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Spiritual Assembly of Tíhrán. Twenty-two Local Assemblies, spread over eight countries, have already

begun to be elected by this method during this period. Similar in many respects to the election of a National Spiritual Assembly, it involves the division of a locality into units from each of which one or more delegates are elected, after which the delegates elect the members of the Local Assembly. As the number of Bahá'ís residing in a locality grows large and the community's capacity for managing complexity increases, the case for implementing a two-stage electoral process becomes commensurately stronger. Accordingly, in the coming Plan, we expect to authorize the adoption of this method for electing a Local Assembly in many more places, both urban and rural, where conditions make such a step timely.

A Local Spiritual Assembly maintains a keen interest in learning how best to advance the community-building work within its jurisdiction, and as such it consults regularly with friends involved in coordinating endeavours in the cluster. It follows closely the development of any centres of intense activity in the locality, especially by offering support to the teams of believers who have emerged there and are stimulating the process of growth. In general, the more the intensification of activity requires organizational arrangements at the level of the locality or in parts of the locality—say, arranging campaigns of home visits, accompanying families who are holding devotional meetings, or encouraging them to form groups to work together—the more prominent the role that can be assumed by the Local Assembly in this regard. In localities where large numbers are being welcomed into the embrace of Bahá'í activities, and where the complexity of an Assembly's work and manifold responsibilities is increasing, the Assembly sometimes finds that its Secretary needs to be supported by a staffed office, and eventually, the need for a befitting local *Hazíratu'l-Quds* becomes more pressing.

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As Local Assemblies begin to take on a greater and greater share of responsibility for nurturing the development of the community, institutions at the regional and national levels must become more systematic in their efforts to support

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them. We have been pleased to see this need being addressed in methodical ways, for instance by National Assemblies or Regional Councils convening periodic meetings with the Secretaries and other officers of Local Assemblies to consult about the unfoldment of specific lines of action.

- 35 Where a Regional Council has developed an enhanced capacity for administration, including an ability to provide appropriate kinds of support to many clusters at once, this has been conducive to the accelerated progress of the whole region. Our message* to your 2015 conference indicated that in smaller countries where the establishment of Regional Councils is not required, a formal structure would need to emerge at the national level which would be charged with helping clusters to advance. We ask that, in countries where this has not yet occurred, you now consult with National Assemblies about the steps that can be taken to appoint that formal structure, namely, a National Growth Committee with three, five, or seven members. The National Assembly will need to give this agency the necessary latitude to foster the movement of clusters, drawing relevant insights from what has been learned about Regional Councils in this regard. Its responsibilities can include appointing Area Teaching Committees and encouraging them in their plans, arranging for the deployment of homefront pioneers, supporting teaching projects, and distributing core literature. The Committee will benefit from being able to collaborate closely with the training institute, itself an agency of the National Assembly, and with the Auxiliary Board members serving the country, and it will also be able to communicate directly with the relevant Counsellor. While a National Assembly will naturally wish to maintain an ongoing familiarity with the work of the Committee and provide it with guidance, support, and encouragement, creating an entity that is wholly occupied with promoting growth should enable an Assembly to give greater attention to other important matters. In countries where Councils have not been formed but could

* See 29 December 2015 message, paragraph 41, or more generally paragraphs 40-48 on “Enhancing administrative capacity”.

be established eventually, a National Growth Committee should also be appointed at this time.

As the spiritual energies released by earnest pursuit of the Plan surge, they meet resistance from the countervailing forces that hold humanity back from attaining full maturity. In the face of such forces, the vitality of the various lines of action being followed at the local level needs to be preserved and fortified. This critical responsibility is of special relevance to the members of the two Auxiliary Boards, whose numerous, demanding duties keep them closely connected to conditions at the grassroots and alert to anything that might affect the spirit of a community. Across different cultures and social environments, they must assist the friends to face different kinds of challenges: to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal; to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity's period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds; to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook; to put the equality of women and men into practice; to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative; to put one's support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference; to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects; to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests; to reject the opiate of consumerism; to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God. These, and many more besides, constitute a formidable set of responsibilities for the company of the faithful to fulfil as they navigate what are sure to be tumultuous years in the life of humanity. Your auxiliaries, who have so creditably acquitted themselves in advancing the process of entry by troops, must be equal to all such challenges whenever and wherever they arise. Through the power of their good example and the clarity of their good

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counsel, may they help the friends to grow in faith, assurance, and commitment to a life of service, and accompany them as they build communities that are havens of peace, places where a harried and conflict-scarred humanity may find shelter.

- 37 Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society-building power of the Faith shine forth.

A historic mission

- 38 We hope to have impressed upon you, in these pages, that the present-day capacity of the Bahá'í community, combined with the discipline it has achieved through adherence to a coherent framework for action, has prepared it for an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material. The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than those with which it honours the glorious

deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.

We put great reliance on you and on National Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that, in all the efforts made to acquaint the friends with the nature of this collective enterprise, the perspective of history is kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: “Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?” The establishment of Divine Civilization is, in the words of the Guardian, “the primary mission of the Bahá’í Faith”. It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration, fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth, a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart. 39

How we long to see humanity illumined with the love of its Lord; how we long to hear His praise on every tongue. Knowing the ardency of our wish, you know then the emotion with which, when we lay our heads upon the Most Holy Threshold, we implore Bahá’u’lláh to make you, and all who cherish His precious Faith, ever more perfect channels of His ineffable grace. 40

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

REFERENCED & RELATED MESSAGES

To the Friends Gathered in the Holy Land
to Mark the Centenary Commemoration
of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

- 1 Our hearts are filled with wonder as we contemplate the significance of this momentous occasion: the close of one hundred years since the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, one hundred years since the inception of the Formative Age of the Bahá’í Dispensation, and one hundred years since the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh was entrusted to His Administrative Order, whose institutions you here represent. How marvellous is His Covenant, through which “this unique, this wondrous System” has been established in your nations and its processes made to operate. We bow our heads in gratitude to Bahá’u’lláh that, despite the numerous and severe obstacles of a world in turmoil, He has opened the doors and facilitated the means for you—including, for the first time, representatives of Regional Bahá’í Councils—to be here during these soul-stirring days.

- 2 A period of special potency which began in 2016 with the centenary of the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan and included the bicentennial anniversaries of the Birth of the Twin Manifestations of God is now, a hundred years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, drawing to a close. The advancements the Bahá’í community has made during this time have been nothing less than extraordinary. These have prepared the believers everywhere to meet the demands and fulfil the requirements of the next stage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan, which is to commence just months from now and will last nine years. The accelerating decline of the current social order, and the growing need for constructive processes that will lead to the emergence of a new world society, are daily more evident. A century after the Master bequeathed to the followers of the Greatest Name a document which contains priceless elements

for building a divine civilization, we are reminded of the words of the beloved Guardian: “The champion builders of Bahá’u’lláh’s rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension and distress.”

Beloved friends, on this Day of the Covenant we all look to its Centre and recall the life and Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a Figure Whose very being was the embodiment of the Covenant, that pivotal centre of unity for all humankind, binding together the multitudinous peoples of the earth. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that Mystery of God, “a sign of His greatness”, and “the most perfect bounty”, Who is treasured in the pure hearts of countless children, youth, and adults, is surely watching over and aiding His loved ones, ever casting His eye of protection over them. In these uncertain times, the friends turn with hope and longing to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that “shelter for all mankind”, “a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth”, beseeching His assistance from the realms above as they endeavour to follow His example in the path of service. During the coming days, when the thoughts of the believers all around the world are focused on “this sacred and glorious Being”, you have the blessing and privilege of paying homage to Him on behalf of your communities in those very spots where He laboured day and night for the promotion of the Cause of God and for the betterment of humankind.

Tomorrow night, on the eve of the centenary of His passing, we will hold His loved ones throughout the world in our hearts as we pray in the sacred room where the final moments of His earthly life were spent. We will ardently supplicate that the healing message for which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lived and sacrificed His all may, before long, find a home in the hearts and souls of all humanity and that the efforts of the friends of God to this end may be acceptable in His sight.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

1 The final words in a most memorable chapter in the history of the Cause have now been written, and the page turns. This Riḍván marks the conclusion of an extraordinary year, of a Five Year Plan, and of an entire series of Plans that began in 1996. A new series of Plans beckons, with what promises to be a momentous twelve months serving as a prelude to a nine-year effort due to commence next Riḍván. We see before us a community that has rapidly gained strength and is ready to take great strides forward. But there must be no illusions about how much striving was required to reach this point and how hard-won were the insights acquired along the way: the lessons learned will shape the community's future, and the account of how they were learned sheds light on what is to come.

2 The decades leading up to 1996, rich with advances and insights of their own, had left no doubt that large numbers of people in many societies would be ready to enter under the banner of the Faith. Yet, as encouraging as instances of large-scale enrolment were, they did not equate to a sustainable process of growth that could be cultivated in diverse settings. Profound questions faced the community which, at that time, it had insufficient experience to answer adequately. How could efforts aimed at its expansion proceed hand in hand with the process of consolidation and resolve the long-standing, seemingly intractable challenge of sustaining growth? How could individuals, institutions and communities be raised up that would be capable of translating Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action? And how could those who were attracted to the teachings become protagonists in a global spiritual enterprise?

So it was that, a quarter of a century ago, a Bahá'í community that could still count three Hands of the Cause of God in its front ranks embarked on a Four Year Plan, distinguished from those that came before it by its focus on a single aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This aim came to define the series of Plans that followed. The community had already come to understand that this process was not just the entry into the Faith of sizeable groups, nor would it emerge spontaneously; it implied purposeful, systematic, accelerated expansion and consolidation. This work would require the informed participation of a great many souls, and in 1996, the Bahá'í world was summoned to take up the vast educational challenge this entailed. It was called to establish a network of training institutes focused on generating an increasing flow of individuals endowed with the necessary capacities to sustain the process of growth.

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The friends set about this task aware that, notwithstanding their previous victories in the teaching field, plainly they had much to learn about which capacities to acquire and, crucially, how to acquire them. In many ways, the community would learn by doing, and the lessons it learned, once they had been distilled and refined by being applied in diverse settings over time, would eventually be incorporated into educational materials. It was recognized that certain activities were a natural response to the spiritual needs of a population. Study circles, children's classes, devotional meetings, and later junior youth groups stood out as being of central importance in this regard, and when woven together with related activities, the dynamics generated could give rise to a vibrant pattern of community life. And as the numbers participating in these core activities grew, a new dimension was added to their original purpose. They came to serve as portals through which youth, adults and whole families from the wider society could come into an encounter with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. It was also becoming apparent how practical it was to consider strategies for the work of community building within the context of the "cluster": a geographic area of manageable size with distinct

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social and economic features. A capacity for preparing simple plans at the level of the cluster began to be cultivated, and out of such plans, programmes for the growth of the Faith arose, organized into what would become three-month cycles of activity. An important point of clarity emerged early on: the movement of individuals through a sequence of courses gives impetus to, and is perpetuated by, the movement of clusters along a continuum of development. This complementary relationship helped the friends everywhere to assess the dynamics of growth in their own surroundings and chart a path towards increased strength. As time went on, it proved fruitful to view what was occurring in a cluster both from the perspective of three educational imperatives—serving children, junior youth, and youth and adults—as well as from the perspective of the cycles of activity essential to the rhythm of growth. Part-way into a twenty-five-year endeavour, many of the most recognizable features of the growth process we see today were becoming well established.

- 5 As the efforts of the friends intensified, various principles, concepts and strategies of universal relevance to the growth process began to crystallize into a framework for action that could evolve to accommodate new elements. This framework proved fundamental to the release of tremendous vitality. It assisted the friends to channel their energies in ways that, experience had shown, were conducive to the growth of healthy communities. But a framework is not a formula. By taking into account the various elements of the framework when assessing the reality of a cluster, a locality, or simply a neighbourhood, a pattern of activity could be developed that drew on what the rest of the Bahá'í world was learning while still being a response to the particulars of that place. A dichotomy between rigid requirements on the one hand and limitless personal preferences on the other gave way to a more nuanced understanding of the variety of means by which individuals could support a process that, at its heart, was coherent and continually being refined as experience accumulated. Let there be no doubt about the advance represented by the

emergence of this framework: the implications for harmonizing and unifying the endeavours of the entire Bahá'í world and propelling its onward march were of great consequence.

