

*Engaging in the
Discourse on Race:*

A Conversation

Compilation of Readings

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1. ASL-I-KULLU'L-KHAYR (Words of Wisdom)
(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 155-57)

In the Name of God, the Exalted, the Most High

THE source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and contentment with His holy will and pleasure.

The essence of wisdom is the fear of God, the dread of His scourge and punishment, and the apprehension of His justice and decree.

The essence of religion is to testify unto that which the Lord hath revealed, and follow that which He hath ordained in His mighty Book.

The source of all glory is acceptance of whatsoever the Lord hath bestowed, and contentment with that which God hath ordained.

The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One, and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord.

True remembrance is to make mention of the Lord, the All-Praised, and forget aught else beside Him.

True reliance is for the servant to pursue his profession and calling in this world, to hold fast unto the Lord, to seek naught but His grace, inasmuch as in His Hands is the destiny of all His servants.

The essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before Him.

The essence of understanding is to testify to one's poverty, and submit to the Will of the Lord, the Sovereign, the Gracious, the All-Powerful.

The source of courage and power is the promotion of the Word of God, and steadfastness in His Love.

The essence of charity is for the servant to recount the blessings of his Lord, and to render thanks unto Him at all times and under all conditions.

The essence of faith is fewness of words and abundance of deeds; he whose words exceed his deeds, know verily his death is better than his life.

The essence of true safety is to observe silence, to look at the end of things and to renounce the world.

The beginning of magnanimity is when man expendeth his wealth on himself, on his family and on the poor among his brethren in his Faith.

The essence of wealth is love for Me; whoso loveth Me is the possessor of all things, and he that loveth Me not is indeed of the poor and needy. This is that which the Finger of Glory and Splendour hath revealed.

The source of all evil is for man to turn away from his Lord and set his heart on things ungodly.

The most burning fire is to question the signs of God, to dispute idly that which He hath revealed, to deny Him and carry one's self proudly before Him.

The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation.

The essence of abasement is to pass out from under the shadow of the Merciful and seek the shelter of the Evil One.

The source of error is to disbelieve in the One true God, rely upon aught else but Him, and flee from His Decree.

True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.

Thus have We instructed thee, manifested unto thee Words of Wisdom, that thou mayest be thankful unto the Lord, thy God, and glory therein amidst all peoples.

2. Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

O peoples of the world! The Sun of Truth hath risen to illumine the whole earth, and to spiritualize the community of man. Laudable are the results and the fruits thereof, abundant the holy evidences deriving from this grace. This is mercy unalloyed and purest bounty; it is light for the world and all its peoples; it is harmony and fellowship, and love and solidarity; indeed it is compassion and unity, and the end of foreignness; it is the being at one, in complete dignity and freedom, with all on earth.

The Blessed Beauty saith: ‘Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch.’ Thus hath He likened this world of being to a single tree, and all its peoples to the leaves thereof, and the blossoms and fruits. It is needful for the bough to blossom, and leaf and fruit to flourish, and upon the interconnection of all parts of the world-tree, dependeth the flourishing of leaf and blossom, and the sweetness of the fruit.

For this reason must all human beings powerfully sustain one another and seek for everlasting life; and for this reason must the lovers of God in this contingent world become the mercies and the blessings sent forth by that clement King of the seen and unseen realms. Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being. Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.

In this day, the one favoured at the Threshold of the Lord is he who handeth round the cup of faithfulness; who bestoweth, even upon his enemies, the jewel of bounty, and lendeth, even to his fallen oppressor, a helping hand; it is he who will, even to the fiercest of his foes, be a loving friend. These are the Teachings of the Blessed Beauty, these the counsels of the Most Great Name.

O ye dear friends! The world is at war and the human race is in travail and mortal combat. The dark night of hate hath taken over, and the light of good faith is blotted out. The peoples and kindreds of the earth have sharpened their claws, and are hurling themselves one against the other. It is the very foundation of the human race that is being destroyed. It is thousands of households that are vagrant and dispossessed, and every year seeth thousands upon thousands of human beings weltering in their life-blood on dusty battlefields. The tents of life and joy are down. The generals practise their generalship, boasting of the blood they shed, competing one with the next in inciting to violence. ‘With this sword,’ saith one of them, ‘I beheaded a people!’ And another: ‘I toppled a nation to the ground!’ And yet another: ‘I brought a government down!’ On such things do men pride themselves, in such do they glory! Love—righteousness—these are everywhere censured, while despised are harmony, and devotion to the truth.

The Faith of the Blessed Beauty is summoning mankind to safety and love, to amity and peace; it hath raised up its tabernacle on the heights of the earth, and directeth its call to

all nations. Wherefore, O ye who are God's lovers, know ye the value of this precious Faith, obey its teachings, walk in this road that is drawn straight, and show ye this way to the people. Lift up your voices and sing out the song of the Kingdom. Spread far and wide the precepts and counsels of the loving Lord, so that this world will change into another world, and this darksome earth will be flooded with light, and the dead body of mankind will arise and live; so that every soul will ask for immortality, through the holy breaths of God.

Soon will your swiftly-passing days be over, and the fame and riches, the comforts, the joys provided by this rubbish-heap, the world, will be gone without a trace. Summon ye, then, the people to God, and invite humanity to follow the example of the Company on high. Be ye loving fathers to the orphan, and a refuge to the helpless, and a treasury for the poor, and a cure for the ailing. Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged. Think ye at all times of rendering some service to every member of the human race. Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way. Be ye sincerely kind, not in appearance only. Let each one of God's loved ones centre his attention on this: to be the Lord's mercy to man; to be the Lord's grace. Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him. Let him improve the character of each and all, and reorient the minds of men. In this way, the light of divine guidance will shine forth, and the blessings of God will cradle all mankind: for love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest. O friends of God! That the hidden Mystery may stand revealed, and the secret essence of all things may be disclosed, strive ye to banish that darkness for ever and ever.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, pp. 1-3)

3. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 14-17 (in Ocean, pp. 17-22)

How often have the Prophets of God, not excepting Bahá'u'lláh Himself, chosen to appear, and deliver their Message in countries and amidst peoples and races, at a time when they were either fast declining, or had already touched the lowest depths of moral and spiritual degradation. The appalling misery and wretchedness to which the Israelites had sunk, under the debasing and tyrannical rule of the Pharaohs, in the days preceding their exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses; the decline that had set in in the religious, the spiritual, the cultural, and the moral life of the Jewish people, at the time of the appearance of Jesus Christ; the barbarous cruelty, the gross idolatry and immorality, which had for so long been the most distressing features of the tribes of Arabia and brought such shame upon them when Muhammad arose to proclaim His Message in their midst; the indescribable state of decadence, with its attendant corruption, confusion, intolerance, and oppression, in both the civil and religious life of Persia, so graphically portrayed by the pen of a considerable number of scholars, diplomats, and travelers, at the hour of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh -- all demonstrate this basic and inescapable fact. To contend that the innate worthiness, the high moral standard, the political aptitude, and social attainments of any race or nation is the reason for the appearance in its midst of any of these Divine Luminaries would be an absolute perversion of historical facts, and would amount to a complete repudiation of the undoubted interpretation placed upon them, so clearly and emphatically, by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

How great, then, must be the challenge to those who, belonging to such races and nations, and having responded to the call which these Prophets have raised, to unreservedly recognize and courageously testify to this indubitable truth, that not by reason of any racial superiority, political capacity, or spiritual virtue which a race or nation might possess, but rather as a direct consequence of its crying needs, its lamentable degeneracy, and irremediable perversity, has the Prophet of God chosen to appear in its midst, and with it as a lever has lifted the entire human race to a higher and nobler plane of life and conduct. For it is precisely under such circumstances, and by such means that the Prophets have, from time immemorial, chosen and were able to demonstrate their redemptive power to raise from the depths of abasement and of misery, the people of their own race and nation, empowering them to transmit in turn to other races and nations the saving grace and the energizing influence of their Revelation.