As one Plan succeeded another, and engagement with the work of community building became more broadly based, advances at the level of culture became more pronounced. For instance, the importance of educating the younger generations became more widely appreciated, as did the extraordinary potential represented by junior youth in particular. Souls assisting and accompanying one another along a shared path, constantly widening the circle of mutual support, became the pattern to which all efforts aimed at developing capacity for service aspired. Even the interactions of the friends among themselves and with those around them underwent a change, as awareness was raised of the power of meaningful conversations to kindle and fan spiritual susceptibilities. And significantly, Bahá'í communities adopted an increasingly outward-looking orientation. Any soul responsive to the vision of the Faith could become an active participant—even a promoter and facilitator—of educational activities, meetings for worship and other elements of the community-building work; from among such souls, many would also declare their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Thus, a conception of the process of entry by troops emerged that relied less on theories and assumptions and more on actual experience of how large numbers of people could find the Faith, become familiar with it, identify with its aims, join in its activities and deliberations, and in many cases embrace it. Indeed, as the institute process was strengthened in region after region, the number of individuals taking a share in the work of the Plan, extending even to those recently acquainted with the Faith, grew by leaps and bounds. But this was not being driven by a mere concern for numbers. A vision of personal and collective transformation occurring simultaneously, founded on study of the Word of God and an appreciation of each person's capacity to become a protagonist in a profound spiritual drama, had given rise to a sense of common endeavour.

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- 7 One of the most striking and inspiring features of this twenty-five-year period has been the service rendered by Bahá'í youth, who with faith and valour have assumed their rightful place in the forefront of the community's efforts. As teachers of the Cause and educators of the young, as mobile tutors and homefront pioneers, as cluster coordinators and members of Bahá'í agencies, youth on five continents have arisen to serve their communities with devotion and sacrifice. The maturity they have demonstrated, in the discharge of duties upon which depends the advancement of the Divine Plan, is expressive of their spiritual vitality and their commitment to safeguarding humanity's future. In recognition of this increasingly evident maturity, we have decided that, immediately following this Ridván, while the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly shall remain twenty-one, the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections shall be lowered to eighteen. We have no doubt that Bahá'í youth everywhere who are of age will vindicate our confidence in their ability to fulfil "conscientiously and diligently" the "sacred duty" to which every Bahá'í elector is called.

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- 8 We are conscious that, naturally, the realities of communities differ greatly. Different national communities, and different places within those communities, began this series of Plans at different points of development; since then, they have also developed at different speeds and have attained different levels of progress. This, in itself, is nothing new. It has always been the case that conditions in places vary, as does the degree of receptivity found there. But we perceive, too, a swelling tide, whereby the capacity, confidence and accumulated experience of most communities are rising, buoyed by the success of their sister communities near and far. As an example, while souls who arose to open a new locality in 1996 lacked nothing for courage, faith and devotion, today their counterparts

everywhere combine those same qualities with knowledge, insights and skills that are the accumulation of twenty-five years of effort by the entire Bahá'í world to systematize and refine the work of expansion and consolidation.

Regardless of a community's starting point, it has advanced the process of growth when it has combined qualities of faith, perseverance and commitment with a readiness to learn. In fact, a cherished legacy of this series of Plans is the widespread recognition that any effort to advance begins with an orientation towards learning. The simplicity of this precept belies the significance of the implications that follow from it. We do not doubt that every cluster, given time, will progress along the continuum of development; the communities that have advanced most quickly, relative to those whose circumstances and possibilities were similar, have shown an ability to foster unity of thought and to learn about effective action. And they did so without hesitating to act.

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A commitment to learning also meant being prepared to make mistakes—and sometimes, of course, mistakes brought discomfort. Unsurprisingly, new methods and approaches were handled inexpertly at first because of a lack of experience; on occasion, a newly acquired capacity of one kind was lost as a community became absorbed in developing another. Having the best of intentions is no guarantee against making missteps, and moving past them requires both humility and detachment. When a community has remained determined to show forbearance and learn from mistakes that naturally occur, progress has never been out of reach.

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Midway through the series of Plans, the community's involvement in the life of society began to become the focus of more direct attention. The believers were encouraged to think of this in terms of two interconnected areas of endeavour—social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. These, of course, were not alternatives to the work of expansion and consolidation, much less distractions from it:

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they were inherent within it. The greater the human resources a community could call on, the greater became its capacity to bring the wisdom contained in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to bear upon the challenges of the day—to translate His teachings into reality. And the troubled affairs of humankind over this period seemed to underline how desperate was its need for the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician. Implied in all this was a conception of religion very different from those holding sway in the world at large: a conception which recognized religion as the potent force propelling an ever-advancing civilization. It was understood that such a civilization would also not appear spontaneously, of its own accord—it was the mission of Bahá'u'lláh's followers to labour for its emergence. Such a mission demanded applying the same process of systematic learning to the work of social action and engagement in public discourse.

- 12 Viewed from the perspective of the last two and a half decades, the capacity for undertaking social action has risen markedly, leading to an extraordinary efflorescence of activity. Compared with 1996, when some 250 social and economic development projects were being sustained from year to year, there are now 1,500, and the number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations has quadrupled to surpass 160. More than 70,000 grassroots social action initiatives of short duration are being undertaken each year, a fifty-fold increase. We look forward to a continued rise in all these endeavours resulting from the dedicated support and stimulus now provided by the Bahá'í International Development Organization. Meanwhile, Bahá'í participation in the prevalent discourses of society has also grown immensely. Besides the many occasions when the friends find they can offer a Bahá'í perspective in conversations that occur in a work or personal context, more formal participation in discourses has significantly advanced. We have in mind not only the much-expanded efforts and increasingly sophisticated contributions of the Bahá'í International Community—which in this period added Offices in Africa, Asia and Europe—but also the work of a vastly augmented,

greatly fortified network of national Offices of External Affairs, for whom this area of endeavour became the principal focus; in addition, there were insightful and notable contributions made by individual believers to specific fields. All this goes some way towards explaining the esteem, appreciation and admiration which leaders of thought and other prominent figures at all levels of society have again and again expressed for the Faith, its followers and their activities.

In reviewing the entire twenty-five-year period, we are awed by the many kinds of progress the Bahá'í world has made concurrently. Its intellectual life has thrived, as demonstrated not only by its advances in all the areas of endeavour already discussed, but also by the volume of high-quality literature published by Bahá'í authors, by the development of spaces for the exploration of certain disciplines in the light of the teachings, and by the impact of the undergraduate and graduate seminars systematically offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, which, in collaboration with the institutions of the Cause, now serves Bahá'í youth from well over 100 countries. Efforts to raise up Houses of Worship have very visibly accelerated. The last Mother Temple was erected in Santiago, Chile, and projects to build two national and five local *Mashriqu'l-Adhikárs* were initiated; the Houses of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia, and Norte del Cauca, Colombia, have already opened their doors. Bahá'í Temples, whether newly dedicated or long established, are increasingly occupying a position at the heart of community life. The material support offered by the rank and file of the believers for the myriad endeavours undertaken by the friends of God has been unstinting. Simply viewed as a measure of collective spiritual vitality, the generosity and sacrifice with which, at a time of considerable economic upheaval, the critical flow of funds has been maintained—nay, invigorated—is most telling. In the realm of Bahá'í administration, the capacity of National Spiritual Assemblies to manage the affairs of their communities in all their growing complexity has been considerably enhanced. They have benefited in particular from new

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heights of collaboration with the Counsellors, who have been instrumental in systematizing the gathering of insights from the grassroots across the world and ensuring they are widely disseminated. This was also the period in which the Regional Bahá'í Council emerged as a fully fledged institution of the Cause, and in 230 regions now, Councils and those training institutes they oversee have proved themselves indispensable for advancing the process of growth. To extend into the future the functions of the Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh was established in 2005; today it coordinates the efforts of no less than 33 National and Regional Boards of Trustees that now compass the globe, which in turn guide the work of over 1,000 Representatives. The developments which occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during this same period are many: witness the completion of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb and two buildings on the Arc and the commencement of the construction of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not to mention a host of projects to strengthen and preserve the precious Holy Places of the Faith. The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Shrine of the Báb were recognized as World Heritage sites, places of inestimable significance for humanity. The public flocked to these sacred locations in their hundreds of thousands, approaching one and a half million in some years, and the World Centre regularly welcomed hundreds of pilgrims at once, sometimes more than 5,000 in a year, along with a similar number of Bahá'í visitors; we are delighted as much by the raised numbers as by the scores of different peoples and nations represented among those who partake of the bounty of pilgrimage. The translation, publication and dissemination of the Sacred Texts has also been greatly accelerated, in parallel with the development of the Bahá'í Reference Library, one of the most notable members of the growing family of websites associated with Bahai.org, which itself is now available in ten languages. A variety of offices and agencies have been established, situated at the World Centre and elsewhere, charged with supporting the process of learning unfolding across multiple

areas of endeavour throughout the Bahá'í world. All this, our sisters and brothers in faith, is but a fraction of the tale we could recount of what your devotion to Him Who was the Wronged One of the World has brought forth. We can but echo the poignant words once voiced by the beloved Master when, overcome with emotion, He cried out: "O Bahá'u'lláh! What hast Thou done?"

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From the panorama of a pivotal quarter century, we now direct our focus to the most recent Five Year Plan, a Plan quite unlike any that has gone before in a variety of ways. In this Plan we urged the Bahá'ís of the world to draw on all that they had learned in the previous twenty years and put it to full effect. We are delighted that our hopes in this regard were more than met, but while we would naturally expect great things from the followers of the Blessed Beauty, the character of what was achieved through their herculean efforts was truly breathtaking. It was the capstone to an accomplishment twenty-five years in the making.

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The Plan was especially memorable for being trisected by two sacred bicentenaries, each of which galvanized local communities the world over. The company of the faithful demonstrated, on a scale never previously witnessed and with relative ease, a capacity to engage people from all sections of society in honouring the life of a Manifestation of God. It was a powerful indicator of something broader: the ability to channel the release of tremendous spiritual energies for the advancement of the Cause. So magnificent was the response that in many places the Faith was propelled out of obscurity at the national level. In settings where it was unexpected, perhaps unlooked for, marked receptivity to the Faith became apparent. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands were transported by their encounter with a devotional spirit that is

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today characteristic of Bahá'í communities everywhere. The vision of what is made possible by observing a Bahá'í Holy Day was immeasurably expanded.

- 16 The achievements of the Plan, simply in numerical terms, quickly eclipsed those of all the Plans that had preceded it since 1996. At the start of this Plan, the capacity existed for conducting just over 100,000 core activities at a given time, a capacity that was the fruit of twenty years of common endeavour. Now, 300,000 core activities are being sustained at once. Participation in those activities has risen above two million, which is also close to a threefold increase. There are 329 national and regional training institutes in operation, and their capacity is evidenced by the fact that three-quarters of a million people have been enabled to complete at least one book of the sequence; overall, the number of courses completed by individuals is now also two million—a rise of well over a third in five years.

- 17 The increased intensity with which programmes of growth around the world are being pursued tells an impressive story of its own. In this five-year span, we had called for growth to be accelerated in every one of the 5,000 clusters where it had begun. This imperative became the impetus for earnest endeavour throughout the world. As a result, the number of intensive programmes of growth more than doubled and now stands at approximately 4,000. Difficulties involved in opening up new villages and neighbourhoods to the Faith in the midst of a global health crisis, or expanding activities that were at an early stage when the pandemic began, prevented an even higher total from being reached during the Plan's final year. However, there is more to tell than this. At the outset of the Plan, we had expressed the hope that the number of clusters where the friends had passed the third milestone along a continuum of growth, as a consequence of learning how to welcome large numbers into the embrace of their activities, would grow by hundreds more. That total then stood at around 200, spread across some 40 countries. Five years

on, this number has risen to an astonishing 1,000 in nearly 100 countries—a quarter of all the intensive programmes of growth in the world and an achievement far surpassing our expectations. And yet even these figures do not reveal the loftiest heights to which the community has soared. There are over 30 clusters where the number of core activities being sustained exceeds 1,000; in places, the total is several thousand, involving the participation of more than 20,000 people in a single cluster. A growing number of Local Spiritual Assemblies now oversee the unfoldment of educational programmes that cater to practically all the children and junior youth in a village; the same reality is beginning to emerge within a few urban neighbourhoods. Engagement with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has, in notable instances, transcended individuals, families and extended kinships—what is being witnessed is the movement of populations towards a common centre. At times, age-old hostilities between opposing groups are being left behind, and certain social structures and dynamics are being transformed in the light of the divine teachings.