In the light of this fundamental principle it should always be borne in mind, nor can it be sufficiently emphasized, that the primary reason why the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh chose to appear in Persia, and to make it the first repository of their Revelation, was because, of all the peoples and nations of the civilized world, that race and nation had, as so often depicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, sunk to such ignominious depths, and manifested so great a perversity, as to find no parallel among its contemporaries. For no more convincing proof could be adduced demonstrating the regenerating spirit animating the Revelations proclaimed by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh than their power to transform what can be truly regarded as one of the most backward, the most cowardly, and perverse of peoples into a race of heroes, fit to effect in turn a similar revolution in the life of mankind. To have appeared among a race or nation which by its intrinsic worth and high attainments

seemed to warrant the inestimable privilege of being made the receptacle of such a Revelation would in the eyes of an unbelieving world greatly reduce the efficacy of that Message, and detract from the self-sufficiency of its omnipotent power. The contrast so strikingly presented in the pages of Nabil's Narrative between the heroism that immortalized the life and deeds of the Dawn-Breakers and the degeneracy and cowardice of their defamers and persecutors is in itself a most impressive testimony to the truth of the Message of Him Who had instilled such a spirit into the breasts of His disciples. For any believer of that race to maintain that the excellence of his country and the innate nobility of its people were the fundamental reasons for its being singled out as the primary receptacle of the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh would be untenable in the face of the overwhelming evidence afforded so convincingly by that Narrative.

To a lesser degree this principle must of necessity apply to the country which has vindicated its right to be regarded as the cradle of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. So great a function, so noble a role, can be regarded as no less inferior to the part played by those immortal souls who, through their sublime renunciation and unparalleled deeds, have been responsible for the birth of the Faith itself. Let not, therefore, those who are to participate so predominantly in the birth of that world civilization, which is the direct offspring of their Faith, imagine for a moment that for some mysterious purpose or by any reason of inherent excellence or special merit Bahá'u'lláh has chosen to confer upon their country and people so great and lasting a distinction. It is precisely by reason of the patent evils which, notwithstanding its other admittedly great characteristics and achievements, an excessive and binding materialism has unfortunately engendered within it that the Author of their Faith and the Center of His Covenant have singled it out to become the standard-bearer of the New World Order envisaged in their writings. It is by such means as this that Bahá'u'lláh can best demonstrate to a heedless generation His almighty power to raise up from the very midst of a people, immersed in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most virulent and long-standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards, men and women who, as time goes by, will increasingly exemplify those essential virtues of self-renunciation, of moral rectitude, of chastity, of indiscriminating fellowship, of holy discipline, and of spiritual insight that will fit them for the preponderating share they will have in calling into being that World Order and that World Civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need. Theirs will be the duty and privilege, in their capacity first as the establishers of one of the most powerful pillars sustaining the edifice of the Universal House of Justice, and then as the champion-builders of that New World Order of which that House is to be the nucleus and forerunner, to inculcate, demonstrate, and apply those twin and sorely needed principles of Divine justice and order -- principles to which the political corruption and the moral license, increasingly staining the society to which they belong, offer so sad and striking a contrast.

Observations such as these, however distasteful and depressing they may be, should not, in the least, blind us to those virtues and qualities of high intelligence, of youthfulness, of unbounded initiative, and enterprise which the nation as a whole so conspicuously displays, and which are being increasingly reflected by the community of the believers

within it. Upon these virtues and qualities, no less than upon the elimination of the evils referred to, must depend, to a very great extent, the ability of that community to lay a firm foundation for the country's future role in ushering in the Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

How great, therefore, how staggering the responsibility that must weigh upon the present generation of the American believers, at this early stage in their spiritual and administrative evolution, to weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies which they have inherited from their own nation, and to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those distinctive qualities and characteristics that are so indispensable to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith. Incapable as yet, in view of the restricted size of their community and the limited influence it now wields, of producing any marked effect on the great mass of their countrymen, let them focus their attention, for the present, on their own selves, their own individual needs, their own personal deficiencies and weaknesses, ever mindful that every intensification of effort on their part will better equip them for the time when they will be called upon to eradicate in their turn such evil tendencies from the lives and the hearts of the entire body of their fellow-citizens. Nor must they overlook the fact that the World Order, whose basis they, as the advance-guard of the future Bahá'í generations of their countrymen, are now laboring to establish, can never be reared unless and until the generality of the people to which they belong has been already purged from the divers ills, whether social or political, that now so severely afflict it.