We cannot but be overjoyed at advances so impressive. The society-building power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is being manifested with ever more clarity, and this is a firm foundation upon which the coming Nine Year Plan will build. Clusters of marked strength, as had been hoped, have proven to be reservoirs of knowledge and resources for their neighbours. And regions where more than one such cluster exist have more easily developed the means to accelerate growth in cluster after cluster. We feel compelled to stress again, however, that progress has been near universal; the difference in progress between one place and another is of degree. The community's collective understanding of the process of entry by troops and its confidence in being able to stimulate this process under any set of circumstances have risen to levels that were unimaginable in decades past. The profound questions that had loomed for so long, and which were brought into sharp focus in 1996, have been convincingly answered by the Bahá'í world. There is a generation of believers whose entire lives bear the imprint

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of the community's progress. But the sheer scale of what has occurred in those many clusters where the frontiers of learning are being extended has turned a significant advance in the process of entry by troops into a momentous one of historic proportions.

- 19 Many will be familiar with how the Guardian divided the Ages of the Faith into consecutive epochs; the fifth epoch of the Formative Age began in 2001. Less well known is that the Guardian also made specific reference to there being epochs of the Divine Plan, and stages within those epochs. Held in abeyance for two decades while local and national organs of the Administrative Order were being raised up and strengthened, the Divine Plan conceived by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was formally inaugurated in 1937 with the commencement of the first stage of its first epoch: the Seven Year Plan assigned by the Guardian to the North American Bahá'í community. This first epoch closed after the conclusion of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963, which had resulted in the banner of the Faith being planted across the world. The opening stage of the second epoch was the first Nine Year Plan, and no less than ten Plans have followed in its wake, Plans that have ranged in duration from twelve months to seven years. At the dawn of this second epoch, the Bahá'í world was already witnessing the earliest beginnings of that entry into the Faith by troops that had been foreseen by the Author of the Divine Plan; in the succeeding decades, generations of devoted believers within the community of the Greatest Name have laboured in the Divine Vineyard to cultivate the conditions required for sustained, large-scale growth. And at this glorious season of Ridván, how abundant are the fruits of those labours! The phenomenon of sizeable numbers swelling the activities of the community, catching the spark of faith and swiftly arising to serve at the leading edge of the Plan has moved from being a forecast sustained by faith to a recurring reality. Such a pronounced and demonstrable advance demands to be marked in the annals of the Cause. With elated hearts, we announce that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan has begun. Stage by stage,

epoch after epoch shall His Plan unfold, until the light of the Kingdom illumines every heart.

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Beloved friends, no review of the five-year enterprise that concluded the second epoch of the Divine Plan would be complete without special reference to the upheavals that accompanied its final year and which persist still. The restrictions on personal interaction that waxed and waned in most countries over this period could have dealt the community's collective efforts a severe blow, recovery from which might have taken years, but there are two reasons why this was not the case. One was the widespread consciousness of the duty of Bahá'ís to serve humanity, never more so than in times of peril and adversity. The other was the extraordinary rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world to give expression to that consciousness. Accustomed over many years to adopting patterns of systematic action, the friends brought their creativity and sense of purpose to bear on an unforeseen crisis, while ensuring that the new approaches they developed were coherent with the framework they had laboured in successive Plans to perfect. This is not to overlook the serious hardships being endured by Bahá'ís, like their compatriots in every land; yet throughout severe difficulties, the believers have remained focused. Resources have been channelled to communities in need, elections went ahead wherever possible, and in all circumstances the institutions of the Cause have continued to discharge their duties. There have even been bold steps forward. The National Spiritual Assembly of São Tomé and Príncipe will be re-established this Riḍván, and two new pillars of the Universal House of Justice will be raised up: the National Spiritual Assembly of Croatia, with its seat in Zagreb, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Timor-Leste, with its seat in Dili.

21 And so the One Year Plan begins. Its purpose and requirements have already been set out in our message sent on the Day of the Covenant; this Plan, though brief, will suffice to prepare the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan that is to follow. A period of special potency, which opened one hundred years after the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, will soon close with the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, marking the conclusion of the first century of the Formative Age and the start of the second. The company of the faithful enter this new Plan at a time when humanity, chastened by the exposure of its vulnerability, seems more conscious of the need for collaboration to address global challenges. Yet, lingering habits of contest, self-interest, prejudice and closed-mindedness continue to hinder the movement towards unity, despite growing numbers in society who are showing in words and deeds how they, too, yearn for greater acceptance of humanity's inherent oneness. We pray that the family of nations may succeed in putting aside its differences in the interests of the common good. Notwithstanding the uncertainties that shroud the months ahead, we entreat Bahá'u'lláh to make the confirmations that have sustained His followers for so long more abundant still, that you may be carried forward in your mission, your composure undisturbed by the turbulence of a world whose need for His healing message is ever more acute.

22 The Divine Plan enters a new epoch and a new stage. The page is turned.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

29 December 2015

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

The Plan upon which the Bahá'í world embarked nearly five years ago is in its closing stages; the final tally of its accomplishments grows still, but will soon be sealed. The collective effort it inspired has called for wholehearted reliance on those powers with which a benevolent Lord has endowed His loved ones. Gathered with you at this moment of reflection, we are conscious of a determination among the friends to bring the current Plan to a fitting conclusion, and of an eagerness to advance further along the path that experience has marked out. 1

The considerable distance already travelled along that path is evident from the present Plan's most striking outcomes. The ambitious goal of raising to 5,000 the number of clusters where a programme of growth, at whatever level of intensity, is under way looks set to be achieved in the months that remain before Ridván 2016. In many scores of clusters, there are over a thousand inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—taking part in a well-established pattern of activity that embraces ever-larger numbers, raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Worldwide, half a million individuals have now been enabled to complete at least the first book in the sequence of courses, an extraordinary feat that has laid a sure foundation for the system of human resource development. A generation of youth is being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world. Marvelling at what they have seen, leaders of society in certain places are pressing the Bahá'ís to make their programmes for educating the young widely available. Faced with increasing complexity, Bahá'í institutions and their agencies are finding 2

ways to organize the activities of rising numbers of friends by promoting collaboration and mutual support. And the capacity for learning, which represented such a priceless legacy of previous Plans, is being extended beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass other areas of Bahá'í endeavour, notably social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. We see a community fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unremitting effort focused on a common aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

- 3 That this process must go much further, there can be no doubt; nevertheless, developments demonstrate that a significant advance has already occurred. It has prepared the friends of God for a more exacting test of their capabilities, one that will also make great demands of your institution as you rally them to meet its requirements. In this coming Plan, which will conclude at the threshold of the second century of the Formative Age of the Faith, we will call the believers everywhere to the immense exertion necessary to bring to fruition the seeds that have been so lovingly and assiduously sown and watered in the five Plans that preceded it.

The emergence of a programme of growth

- 4 The unfoldment of the process of growth in a cluster, while naturally possessing unique features in every instance shaped by the receptivity of those who are exposed to the divine teachings, conforms to certain shared characteristics. Many of these were discussed in our message to your 2010 conference, in which reference was made to a series of milestones that mark progress along a path of development. A collective understanding of what is required for the friends in a cluster to pass the first of the milestones we described, and then the second, has grown over this period.

In the Five Year Plan now ending, the task facing the believers has been to apply all that had been learned from previous Plans to the work of extending the process of growth to thousands of new clusters. What this has shown is that much depends on the ability of the institutions to draw on help from friends in other clusters, reinforcing the actions of an existing Bahá'í community by, for example, arranging the support of visiting teaching teams or tutors. In many places, the institute process begins with the assistance of believers from stronger neighbouring communities who find creative ways of reaching out to the local population, youth in particular, and supporting them as they start to engage in service. Efforts to stimulate activity in a cluster, especially one that has not yet been opened to the Faith, are greatly enhanced if one or more individuals settle there as homefront pioneers, concentrating their attention on part of a village or even a single street where there is heightened receptivity. Well over 4,500 believers have already arisen to serve in this way during the present Plan, an astonishing accomplishment.

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Whatever the combination of strategies used, the chief aim is to initiate a process for building capacity within the cluster through which its inhabitants, prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, are enabled to begin offering acts of service. Once this fundamental requirement is met, a programme of growth has emerged. Essential, of course, is the support of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, whose close involvement from the first stirrings of activity helps the friends to maintain a clear and united vision of what is needed.

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Strengthening the pattern of action

Before long, there forms a nucleus of friends in a cluster who are working and consulting together and arranging activities. For the process of growth to advance further, the number of people sharing this commitment must rise, and

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their capacity for undertaking systematic action within the framework of the Plan must correspondingly increase. And similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place.

- 8 Foremost among these conditions is an institute process gaining in strength, given its centrality to fostering the movement of populations. The friends who have begun studying institute materials, and are also investing their energies in organizing children's classes, junior youth groups, gatherings for collective worship, or other related activities, are being assisted to proceed further through the sequence of courses, while the number of those starting their study continues to rise. With the flow of participants through institute courses and into the field of action being maintained, the company of those who are sustaining the growth process expands. Progress relies to a large extent on the quality of the efforts of those serving as tutors. At this early stage, most of them might still be drawn from other clusters, but at the same time, a few local friends are being raised up who, as their capacity for action increases, begin to help others study the materials of the institute. Efforts to usher in the first cadre of tutors from the cluster should steer a path between two undesirable outcomes. If individuals proceed through the courses of the institute too hastily, the capacity to serve is not sufficiently developed; conversely, if study is overly prolonged, the process is robbed of the dynamism essential to its advancement. In differing circumstances, creative solutions have been used to achieve the necessary balance, ensuring that, within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors.

- 9 Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with

some experience increases consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time. Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path.

Where the institute is concerned, the flow of participants through its courses creates a growing need for them to be systematically supported as they begin serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors. Opportunities naturally arise for those among the core of believers who have already gained a measure of experience in the educational activities to assist those who are newer to them. An individual's readiness to help others move forward in their efforts to serve might lead to specific responsibilities being assigned to him or her. In this manner, coordinators of each of the three stages of the educational process gradually emerge as needs demand. Their actions are always motivated by a desire to see capacity develop in others and to foster friendships founded on cooperation and reciprocity.

Clearly, the institute process raises capacity for a broad range of undertakings; from the earliest courses, participants are encouraged to visit their friends at their homes and study a prayer together or share with them a theme from the Bahá'í teachings. Arrangements for supporting the friends in these endeavours, which may have been largely informal, eventually prove inadequate, signalling the need for an Area Teaching Committee to appear. Its principal focus is the mobilization of individuals, often through the formation of teams, for the continued spread of the pattern of activity in a cluster. Its members come to see everyone as a potential collaborator in a collective enterprise, and they appreciate their own part in nurturing a spirit of common purpose in the community.

With a Committee in place, the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for worship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably. You will need to encourage National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, as much as training institutes, to remain alert to when conditions in a cluster call for organizational arrangements to assume a definite shape—neither acting prematurely nor unduly delaying the appearance of formal structures.

- 12 Just like individuals, the agencies emerging in a cluster need assistance as they take up their duties. The help that Auxiliary Board members provide in this regard is essential, but it is also an important responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils or, where no Council exists, of the National Spiritual Assembly itself, and it is a pressing concern for training institutes as well. The capacity to serve ably at the cluster level increases when spaces are created in which the believers involved can study guidance, reflect on their actions in its light and draw insights therefrom, and also become connected with the wider body of knowledge being generated in surrounding clusters and further afield. Instead of formulating plans in the abstract, consultations conducted in such spaces often aim at capturing the reality of the cluster at that particular moment and identifying the immediate next steps to facilitate progress. Those serving at the regional or national level may do much to advise the friends and expand their vision of what can be accomplished, but they would not seek to impose their own expectations on the planning process; rather, they are helping the believers who are labouring in a cluster to gradually enhance their ability to devise and implement a course of action informed by the experience accumulating at the grass-roots of the community and familiarity with actual conditions. In order to develop the capacity of cluster agencies to learn and to act systematically, regional and national institutions need to be conscientious and methodical in their own efforts to assist them. Your auxiliaries' support for this work will ensure that each element of the growth process attains the

requisite characteristics and that the integrity and coherence of all the endeavours are maintained.

The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated. 13

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence 14

that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. What is clear, then, is that as the institute process in a cluster gains momentum, the act of teaching comes to assume greater prominence in the lives of the friends.

- 15 As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes. The actions undertaken during this phase allow abilities developed through studying the relevant institute materials to be exercised and refined. As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause. The approach of working in teams allows the friends to serve together, offer mutual support, and build confidence—but even when carrying out actions individually, they are coordinating their efforts to greater effect. Their focus and investment of time endow this short but decisive phase of the cycle with the intensity it demands. This spirit of high resolve serves to multiply the community's powers, and in each cycle the friends learn to depend more and more on the potent confirmations from the divine realm that their actions attract.

Five years ago, most of the clusters where an intensive programme of growth had been established were those where a reasonable number of Bahá'ís already lived, often geographically spread out. Efforts on the part of those believers to advance the work by inviting the participation of friends, co-workers, extended family, and acquaintances did much to raise the level of activity throughout the cluster. Indeed, widening the circle of participation in this way has become a familiar aspect of Bahá'í life and remains essential. At the same time, experience indicates that, for growth to accelerate through a steady flow of new participants entering the institute process, more is required. The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible.

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Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them

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frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. Over time, the cluster as a whole and its centres of intense activity will infuse one another with the heightened understanding that comes from efforts to apply the teachings in different contexts.

18 As the friends in a cluster continue to reinforce and expand the community-building activities taking shape around them, it becomes evident that distinctive progress has been made. All the elements of a system necessary for growth to be sustained are now in place. Reaching the second milestone along the continuum of development, which we described to you five years ago, is accompanied by advances qualitative, but also quantitative—such as a rise in the number of those involved in conversations that enable receptivity to be discovered and nurtured, in how many homes are being visited, in core activities and participation, in how many individuals are beginning the sequence of courses or supporting others as they gain the confidence to serve. Attendance at gatherings to mark the Nineteen Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Days is being fostered by Local Spiritual Assemblies. Such advances are the more visible signs of a much finer development: the gradual spread, within a population, of a pattern of community life based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And, naturally, the number of believers grows.

19 In the last five years, the path that leads to the emergence of an intensive programme of growth has become more readily discernible. It must be earnestly pursued. In the Plan that will commence this Ridván, we are calling for growth to be accelerated in all clusters where it has begun. Notwithstanding

the natural ebb and flow characteristic of an organic process, there should appear a clear arc of progress over the course of twenty cycles. This combined effort should seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Riḍván 2021.

We set this objective before the Bahá'í world conscious that it is truly formidable; that a herculean labour will be required; that many sacrifices will have to be made. But faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá'u'lláh's elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers. God willing, their exertions will prove worthy to crown a hundred years of toil and set the stage for exploits as yet unimagined that must adorn the second century of the Formative Age. 20

In the coming months, you will be initiating consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies to assess with them the implications that this global goal holds for their respective communities, a process of consultation which has to be quickly extended until it reaches the grassroots. Action must then ensue. We anticipate that progress will be more swiftly achieved in regions where one or more intensive programmes of growth have been sustained for some time, as these offer a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources as efforts are made to strengthen surrounding areas. Pursuit of this goal will also result in the emergence of new programmes of growth, often in unopened clusters that neighbour those where a significant advance has occurred. Such a flow of assistance finds its origin in the imperatives laid out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. 21

Embracing large numbers and managing complexity

Whereas, when a programme of growth is nascent in a cluster, there might be a handful of individuals who are involved in its promotion and those who are participating 22

might come from only several households, by the time a programme has become intensive, these figures, as one would expect, have grown: perhaps tens of individuals active in the work of expansion and consolidation, while those participating might well surpass a hundred. But being able to reach out to large numbers—mobilizing a hundred people or more, whose service connects them with many hundreds or even thousands—requires the capacity to adapt to a substantial increase in complexity.

- 23 As the growth process continues to gain intensity, the friends' efforts to engage in meaningful conversations bring them into many social spaces, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the teachings and consider seriously the contribution they can make to the betterment of society. In addition, more and more homes are provided as venues for community-building activities, making each a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance. The institute process comes to be supported by a growing number of friends serving capably as tutors who, cycle after cycle, offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity. Thus, human resource development proceeds with minimal interruption and generates a constantly expanding pool of workers. While it continues to draw on a diverse range of the cluster's inhabitants, those taking its courses in the greatest numbers are often the youth. The transformative effect of studying the Word of God is experienced by the many whose lives are touched in some way by the community's activities. And as the flow of people beginning a path of service swells, considerable progress is made in all aspects of the community-building efforts of the friends. Animators of junior youth groups and teachers of children's classes multiply in number, fuelling an expansion of these two vital programmes. Children are enabled to move from one grade of the classes to another, while groups of junior youth progress from year to year and ground their learning in service to society. Cluster agencies, bolstered by the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies, encourage and foster the natural passage

of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next. An educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers, is now firmly rooted within the cluster.

This kind of progress requires the concerted efforts of the friends wherever in the cluster they reside. Nevertheless, experience in the present Plan demonstrates that a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages—places where the convergence of spiritual forces is effecting rapid change within a body of people—to the point where they can sustain intense activity. A core of individuals from within each is assuming responsibility for the process of building capacity in its inhabitants. A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. The friends in such locations help the cluster agencies extend the growth process to different parts of the cluster, for they are eager to introduce others to the vision of transformation they have themselves already glimpsed. 24

In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics 25

involved when a population of this kind embraces the Faith and is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

26 As growth in the cluster advances further, greater demands are being placed on the organizational scheme of the training institute. Additional coordinators are now required, some of whom might focus their efforts on a particular part of the cluster. However, this need not result in another layer of administration. Much can be achieved through collaboration, as coordinators start to work together in teams, sometimes drawing on the help of other capable individuals. The ongoing interactions and exchange of experience within these teams constantly enriches understanding and increases the efficacy of their service. The coordinators are also discovering that their efforts can be much enhanced if the friends serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors who live in close proximity to one another are able to meet in small groups, in the settings where they serve, and assist each other.

27 Meanwhile, the Area Teaching Committee is rising to a new level of functioning. It is engaged in a more thorough reading of circumstances in the whole cluster: on the one hand, accurately assessing the capacities of the community and the effects being produced by sustained growth, and on the other, understanding the implications of various social realities for community building in the long term. In the plans it makes each cycle, the Committee relies heavily on those shouldering the greatest share of the work of expansion and

consolidation, but given that the number of those connected in some way with the pattern of activity is now large, a variety of questions become more pressing: how to mobilize the entire company of believers in support of teaching goals; how to organize systematic home visits to the friends who would benefit from deepening and discussions that connect them with the community; how to strengthen spiritual bonds with the parents of children and junior youth; how to build on the interest of those who have shown goodwill towards the Faith but have yet to take part in its activities. Promoting the widespread holding of devotional meetings is another concern, so that hundreds of people, eventually thousands, are engaged in worship in the company of their households and their neighbours. Ultimately, of course, the Committee looks to continually extend the reach of the community's endeavours so that more and more souls become acquainted with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analysing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members. These complexities also require increasingly close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality. The Assembly is also attentive to the need for new believers to be nurtured sensitively, considering when and how various dimensions of community life are to

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be introduced to them. By encouraging their involvement in institute courses, it aims to ensure that from the very beginning they regard themselves as protagonists in a noble endeavour to build the world anew. It seems to it that gatherings for the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day commemorations, and Bahá'í elections become opportunities to reinforce the high ideals of the community, strengthen its shared sense of commitment, and fortify its spiritual character. As numbers in the community grow larger, the Assembly gives thought to when it could be beneficial to decentralize such meetings so as to facilitate ever-greater participation on these important occasions.

29 A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity. The cluster-wide reflection meeting, at which so much of this learning is presented, is often complemented by meetings for smaller areas, which generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending. This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent from cycle to cycle—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their spiritual development over generations to come. And as they do so, the support they receive from regional and national Bahá'í institutions and their agencies is experienced as an unceasing flow of love.

30 A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various

places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

For the movement of a population to have come this far demonstrates that the process which brought it about is strong enough to achieve and sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed. This is another milestone for the friends to pass, the third in succession since the process of growth in a cluster was begun. It denotes the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation. This has already come about in around two hundred clusters, covering a range of socio-economic circumstances, and we anticipate that, by the conclusion of the coming Plan, it will be observable in several hundred more. It is a future to which the friends labouring in thousands of clusters elsewhere can aspire.

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In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant

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percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived. Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

- 33 We recognize that developments like these are yet a distant prospect for many, even in clusters where the pattern of activity embraces large numbers. But in some places, this is the work of the moment. In such clusters, while the friends continue to be occupied with sustaining the process of growth, other dimensions of Bahá'í endeavour claim an increasing share of their attention. They are seeking to understand how a flourishing local population can transform the society of which it is an integral part. This will be a new frontier of learning for the foreseeable future, where insights will be generated that will ultimately benefit the whole Bahá'í world.

Releasing the potential of the youth

- 34 The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan. If any proof were needed of the extraordinary potential that the youth possess, it has been incontrovertibly delivered. In the wake of the youth

conferences convened in 2013, the surge of energy which was imparted to the work being carried out in clusters demonstrates clearly how the community of the Greatest Name is able to give shape to the highest aspirations of young people. How pleased we are to see that, following the participation of more than 80,000 youth in these conferences, an additional cohort of over 100,000 have joined them in taking part in numerous encounters held since then. Measures to encourage the full engagement of these growing contingents in the activities of the community must constitute a major component of the new Plan.

The enthusiastic participation of the youth also highlighted the fact that they represent a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out. What has been learned in this regard is how to help young people become aware of the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society. As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way. Conversations along these lines kindle interest in how the physical and spiritual powers available to them at this time of life can be channelled towards providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations. Special gatherings for youth, now occurring more frequently at the level of the cluster and even the neighbourhood or village, have proved to be ideal occasions for bringing an intensity to this ongoing conversation, and they are an increasingly common feature of cycles of activity in many clusters.

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Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of “doing”, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of “being”, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life. And so it is that, having been introduced to the vision of the Faith for humanity

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and the exalted character of its mission, the youth naturally feel a desire to be of service, a desire to which training institutes swiftly respond. Indeed, releasing the capacity of the youth is, for each training institute, a sacred charge. Yet fostering that capacity as it develops is a responsibility of every institution of the Cause. The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

37 Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another's efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

38 As youth advance along the path of service, their endeavours are integrated seamlessly into the activities of the cluster, and as a consequence, the entire community thrives as a cohesive whole. Reaching out to the families of young people is a natural way of strengthening community building. Institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth. With a greater awareness of this age group's circumstances and dynamics, they are able to plan accordingly—for instance, providing opportunities for youth to study courses intensively, perhaps immediately upon the conclusion of a youth gathering. The infusion of energy from

a vibrant band of youth allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.

While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá’u’lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá’u’lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother’s milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá’í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come

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into focus. We rely on you and your auxiliaries to ensure that the spiritual and material prospects of the youth are given due weight in the deliberations of families, communities, agencies, and institutions.

Enhancing institutional capacity

40 The demands of the present Plan—establishing thousands of new programmes of growth and fortifying existing ones—required from national and regional institutions, as well as yourselves, a feat of strength and coordination. Meeting them was made possible through a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan’s three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions. This spirit was the prerequisite for every important undertaking, including special initiatives to settle pioneers in selected countries and, of course, the organization of 114 youth conferences. A prevalent attitude of joyful service, flexibility, and detachment from personal preferences lent even routine administrative activities a sacred quality. The fresh demands of the coming Plan will, undoubtedly, test the capacity of Bahá’í institutions further still, but no matter what, they will surely preserve this unified spirit among all who work together.

41 As indicated earlier, the movement of clusters along a continuum depends on there being a commitment from the institutions to guide and support cluster agencies and provide resources as necessary. This work is a critical responsibility of Regional Bahá’í Councils and regional training institutes. The number of Councils in the world rose from 170 to 203 in the last five years, reflecting the growing need and the rising capacity for work to be undertaken at this level, and in some countries where Councils are yet to be formed, specific steps were taken to build experience in anticipation of their emergence, such as the appointment of regional teams. In some regions that stretch across a large territory, Councils have made arrangements for nurturing the development of groups

of adjoining clusters. Meanwhile, in smaller countries that do not require the establishment of Regional Councils, National Assemblies are increasingly giving thought to ways of helping clusters advance, in some instances by forming a working group charged with this task; you are encouraged to stimulate learning in this area, with the aim that, in due course, formal structures can be defined that would assume this responsibility in much the same way that Councils do in other countries. And, as is the case with Councils, we envisage that any such structure which emerges at the national level will benefit from interaction with the institution of the Counsellors.

To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee. Timely access to information about the movement of clusters and the work of the institute in their jurisdictions is required for institutions to support their agencies and take the many decisions that concern, for instance, the deployment of pioneers, the allocation of funds, the creation and promotion of Bahá'í literature, and the planning of institutional meetings; it allows them to accurately read the reality of their communities and act on the basis of clearly understood needs when marshalling the energies of the friends towards meeting the exigencies of the hour. At various intervals a National Assembly, in consultation with you, may find it advisable to formally adopt and disseminate certain aspects of the lessons that have been learned, especially in relation to organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

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43 Of course, a National Spiritual Assembly ultimately has responsibility for fostering all aspects of a Bahá'í community's development. Although it pursues various lines of action itself, in many cases it fulfils this responsibility by ensuring that Regional Councils or specialized agencies are able to take steps to advance areas of endeavour entrusted to them. As the capacity of the friends increases and the size of a community grows, the work of a National Assembly in its manifold dimensions becomes commensurately more complex. Therefore, and in view of the magnitude of the task before the institutions in the coming Plan, National Assemblies—as well as Councils—will benefit from periodically considering, in collaboration with you, whether their administrative operations, and indeed elements of their own functioning, could be adjusted or enhanced in ways that would better support the growth process.

44 Attaining a higher level of functioning is similarly a pressing concern of training institutes. The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising. While it is important that institutes attend to day-to-day operational matters, the scale of what must be accomplished requires that they also become occupied with considerations of strategy. Training institute boards need to maintain an ongoing consultation with national or regional coordinators, as well as with Auxiliary Board members, about how an activity in a cluster gains strength, how it can be adequately resourced, what approaches prove effective in different settings, and how experience can be shared. We have in mind a systematic and concentrated effort by this collaborative group to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth

groups, and study circles. Addressing other dimensions of the institute's work—such as schemes of coordination at the cluster level, enhancing the capacity of coordinators, and the management of statistics and finances—will be essential too. In your work with training institutes, you will no doubt wish to arrange that they draw on the experience of other institutes in the same part of the world. Sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme also offer a rich source of insight for the institutes of nearby countries or regions.

As institutions and agencies seek to accelerate the processes of expansion and consolidation in every land, the question of financial resources will surely claim increased attention. Indeed, an important aspect of enhancing institutional capacity over the coming years will be the ongoing development of local and national Funds. For this to occur, the generality of the friends must be invited to consider afresh the responsibility of all believers to support the work of the Faith through their own means and, further, to manage their financial affairs in the light of the teachings.

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The future civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh is a prosperous one, in which the vast resources of the world will be directed towards humanity's elevation and regeneration, not its debasement and destruction. The act of contributing to the Fund, then, is imbued with profound meaning: it is a practical way of hastening the advent of that civilization, and a necessary one, for as Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained, "He Who is the Eternal Truth—exalted be His glory—hath made the fulfilment of every undertaking on earth dependent on material means." Bahá'ís conduct their lives in the midst of a society acutely disordered in its material affairs. The process of community building they are advancing in their clusters cultivates a set of attitudes towards wealth and possessions very different from those holding sway in the world. The habit of regularly giving to the Funds of the Faith—including in-kind contributions particularly in certain places—arises

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from and reinforces a sense of personal concern for the welfare of the community and the progress of the Cause. The duty to contribute, just like the duty to teach, is a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í identity which strengthens faith. The sacrificial and generous contributions of the individual believer, the collective consciousness promoted by the community of the needs of the Fund, and the careful stewardship of financial resources exercised by the institutions of the Faith can be regarded as expressions of the love that binds these three actors more closely together. And ultimately, voluntary giving fosters an awareness that managing one's financial affairs in accordance with spiritual principles is an indispensable dimension of a life lived coherently. It is a matter of conscience, a way in which commitment to the betterment of the world is translated into practice.

47 We direct these statements to you in recognition of the unique responsibility that you, your deputies, and their assistants shoulder in helping the friends to advance their understanding in numerous areas, not least, of course, with respect to the dynamics of growth. As we have previously indicated, in the institution of the Counsellors the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part. As a progressively deeper understanding of the Five Year Plan emerges among the believers over time, insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared. In this regard, an immense debt of gratitude is owed by the community of the Greatest Name to the International Teaching Centre, which has done so much in recent years, and with such diligence, to lovingly nurture and energetically promulgate a mode of learning that has now become well established.

48 The essential elements of the coming Plan, like those that came before it, are straightforward. Nevertheless, a profound understanding of its various facets requires an appreciation

of the sophisticated set of operations through which a cluster develops. We rely on your institution being so familiar with the relevant guidance that the friends in general, and institutions and their agencies in particular, can depend on you to illuminate their deliberations by calling attention to pertinent considerations. Clearly, however, the need to assist the friends in at least 5,000 clusters where the pattern of action is being intensified will be a considerable challenge, one with implications for your own mode of functioning—but more especially for that of Auxiliary Board members. Clusters that are in the front ranks of the growth process in their areas will inevitably claim a large share of their time; also, administrative arrangements at the regional level will more frequently require their support. They are concerned with much of what occurs in the community; attentive both to the development of each stage of the educational process and to the strengthening of the cycles of activity, they promote coherence among the lines of action being advanced in a cluster and fan into flame a passion for teaching. In the exercise of their responsibility to foster learning and to help the friends enter the arena of service, they draw heavily on the training institute, aspects of whose work align closely with theirs. But their other duties are equally demanding. As such, they will need to consider how, in order to fulfil those wide-ranging responsibilities, they can draw on the help of their assistants more extensively and more creatively. Assistants, of course, may be assigned any task—simple or complex, general or highly specific—and this versatility constitutes a distinctive strength. While some assistants might be occupied with the development of a local community, others might be given tasks that relate to an entire cluster. By properly orienting them, guiding them as capacity expands, and gradually increasing their duties, Auxiliary Board members will be able to better exploit the possibilities that exist. Much is sure to be learned as a result, and you are encouraged to derive insights from the experience of your auxiliaries.

A period of special potency

49 The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. By convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* is evoked in any locality. The enhancement of the devotional character of a community also has an effect on the Nineteen Day Feast and can be felt at other times when the friends come together.

50 Holy Day commemorations hold a special position in this regard. The Tablets recited, and the prayers, stories, songs, and sentiments voiced—all of them expressions of love for those sacred Figures Whose lives and missions are being remembered—stir the heart and fill the soul with awe and wonder. During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá’ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation,

a Manifestation of God, was born to the world. Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá'í identity.

Over the coming years, the community will, in fact, encounter a series of anniversaries, concluding with the Centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in November 2021, which will close the first century of the Formative Age. Next year the Bahá'í world will mark one hundred years since the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan flowed from the pen of the Master. In these fourteen Tablets, revealed during one of humanity's darkest hours, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching work that defined its theatre of action as the entire planet. Held in abeyance until 1937, when the first in a succession of Plans launched at the instigation of the Guardian was assigned to the Bahá'ís of North America, the Divine Plan has continued to unfold over the decades since as the collective capacity of Bahá'u'lláh's followers has grown, enabling them to take on ever-greater challenges. How wondrous the vision of the Plan's Author! Placing before the friends the prospect of a day when the light of His Father's Revelation would illuminate every corner of the world, He set out not only strategies for achieving this feat but guiding principles and unchanging spiritual requisites. Every effort made by the friends to systematically propagate the divine teachings traces its origins to the forces set in motion in the Divine Plan.

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The coming global endeavour to which the friends will be summoned calls for the application of proven strategies, systematic action, informed analysis, and keen insight. Yet above all, it is a spiritual enterprise, and its true character should never be obscured. The urgency to act is impelled by the world's desperate condition. All that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have learned in the last twenty years must culminate in the accomplishments of the next five. The scale of what is being asked of them brings to mind one of His Tablets in

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which He describes, in striking terms, the challenge entailed in spreading His Cause:

53 How many the lands that remained untilled and uncultivated; and how many the lands that were tilled and cultivated, and yet remained without water; and how many the lands which, when the harvest time arrived, no harvester came forth to reap! However, through the wonders of God's favour and the revelations of His loving-kindness, We cherish the hope that souls may appear who are the embodiments of heavenly virtue and who will occupy themselves with teaching the Cause of God and training all that dwell on earth.

54 The systematic efforts of His loved ones throughout the world aim at the fulfilment of the hope thus expressed by the Blessed Perfection. May He Himself reinforce them at every turn.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

12 December 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

Across the globe Bahá'í communities are intently engaged 1
in executing the provisions of the Five Year Plan. Its opening months now behind us, there is every indication that the study of recent guidance and deliberations on the nature and extent of capacity developed thus far are bearing fruit in focused, highly unified action at the grassroots. Principally through the efforts of homefront pioneers, in several hundred newly opened clusters, the first stirrings of a programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can already be felt, while in several hundred more, further along the continuum of growth, a pattern of rigorous activity is taking hold. Meanwhile the friends in those clusters in the forefront of learning are gaining mastery over the dynamics that characterize rapidly expanding, relatively large communities.

In this connection, we are particularly happy to note the 2
degree of effort being exerted in every country to lend an added measure of vitality to the institute process, so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order. The operation of the institute board; the functioning of coordinators at different levels; the capabilities of friends serving as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, teachers of children's classes; and the promotion of an environment conducive at once to universal participation and mutual support and assistance—nowhere is the centrality of these to the fulfilment of the community's God-given mission lost on the friends. What has been especially heartening to observe in this respect is the widespread mobilization of resources dedicated to the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme.

No less encouraging is the zeal with which institutes have greeted the challenge of preparing teachers for successive grades of Bahá'í children's classes as additional materials for this purpose have been made available. It seems timely, then, to offer National Spiritual Assemblies and their training institutes further guidance on the implementation of the main sequence of courses and those that branch off from it.

The path of service

3 A number of years ago, to aid the believers in thinking about the process of growth at the level of the cluster, we introduced the concept of two complementary movements. The progress of a steady, ever-widening stream of individuals through the courses of the institute represents one of these. It is not only responsible for giving impetus to the other—the development of the cluster, discernable in the collective capacity to manifest a pattern of life in conformity with the teachings of the Faith—but also dependent on it for its own perpetuation. It was in view of mounting evidence of the effects of the Ruhi Institute curriculum on these two mutually reinforcing movements that we recommended its adoption worldwide six years ago. At the time, we did not comment specifically on the pedagogical principles governing the curriculum; nevertheless, it should be apparent to the friends that the curriculum possesses desirable characteristics, some of which have been described in broad terms in our messages regarding the current series of global Plans. Of particular significance is its organizing principle: developing capacity to serve the Cause and humanity in a process likened to walking a path of service. This conception shapes both content and structure.

4 The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative

of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.

At present the main sequence consists of eight courses, though it is understood there may eventually be as many as eighteen that will address acts of service related to such requirements as coordination and administration, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. There are currently two points along the sequence at which an individual may choose to follow a specialized path of service. The first appears at Book 3. From among the friends who complete it and begin to offer a relatively simple class for children in the first grade of a programme for their spiritual education, a percentage will want to dedicate themselves to this field of service, pursuing in time a series of progressively more complex branch courses for teaching Grades 2 to 6. This does not mean that they will abandon study of the main sequence. Indeed, courses that make up a specialized path of service anticipate that participants are continuing to progress, each at a pace suitable to his or her situation, along the path traced out by the main sequence. Book 5, which seeks to raise up animators of junior youth groups, constitutes the second point at which a series of courses branch out.

Additional avenues of exploration will no doubt appear along the main sequence in due time. Some may be of universal interest, such as the two mentioned above, while others may be limited to specific local needs. As with the main sequence

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itself, content and structure must emerge out of continued collective experience in the field, an experience that is not haphazard or subject to the forces of personal preference but is guided by the institutions of the Faith. The generation of such an experience will call for a still greater infusion of energy from a much larger portion of the population, and it would be premature, in all but a few places, for institutes to give attention to the creation or implementation of other branch courses at this juncture in the unfoldment of the current series of global Plans.

Coordination

7 Clearly, the approach to capacity building described above represents an attempt to achieve a certain dynamics within a population that brings together service and the generation of knowledge and its diffusion, a subject which we discussed, albeit briefly, in our Riḍván 2010 message. Here we address a few practical considerations, which the emergence of the two aforementioned specialized paths of service has made all the more relevant.

8 At any given moment it is possible to view from one of two perspectives what occurs in a cluster as the pattern of action promoted by the Five Year Plan, through which is woven the fabric of a vibrant community life, gathers in strength. Both perspectives are equally valid; each offers a particular way of thinking and speaking about what is taking place. From one perspective an educational process with three distinct stages appears in sharp relief: the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults. In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions

take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.

From another perspective one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan. The question of teaching among receptive populations moves to the foreground in this light, and the challenge of seeking out souls who are willing to engage in a conversation about the world around them and participate in a collective effort to transform it comes into focus.

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It is especially at the level of coordination that it proves indispensable to step back and view from these two vantage points what is essentially one reality. Doing so makes it possible to analyse accurately, to assess strategically, to allocate wisely, and to avoid fragmentation. At this point, then, early in the execution of the Plan, it seems more vital than ever for attention to be devoted to the issue of coordination. Though the basic elements of an effective organizational scheme are already well understood, the form it should assume under diverse circumstances is in need of articulation. We have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow efforts made in this direction, particularly in the several hundred furthest advanced clusters worldwide, in order to effect the rapid systematization of lessons learned.

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In all such clusters, where the demands of large-scale growth are asserting themselves, each stage of the educational process promoted by the training institute must receive added support. The work of the coordinator should be reinforced by assistance from a growing number of experienced individuals,

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and meetings for the exchange of information and insights become regular and more systematic in approach. So, too, must periodic occasions be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children's classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole. And they, in turn, should meet on a regular basis with the Area Teaching Committee. Further, if an adequate flow of information, guidance and much-needed funds is to reach the cluster, a parallel set of steps will have to be taken by the board of the institute to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.

- 12 One final point merits reflection in this respect. Nearly all of the several hundred clusters under consideration are associated with one or another of some forty sites for the dissemination of learning established by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre in response to the overwhelming demand for the junior youth programme experienced throughout the world. Institutes operating in these clusters have already benefited over the past year from knowledge gained through the sites, particularly in relation to coordination of the programme. Without question, the capacity to sustain scores of junior youth groups lent a powerful impetus to the progress of all such clusters and contributed decisively to the subsequent development of study circles and children's classes. Sites supported by the Office of Social and Economic Development will continue to assist training institutes in addressing the complex set of questions arising out of the implementation of a programme for an age group whose enormous potential must remain the object of ongoing exploration. We look to the institutes themselves, however, to foster the learning process necessary to manage large numbers of children's classes and study circles, to put

in place a scheme at the cluster level that will strengthen coordination across their three defined areas of action, and to open the flow of resources from the regional level into the grassroots—this, to ensure the seamless progression of sizeable contingents from one stage of the educational process to the next and to facilitate the steady unfoldment of cycles of activity so essential to systematic growth.

Classes for children

Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses. The units that comprise the three books currently available contain both materials for study by teachers and lessons for children, allowing institutes to establish without delay the first three grades of a six-year programme. To raise up an initial corps of teachers for these grades, they may well have to employ temporary measures. A good scheme of coordination, built incrementally in keeping with demands on the ground, should make it possible to respond to exigencies with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the integrity of the overall educational process in the long term. 13

Besides the systematic training of teachers for successive grades, institutes will need to learn about the formation of classes for distinct age groups in villages and neighbourhoods; the provision of teachers for various classes; the retention of students year after year, grade after grade; and the continued progress of children from a wide variety of households and backgrounds—in short, the establishment of an expanding, sustainable system for child education that will keep pace with both the growing concern among parents for their youngsters to develop sound moral structures and the rise in human resources in the community. The task, while immense, is 14

relatively straightforward, and we urge institutes everywhere to give it the attention which it so clearly deserves, focusing especially on the implementation of the first three grades of the programme and remembering that the quality of the teaching-learning experience depends, to a great extent, on the capabilities of the teacher.

- 15 A word of caution seems to be in order. It is certainly not incorrect to speak of “training” children’s class teachers or, for that matter, animators of junior youth groups. Institutes, however, ought to take care, lest they begin to perceive their work as training in techniques, losing sight of the conception of capacity building at the heart of the institute process that entails a profound understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

Educational materials

- 16 In light of the foregoing paragraphs, the question of educational materials specifically as they pertain to children’s classes and to junior youth groups has to be considered. With regard to the former, we explained in our Riḍván 2010 message that the lessons prepared by the Ruhi Institute would constitute the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements could be organized. Whether or not any additional elements are required to reinforce the educational process for each grade would generally be determined by teachers themselves, on the basis of specific circumstances, not infrequently in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level. It is assumed that, if found to be appropriate, any additional items would be selected from resources readily available. There will seldom be cause to formalize the use of such items, whether directly through their adoption by training institutes or indirectly through their widespread systematic promotion.
- 17 In the case of junior youth groups, a similar approach is encouraged by the Office of Social and Economic

Development. The core of the programme consists of a series of textbooks studied by the groups. We understand that, at present, seven of a projected eighteen textbooks, exploring a range of themes from a Bahá'í perspective, though not in the mode of religious instruction, are available. These form the major component of a three-year programme. Another nine textbooks will provide a distinctly Bahá'í component, and two of these are currently in use. Animators are advised to complement study with artistic activities and service projects. As with children's class teachers, the institute coordinator at the cluster level can offer animators assistance in determining how to proceed. Yet, most often, such projects and activities are selected by the junior youth themselves, in light of their own circumstances and inclinations, in consultation with the group's animator.

In all such matters, those serving as teachers and animators alike are called upon to exercise discretion. Education is a vast field, and educational theories abound. Surely many have considerable merit, but it should be remembered that none is free of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. An educational process should, for example, create in a child awareness of his or her potentialities, but the glorification of self has to be scrupulously avoided. So often in the name of building confidence the ego is bolstered. Similarly, play has its place in the education of the young. Children and junior youth, however, have proven time and again their capacity to engage in discussions on abstract subjects, undertaken at a level appropriate to their age, and derive great joy from the serious pursuit of understanding. An educational process that dilutes content in a mesmerizing sea of entertainment does them no service. We trust that, in studying the institute courses, teachers and animators will find themselves increasingly equipped to make judicious decisions in selecting any materials or activities necessary, whether from traditional educational sources or from the wealth of items, such as songs, stories, and games, that are sure to be developed for the young in the Bahá'í community in the years to come.

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Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works. It is with such considerations in mind that we welcome the decision of the Ruhi Institute, in formulating its courses, to leave for the friends to address locally issues related to artistic activity. What we ask at this stage, then, when energies are to be invested in the extension of children's classes and junior youth groups, is that the multiplication of supplementary items for this purpose be allowed to occur naturally, as an outgrowth of the process of community building gathering momentum in villages and neighbourhoods. We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted. Further, every effort should be made to protect spiritual education from the perils of commercialization. The Ruhi Institute itself has explicitly discouraged the proliferation of products and items that treat its identity as a brand to be marketed. We hope that the friends will respect its diligence in this matter.

In this connection, it gives us pleasure to inform you that we have created an International Advisory Board to assist the Ruhi Institute in overseeing its system for the preparation, production, and distribution of materials, the content and structure of which now draw extensively on Bahá'í experience worldwide in applying the teachings and principles of the Faith to the life of humanity. As it gradually takes up its work, the Board will be able to respond to related issues and follow the development of supplementary materials that are aligned with the direction set by the global Plans.

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In closing, we feel compelled to address a few words to training institutes throughout the world: It should be remembered that the Bahá'í children's class teacher and the junior youth group animator, entrusted with so much responsibility for strengthening the moral foundations of the community, will, in most places, be a young person in his or her teens. Increasingly these young people will emerge, it can be expected, from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme imbued with a strong twofold purpose, both to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society. But they may also come from any one of a number of educational backgrounds with all the hope in their hearts that, through strenuous concerted effort, the world will change. Irrespective of particulars, they will, one and all, share in the desire to dedicate their time and energy, talents and abilities, to service to their communities. Many, when given the opportunity, will gladly devote a few years of their lives to the provision of spiritual education to the rising generations. In the young people of the world, then, lies a reservoir of capacity to transform society waiting to be tapped. And the release of this capacity should be regarded by every institute as a sacred charge.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

- 1 Fifteen years have elapsed since, on an occasion such as this, we gave to the body of Counsellors assembled in the Holy Land the first intimation of the course the Bahá'í community would have to take, if it was to accelerate the dual process of its expansion and consolidation—a course which its accumulated experience had prepared it to steer with confidence. No need to remark on the distance traversed in a short decade and a half. The record of accomplishments speaks for itself. Today we invite you to begin deliberations on the next stage of the great enterprise on which the Bahá'í world is embarked, a stage that will stretch from Ridván 2011 to Ridván 2016, constituting the first of two consecutive Five Year Plans that will culminate at the centenary of the inauguration of the Faith's Formative Age. Over the coming days you are asked to formulate a clear conception of how the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will assist the community in building on its extraordinary achievements—extending to other spheres of operation the mode of learning which has so undeniably come to characterize its teaching endeavours, gaining the capacity needed to employ with a high degree of coherence the instruments and methods which it has so painstakingly developed, and increasing well beyond all previous numbers the ranks of those who, alive to the vision of the Faith, are labouring so assiduously in pursuit of its God-given mission.

- 2 In our Ridván message this year, we described the dynamics of the process of learning that, through four successive global Plans, has steadily gathered momentum, enhancing the capacity of the friends to engage in grassroots action. The vista from this vantage point is stupendous indeed. With more than

350,000 souls worldwide who have completed the first institute course, capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character has risen perceptibly. In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends. A near doubling in the reserve of Bahá'í children's class teachers in a five-year period, bringing the total to some 130,000, has made it possible for the community to respond wholeheartedly to the spiritual aspirations of the young. A sixfold increase in capacity over the same period to assist junior youth in navigating through such a crucial stage of their lives provides an indication of the level of commitment to that age group. What is more, everywhere, a notable number of friends find themselves ready to enter into conversation with people of varied backgrounds and interests and to undertake with them an exploration of reality that gives rise to a shared understanding of the exigencies of this period in human history and the means for addressing them. And fuelling the systematic multiplication of core activities across the globe, with no fewer than half a million known participants at a given time, are the efforts of close to 70,000 friends capable of serving as tutors of study circles.

As made clear in our Ridván message, in the system thus created to develop its human resources, the community of the Greatest Name possesses an instrument of limitless potentialities. Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order. A decade ago, when we introduced the concept of a cluster—a geographic construct intended to facilitate thinking about the growth of the Faith—we provided an outline of four broad stages along the path of its development. As the Bahá'í community set about implementing the provisions of the Plan, this outline proved immensely useful in giving shape and definition to what is essentially an ongoing process. The

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abundant experience which has since accrued enables the believers now to conceive of the movement of a population, propelled by mounting spiritual forces, in terms of a rich and dynamic continuum. A brief review of the process that unfolds in a cluster, though well familiar to you all, will serve to underscore its fundamentally organic nature.

A programme of growth

- 4 Invariably, opportunities afforded by the personal circumstances of the believers initially involved—or perhaps a single homefront pioneer—to enter into meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents dictate how the process of growth begins in a cluster. A study circle made up of a few friends or colleagues, a class offered for several neighbourhood children, a group formed for junior youth during after-school hours, a devotional gathering hosted for family and friends—any one of these can serve as a stimulus to growth. What happens next follows no predetermined course. Conditions may justify that one core activity be given precedence, multiplying at a rate faster than the others. It is equally possible that all four would advance at a comparable pace. Visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities. But irrespective of the specifics, the outcome must be the same. Within every cluster, the level of cohesion achieved among the core activities must be such that, in their totality, a nascent programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived. That is to say, in whatever combination and however small in number, devotional gatherings, children's classes and junior youth groups are being maintained by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster. This initial flow of human resources into the field of systematic action marks the first of several milestones in a process of sustainable growth.

All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members. To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants. In this, as in all their work, they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

Increasing intensity

It is important to note that, as a programme of growth is being brought into existence, an emergent community spirit begins to exert its influence on the course of events. Whether activities are scattered across the cluster or concentrated in one village or neighbourhood, a sense of common purpose

characterizes the endeavours of the friends. Whatever level of organization served to channel the early manifestations of this spirit, the systematic, coordinated multiplication of core activities necessitates that higher levels soon be attained. Through various measures, greater structure is lent to activity, and initiative, shaped largely by individual volition before, is now given collective expression. A complement of coordinators appointed by the institute moves into place—those for study circles, for junior youth groups, and for children's classes. Any order of appointment is potentially valid. Nothing less than an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground should make this determination, for what is at stake is not compliance with a set of procedures but the unfoldment of an educational process that has begun to show its potential to bring about the spiritual empowerment of large numbers.

- 7 Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process, other administrative structures are gradually taking shape. Out of the occasional meetings of a few believers emerge the regular deliberations of an expanding core group of friends concerned with channelling into the field of service an increasing store of energy. As the process of growth continues to gather momentum, such an arrangement ultimately fails to satisfy the demands of planning and decision making, and an Area Teaching Committee is constituted, and reflection meetings institutionalized. In the joint interactions of the Committee, the institute and the Auxiliary Board members, a fully fledged scheme for the coordination of activities becomes operational—with all the inherent capacity needed to facilitate the efficient flow of guidance, funds, and information. By now, the process of growth in the cluster will conform to the rhythm established by pronounced cycles of expansion and consolidation, which, punctuated every three months by a meeting for reflection and planning, are unfolding without interruption.

- 8 Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative

structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics. Specifically, the sequence of courses that we have recommended for use by institutes everywhere, which is facilitating so effectively the process of transformation under way, is designed to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance. The nature of relationships among individuals in this environment, all of whom consider themselves as treading a common path of service, was explained briefly in our Riḍván message. We also indicated there that such an environment is not without its effects on the administrative affairs of the Faith. As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.

Within this landscape of unfolding processes, emerging structures, and enduring fellowship, that moment which has come to be known as the “launching” of an intensive programme of growth represents conscious recognition that all the elements necessary to accelerate the expansion and consolidation of the Faith are not only in place but also functioning with an adequate degree of effectiveness. It signals the maturation of an ever-expanding, self-sustaining system for the spiritual edification of a population: a steady stream of friends is proceeding through the courses of the training institute and engaging in the corresponding activities, which serves, in turn, to increase the number of fresh recruits into the Faith, a significant percentage of whom invariably enters the

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institute process, guaranteeing the expansion of the system. This constitutes another milestone that the friends labouring in every cluster must, in time, reach.

10 In reiterating here much of what we have stated on previous occasions, we hope to have impressed upon you how readily the movement of a population, inspired by the purpose and principles of the Cause, can be nurtured, when not made the object of extraneous complications. We have no illusion that the path traced out so summarily above is devoid of difficulty. Progress is achieved through the dialectic of crisis and victory, and setbacks are inevitable. A drop in participation, a disruption in the cycles of activity, a momentary breach in the bonds of unity—these are among the myriad challenges that may have to be met. Not infrequently the rise in human resources, or the ability to mobilize them, will fall short of the demands of rapid expansion. Yet the imposition of formulas on the process will not result in a pattern of growth characterized by the desired equilibrium. Temporary imbalances in the progress of different activities are intrinsic to the process, and they can be adjusted over time, if dealt with patiently. Scaling back one activity that is flourishing, on the basis of theoretical conceptions of how balanced growth can be achieved, often proves counterproductive. While the friends in a cluster might well benefit from the experience of those who have already established the necessary pattern of action, it is only through continued action, reflection and consultation on their part that they will learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come.

11 Today, there are some 1,600 clusters worldwide where the friends have succeeded in creating the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth. Though significant, this accomplishment can by no means be considered the culmination of the process that has gathered momentum in each cluster. New frontiers of learning are now

open to the friends, who are asked to dedicate their energies to the creation of vibrant communities, growing in size and reflecting in greater and greater degrees Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity. Such clusters will also need to serve as reservoirs of potential pioneers that can be dispatched, largely across the home front, to cluster after cluster, shedding in some the first rays of the light of His Revelation and strengthening in others the presence of the Faith, enabling all to progress quickly to the first milestone along the path of development, or beyond. With this in mind, we will call upon the community of the Most Great Name at Riḍván 2011 to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a programme of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.

Advancing the frontiers of learning

What we have described in the preceding paragraphs and in so many messages over the last decade and a half can best be viewed as the latest in a series of approaches to the growth of the Bahá'í community, each suited to specific historical circumstances. This divinely propelled process of growth was set in motion by the fervour generated in the Cradle of the Faith more than one hundred and sixty years ago, as thousands responded to the summons of a New Day, and received impetus through the exertions made by early believers to carry the message of Bahá'u'lláh to neighbouring countries in the East and scattered pockets in the West. It acquired greater structure through the Tablets of the Divine Plan revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and gained momentum as the friends spread out systematically across the globe under the direction of the Guardian to establish small centres of Bahá'í activity and erect the first pillars of the Administrative Order. It gathered force in the rural areas of the world as masses of humanity were moved to embrace the Faith, but slowed considerably as the friends strove to discover strategies for sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. And, for fifteen years now, it

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has been steadily accelerating since we raised the call at the outset of the Four Year Plan for the Bahá'í world to systematize the teaching work on the basis of the experience it had gained through decades of difficult but invaluable learning. That the current approach to growth, effective as it is, must evolve still further in complexity and sophistication once it has taken root in a cluster, demonstrating ever more notably the "society-building power" inherent in the Faith, few would fail to recognize.

- 13 Referring to the development of the global Bahá'í community, how often did the beloved Guardian encourage the friends to remain resolute in their purpose and persevere in their endeavours. "Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses," he noted with satisfaction, "they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop." "It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive," he reminded them, that "constitutes the one hope" of a disillusioned humanity. That this process will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time "its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order" is clear from his writings. "In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anaemic and lost their virtue," he asserted so emphatically, "this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive," is "taking shape," is "crystallizing into institutions," and is "mobilizing its forces".

- 14 What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How

could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá'í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.

Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan. Wherever an intensive programme of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people. Let them not lose sight of the remarkable receptivity they found—nay, the sense of eager expectation that awaited them—as they gained confidence in their ability to interact with people of all walks of life and converse with them about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. Let them hold fast to the conviction that a direct presentation of the Faith, when carried out at a sufficient level of depth and reinforced by a sound approach to consolidation, can bring enduring results. And let them not forget the lessons of the past which left no doubt that a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause, no matter how resourceful, no matter how consecrated, cannot attend to the needs of communities comprising hundreds, much less thousands, of men, women and children. The implications are clear enough. If, in a cluster, those shouldering responsibility for expansion and consolidation number in the tens, with a

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few hundred participating in the activities of community life, both figures should rise significantly so that by the end of the Plan, one or two hundred are facilitating the participation of one or two thousand.

- 16 It is heartening to see that, already in some 300 of the 1,600 clusters worldwide with intensive programmes of growth in operation, the believers have entered the new arena of learning now open to them, and, in more than a few, they are extending its frontiers. Clearly, in all such clusters, strengthening the educational processes set in motion by the training institute, each with its own requisites—regularly held classes for the youngest members of society, close-knit groups for junior youth, and circles of study for youth and adults—is of paramount importance. Much of what this work entails was discussed in the Riḍvān message. Without exception, having witnessed the transformative effects of the institute process first hand, the friends in such clusters are striving to gain a fuller appreciation of the dynamics that underlie it—the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God. Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies; the stress they lay on memorization of the Creative Word; and the care they exercise in raising consciousness, without awakening the insistent self.

Enhancing administrative capacity

- 17 Though the central elements of the process of growth remain unchanged in the clusters in the vanguard of learning, sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity. Different innovations have already been introduced, on the basis of both geographic

considerations and numerical growth. The division of the cluster into smaller units, the decentralization of the reflection meeting, the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators, the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field—these are some of the arrangements that have been made thus far. We have every confidence that, with your able assistance, the International Teaching Centre will follow these developments over the course of the next Plan, helping to consolidate the lessons learned into well-proven methods and instruments. To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.

Whatever the nature of the arrangements made at the cluster level for coordinating large-scale activity, continued progress will depend on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and on the increased capacity of Regional Bahá'í Councils and ultimately National Spiritual Assemblies. In the *Riḍván* message we expressed pleasure at noting the growing strength of National Assemblies, and we look to the coming five years with optimism, certain that we will see significant leaps forward in this respect. Moreover, we have no doubt that, in concert with National Assemblies, you will be able to help Regional Councils enhance their institutional capacity. There are currently 170 such administrative bodies in 45 countries worldwide, and their number is sure to climb during the next Plan. It will be imperative that all Regional Councils pay close attention to the operation of the training institute and the functioning of Area Teaching Committees. With this in mind, they will find it necessary to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it. These will include a well-functioning regional office that provides the secretary with basic organizational

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support; a sound system of accounting that accommodates diverse channels for the flow of funds to and from clusters; an efficient means of communication that takes into consideration the reality of life in villages and neighbourhoods; and, where warranted, physical structures that facilitate intensified and focused activity. What is important to acknowledge in this respect is that only if the Councils themselves are engaged in a process of learning will such mechanisms prove to be effective. Otherwise, while ostensibly created to support learning in action by an increasing number of participants in neighbourhoods and villages, systems being developed may well work against it in subtle ways, stifling, unintentionally, rising aspirations at the grassroots.

19 While collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils will be one of your primary concerns, your auxiliaries will need to direct more and more of their energies towards fostering institutional capacity at the local level, where the demands of community building assert themselves so unmistakably. To help you envision what lies ahead of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants everywhere, particularly in clusters experiencing large-scale expansion and consolidation, we ask you to reflect, first, on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many rural areas of the world, in which the vast majority of such clusters today are to be found.

20 As you are aware, often in a rural cluster made up of villages and perhaps one or two towns, while the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth is being established, the efforts of the friends are confined to a few localities. Once in place, however, the pattern can be extended quickly to village after village, as explained in our Ridván message this year. Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the

development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward: Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member's personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

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22 Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that “discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word.” Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

23 Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly’s growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly’s mind. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how

to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

As the community grows in size and in capacity to maintain vitality, the friends will, we have indicated in the past, be drawn further into the life of society and be challenged to take advantage of the approaches they have developed to respond to a widening range of issues that face their village. The question of coherence, so essential to the growth achieved thus far, and so fundamental to the Plan's evolving framework for action, now assumes new dimensions. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised. 24

Our Riḍván message described a few of the characteristics of social action at the grassroots, and the conditions it must meet. Efforts in a village will generally begin on a small scale, perhaps with the emergence of groups of friends, each concerned with a specific social or economic need it has identified and each pursuing a simple set of appropriate actions. Consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find constructive expression. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them—the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá'í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance. Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends 25

to take advantage of methods and programmes of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá'í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

- 26 What is outlined in the foregoing paragraphs represents only a few of the attributes which Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many villages of the world will gradually develop in serving the needs of communities that embrace larger and larger numbers. As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as “the trusted ones of the Merciful among men”. Thus will these Assemblies become “shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.”

- 27 Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly's development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population. The first necessitates the division of the Assembly's area of jurisdiction into neighbourhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each. The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area—social, political, and

cultural—with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

Service on Bahá'í institutions

In setting out for you in these pages developments we are eager to see in the administrative work of the Faith during the next Five Year Plan, we are reminded of the repeated warnings raised by the Guardian in this regard. “Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause,” he stated, “we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created.” The Bahá'í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, “is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself”. It is intended, he made clear, “to serve a twofold purpose”. On the one hand, “it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion” of the Cause “along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal.” On the other, “it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved.” And he went on to explain: “It should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá'í community.” 28

It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá'í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs 29

and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

30 Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá'í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they "must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal." Bahá'í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us that "when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire's distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it." As He averred, "ye must in this matter—that is, the

serving of humankind—lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice.”

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Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God, to promote learning, and to assist all in their endeavours to develop an upright and praiseworthy character. When the North American Bahá'í community embarked on its first Seven Year Plan, in pursuit of the responsibilities with which it had been charged in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian addressed to the friends in that land a letter of considerable length and great potency, dated 25 December 1938, subsequently published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Elaborating on the nature of the tasks at hand, the letter made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá'í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, “stand out as preeminent and vital”: rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice. Given the conditions of the world today, you would do well to reflect on the implications of his observations for the global effort of the Bahá'í community to infuse cluster after cluster with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

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Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the “justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness” that must “distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community.” Though applicable to all its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its “elected representatives, whether local, regional, or national,” whose sense of moral rectitude should stand in clear contrast to “the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests”. The

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Guardian called for “an abiding sense of undeviating justice” in a “strangely disordered world” and quoted extensively from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, setting the sights of the friends on the highest standards of honesty and trustworthiness. He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their lives—in their business dealings, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—and to observe its requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws and principles of the Faith. That political life everywhere has continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate in the intervening years, as the very conception of statesmanship has been drained of meaning, as policies have come to serve the economic interests of the few in the name of progress, as hypocrisy has been allowed to undermine the operation of social and economic structures, is evident. If indeed great effort was required for the friends to uphold the high standards of the Faith then, how much greater must be the exertion in a world that rewards dishonesty, that encourages corruption, and that treats truth as a negotiable commodity. Profound is the confusion that threatens the foundations of society, and unwavering must be the resolve of all those involved in Bahá’í activity, lest the slightest trace of self-interest becloud their judgement. Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching Committee, every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and all members of every local, regional and national Bahá’í body, whether elected or appointed, appreciate the significance of the Guardian’s plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of the moral rectitude which he described with such clarity. May their actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its high destiny and its inherent nobility.

- 33 No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá’í enterprise today are the Guardian’s forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, “with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness”.

He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied “by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters”. We need not provide for you here evidence of the influence that such a deficient code now exerts on humanity as a whole; even the remotest spots on the globe are captivated by its enticements. Yet we feel compelled to mention a few points related specifically to the theme of purity. The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. And in this the friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that “the present-day order” must “be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.” Throughout the world today, young people are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Plan and the most ardent champions of the Cause; their numbers will, we are certain, increase from year to year. May every one of them come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.

The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that “any division or cleavage” in the ranks of the Faith “is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals.” He made clear that the friends should manifest “complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or colour.” He went on to discuss at length the specific question of racial prejudice, “the corrosion

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of which,” he indicated, had “bitten into the fibre, and attacked the whole social structure of American society” and which, he asserted at the time, “should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá’í community at the present stage of its evolution.” Independent of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures taken by the American nation, and the Bahá’í community evolving within it, in addressing this particular challenge, the fact remains that prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity. While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

- 35 The educational process associated with the training institute is, of course, helping to foster the spiritual conditions to which the Guardian referred in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, along with the many others mentioned in the writings that must distinguish the life of the Bahá’í community—the spirit of unity that must animate the friends, the ties of love that must bind them, the firmness in the Covenant that must sustain them, and the reliance and trust they must place on the power of divine assistance, to note but a few. That such essential attributes are developed in the context of building capacity for service, in an environment that cultivates systematic action, is particularly noteworthy. In promoting this environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of two fundamental,

interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be eschewed.

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Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá'í life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Bahá'í activity. The magnitude of the challenge facing the friends in this respect is not lost on us. They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences. At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of society, remoulding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end, they must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing—this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society. There are a few specific points we wish to mention in this connection.

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It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We

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cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

- 38 Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: "We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two." How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown. Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of Bahá'í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a programme of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.

Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort. The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project with a clear beginning and a definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

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To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community. Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another,

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the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. The worldwide crisis of authority provides proof enough. So grievous have been its abuses, and so deep the suspicion and resentment it now arouses, that the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable—a situation made all the more perilous by the weakening of community ties.

- 41 Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation. No sooner had “the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.” The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe. So it is that the individual, with no regard for “personal benefits and selfish advantages,” comes to see him- or herself as “one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing,” whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the friends come to recognize that “wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort” are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that “the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” and that “the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion

to the common weal.” And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order.

And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian’s words that “their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent.” “Never” would they be “led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.” “With extreme humility,” they approach their tasks and “endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.” Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious. 42

Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union 43

of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.”

- 44 As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Ridván 2010

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With hearts filled with admiration for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, we are pleased to announce that, as this most joyous Ridván season opens, there is in every continent of the globe a fresh complement of intensive programmes of growth under way, raising the total number worldwide over the 1,500 mark and securing the goal of the Five Year Plan, one year in advance of its conclusion. We bow our heads in gratitude to God for this astounding achievement, this signal victory. All who have laboured in the field will appreciate the bounty He has bestowed on His community in granting it a full year to strengthen the pattern of expansion and consolidation now everywhere established, in preparation for the tasks it will be called upon to undertake in its next global enterprise—a plan of five years' duration, the fifth in a series with the explicit aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. ¹

We feel moved, as we take pause on this festive occasion, to make clear that what evokes such a deep sense of pride and gratitude in our hearts is not so much the numerical feat you have achieved, remarkable as it is, but a combination of developments at the more profound level of culture, to which this accomplishment attests. Chief among them is the rise we have observed in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving. ²

In recent messages we have expressed joy at witnessing the steady increase in the tempo of teaching across the globe. The discharge of this fundamental spiritual obligation by the ³

individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. What the establishment of 1,500 intensive programmes of growth has made evident is how courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside. Even the most modest estimates suggest that there are now tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.

- 4 In their efforts to present the essentials of the Faith plainly and unequivocally, the believers have benefited greatly from the illustrative example in Book 6 of the Ruhi Institute. Where the logic underlying that presentation is appreciated, and the urge to convert it into a formula overcome, it gives rise to a conversation between two souls—a conversation distinguished by the depth of understanding achieved and the nature of the relationship established. To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation. Whether the first contact with such newly found friends elicits an invitation for them to enrol in the Bahá'í community or to participate in one of its activities is not an overwhelming concern. More important is that every soul feel welcome to join the community in contributing to the betterment of society, commencing a path of service to humanity on which, at the outset or further along, formal enrolment can occur.
- 5 The significance of this development should not be underestimated. In every cluster, once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should

become a centre of intense activity. In an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose. Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as “door-to-door”, even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage—meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives—may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighbourhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. A rhythm of community life should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order.

Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive programme of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on

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them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

- 7 To meet this challenge, the believers and the institutions that serve them will have to strengthen the institute process in the cluster, increasing significantly within its borders the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles; for it should be recognized that the opportunity now open to the friends to foster a vibrant community life in neighbourhoods and villages, characterized by such a keen sense of purpose, was only made possible by crucial developments that occurred over the past decade in that aspect of Bahá'í culture which pertains to deepening.

- 8 When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá'í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

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Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in

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which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

- 11 What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly over the next year so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.

- 12 If the work of the tutor is to reach higher and higher degrees of excellence, it must be remembered that primary responsibility for the development of human resources in a region or country rests with the training institute. While striving to increase the number of its participants, the institute as a structure—from the board, to the coordinators at different levels, to the tutors at the grassroots—must lay equal stress on the effectiveness of the system in its entirety, for, in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress. At the level of the cluster, the coordinator must bring both practical experience and dynamism to his or her efforts to accompany those who serve as tutors. He or she should arrange periodic gatherings for them to reflect on their endeavours. Events organized to repeat the study of segments selected from the institute material may occasionally prove helpful, provided they do not inculcate a need for perpetual

training. The capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans, through study of the sequence of courses and implementation of their practical component. And as men and women of various ages move along the sequence and complete their study of each course with the help of tutors, others must stand ready to accompany them in acts of service undertaken according to their strengths and interests—particularly the coordinators responsible for children's classes, for junior youth groups and for study circles, acts of service crucial to the perpetuation of the system itself. To ensure that the proper measure of vitality is pulsating through this system should continue to be the object of intense learning in every country over the course of the next twelve months.

Concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá'í community, a concern that resulted in two, coexisting realities. One, emulating the achievements of the Bahá'ís of Iran, was characterized by the capacity to offer systematic classes, from grade to grade, to children from Bahá'í families, generally with the aim of imparting basic knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith to rising generations. In most parts of the world, the number who benefited from such classes has been relatively small. The other reality emerged in areas where large-scale enrolments took place, both rural and urban. A more inclusive attitude dominated that experience. Yet while children from households of all kinds were at once eager and welcome to attend Bahá'í classes, various factors prevented lessons from being conducted with the required degree of regularity, year after year. How pleased we are to see this duality, a consequence of historical circumstances, begin to fall away as friends trained by institutes everywhere strive to offer classes, open to all, on a systematic basis.

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Such promising beginnings have now to be vigorously pursued. In every cluster with an intensive programme of

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growth in operation, efforts need to be made to systematize further the provision of spiritual education to increasing numbers of children, from families of many backgrounds—a requisite of the community-building process gathering momentum in neighbourhoods and villages. This will be a demanding task, one that calls for patience and cooperation on the part of parents and institutions alike. The Ruhi Institute has already been requested to expedite plans to complete its courses for training children's class teachers at different levels including the corresponding lessons, starting with youngsters aged 5 or 6 and proceeding to those aged 10 or 11, in order to close the present gap between existing lessons and its textbooks for junior youth, such as *Spirit of Faith* and the forthcoming *Power of the Holy Spirit*, which provide a distinctly Bahá'í component to the programme for that age group. As these additional courses and lessons become available, institutes in every country will be able to prepare the teachers and the coordinators required to put in place, grade by grade, the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements can be organized. Meanwhile, institutes should do their best to provide teachers with suitable materials, from among others currently in existence, for use in their classes with children of various ages, as necessary.

- 15 The International Teaching Centre has earned our abiding gratitude for the vital impetus it lent to the efforts to secure the early attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan. To see the degree of energy it brought to this worldwide enterprise, following so tenaciously the progress in every continent and collaborating so closely with the Continental Counsellors, was to catch a glimpse of the tremendous power inherent in the Administrative Order. As the Teaching Centre now turns its attention with equal vigour to questions related to the efficacy of activities at the cluster level, it will no doubt give special consideration to the implementation of Bahá'í children's classes. We are confident that its analysis of the experience gained in a few selected clusters this coming year, representative of diverse social realities, will shed light on practical issues

which will make possible the establishment of regular classes, for children of every age, in neighbourhoods and villages.

The rapid spread of the programme for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is yet another expression of cultural advance in the Bahá'í community. While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community—in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts—is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Account after account, in which junior youth in countries all over the planet give voice to their thoughts as participants in the programme, testifies to the validity of this vision. There is every indication that the programme engages their expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyse the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives. At an age when burgeoning intellectual, spiritual and physical powers become accessible to them, they are being given the tools needed to combat the forces that would rob them of their true identity as noble beings and to work for the common good.

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That the major component of the programme explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the programme enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the

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Holy Land. Already the accumulating body of knowledge and experience has given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the programme. To help others advance swiftly in this direction, the Office is establishing a network of sites in all continents, with the assistance of a corps of believers, that can be used to provide training to coordinators from scores upon scores of clusters. These resource persons continue to support coordinators upon their return to their respective clusters, enabling them to create a spiritually charged environment in which the junior youth programme can take root.

- 18 Further knowledge is sure to accrue in this area of endeavour, although a pattern of action is already clear. Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the programme by schools and civic groups. Within the clusters that today are the focus of an intensive programme of growth, there is a wide array of circumstances, from those with a few sporadic junior youth groups to those maintaining a number sufficient to require the services of a dedicated coordinator, who could receive ongoing support from a site for the dissemination of learning. To ensure that this capacity increases across the entire spectrum of these clusters, we are calling for 32 learning sites, each serving some twenty clusters with full-time coordinators, to be in operation by the end of the current Plan. In all other such clusters, priority should be given to creating the capacity over the coming year to offer the programme, multiplying the number of groups systematically.

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- 19 The developments we have mentioned thus far—the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life, the efflorescence of an approach to

study of the writings that is wedded to action, the renewal of commitment to provide spiritual education to the young in neighbourhoods and villages on a regular basis, and the spread in influence of a programme that instils in junior youth the sense of a twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society—are all reinforced, in no small measure, by yet another advance at the level of culture, the implications of which are far-reaching indeed. This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.

In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labour together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their thoughts are centred at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe,

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propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side.

21 Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community's mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

22 That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the

threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfil these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

The development that we are sure to witness in Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyse the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical,

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fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.

- 24 Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programmes of growth.

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- 25 Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building

of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.

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In our Ridván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labour at the level of the cluster, they

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would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

- 28 Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the

friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. That the world civilization now on humanity's horizon must achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life is central to the Bahá'í teachings. Clearly this ideal has profound implications for the nature of any social action pursued by Bahá'ís, whatever its scope and range of influence. Though conditions will vary from country to country, and perhaps from cluster to cluster, eliciting from the friends a variety of endeavours, there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a

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project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings—seeing in their fellow human beings gems of inestimable value and recognizing the effects of the dual process of integration and disintegration on both hearts and minds, as well as on social structures.

30 Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

31 In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which

are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

In describing for you these new opportunities now opening at the level of the cluster, we are not asking you to alter in any way your current course. Nor should it be imagined that such opportunities represent an alternative arena of service, competing with the expansion and consolidation work for the community's limited resources and energies. Over the coming year, the institute process and the pattern of activity that it engenders should continue to be strengthened, and teaching should remain uppermost in the mind of every believer. Further involvement in the life of society should not be sought prematurely. It will proceed naturally as the friends in every cluster persevere in applying the provisions of the Plan through a process of action, reflection, consultation and study, and learn as a result. Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning.

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Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one

family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of suffering out of His love for humanity? Look within your own ranks, at your dear Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. Do they not exemplify fortitude born of the love of God and the desire to serve Him? Does not their capacity to transcend the cruelest and most bitter persecution bespeak the capacity of millions upon millions of oppressed people of the world to arise and take a decisive part in building the Kingdom of God on earth? Undeterred by divisive social constructs, press on and bring Bahá'u'lláh's message to waiting souls in every urban neighbourhood, in every rural hamlet, in every corner of the globe, drawing them to His community, the community of the Greatest Name. Never do you leave our thoughts and prayers, and we will continue to implore the Almighty to reinforce you with His wondrous grace.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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