Surveying as a whole the most pressing needs of this community, attempting to estimate the more serious deficiencies by which it is being handicapped in the discharge of its task, and ever bearing in mind the nature of that still greater task with which it will be forced to wrestle in the future, I feel it my duty to lay special stress upon, and draw the special and urgent attention of the entire body of the American believers, be they young or old, white or colored, teachers or administrators, veterans or newcomers, to what I firmly believe are the essential requirements for the success of the tasks which are now claiming their undivided attention. Great as is the importance of fashioning the outward instruments, and of perfecting the administrative agencies, which they can utilize for the prosecution of their dual task under the Seven Year Plan; vital and urgent as are the campaigns which they are initiating, the schemes and projects which they are devising, and the funds which they are raising, for the efficient conduct of both the Teaching and Temple work, the imponderable, the spiritual, factors, which are bound up with their own individual and inner lives, and with which are associated their human and social relationships, are no less urgent and vital, and demand constant scrutiny, continual self-examination and heart-searching on their part, lest their value be impaired or their vital necessity be obscured or forgotten.

Of these spiritual prerequisites of success, which constitute the bedrock on which the security of all teaching plans, Temple projects, and financial schemes, must ultimately rest, the following stand out as preeminent and vital, which the members of the American Bahá'í community will do well to ponder. Upon the extent to which these basic requirements are met, and the manner in which the American believers fulfill them in

their individual lives, administrative activities, and social relationships, must depend the measure of the manifold blessings which the All-Bountiful Possessor can vouchsafe to them all. These requirements are none other than a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color.

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 14-17 (in *Ocean*, pp. 17-22):

4. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 28-34 (in Ocean, pp. 33-41):

As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution. The ceaseless exertions which this issue of paramount importance calls for, the sacrifices it must impose, the care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates, invest this problem, which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily resolved, with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated. White and Negro, high and low, young and old, whether newly converted to the Faith or not, all who stand identified with it must participate in, and lend their assistance, each according to his or her capacity, experience, and opportunities, to the common task of fulfilling the instructions, realizing the hopes, and following the example, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whether colored or noncolored, neither race has the right, or can conscientiously claim, to be regarded as absolved from such an obligation, as having realized such hopes, or having faithfully followed such an example. A long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls, still remains untraveled, both by the white and the Negro exponents of the redeeming Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. On the distance they cover, and the manner in which they travel that road, must depend, to an extent which few among them can imagine, the operation of those intangible influences which are indispensable to the spiritual triumph of the American believers and the material success of their newly launched enterprise.

Let them call to mind, fearlessly and determinedly, the example and conduct of 'Abdu'l-Bahá while in their midst. Let them remember His courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship, His contempt for and impatience of criticism, tempered by His tact and wisdom. Let them revive and perpetuate the memory of those unforgettable and historic episodes and occasions on which He so strikingly demonstrated His keen sense of justice, His spontaneous sympathy for the downtrodden, His ever-abiding sense of the oneness of the human race, His overflowing love for its members, and His displeasure with those who dared to flout His wishes, to deride His methods, to challenge His principles, or to nullify His acts.

To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. The consciousness of any division or cleavage in its ranks is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals. Once its members have fully recognized the claim of its Author, and, by identifying themselves with its Administrative Order, accepted unreservedly the principles and laws embodied in its teachings, every differentiation of class, creed, or color must automatically be obliterated, and never be allowed, under any pretext, and however great the pressure of events or of public opinion, to reassert itself. If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise. Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political

minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community. In the light of this principle, and bearing in mind the extreme desirability of having the minority elements participate and share responsibility in the conduct of Bahá'í activity, it should be the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible. The adoption of such a course, and faithful adherence to it, would not only be a source of inspiration and encouragement to those elements that are numerically small and inadequately represented, but would demonstrate to the world at large the universality and representative character of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and the freedom of His followers from the taint of those prejudices which have already wrought such havoc in the domestic affairs, as well as the foreign relationships, of the nations.

Freedom from racial prejudice, in any of its forms, should, at such a time as this when an increasingly large section of the human race is falling a victim to its devastating ferocity, be adopted as the watchword of the entire body of the American believers, in whichever state they reside, in whatever circles they move, whatever their age, traditions, tastes, and habits. It should be consistently demonstrated in every phase of their activity and life, whether in the Bahá'í community or outside it, in public or in private, formally as well as informally, individually as well as in their official capacity as organized groups, committees and Assemblies. It should be deliberately cultivated through the various and everyday opportunities, no matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds, their Bahá'í meetings, conferences, conventions, summer schools and Assemblies. It should, above all else, become the keynote of the policy of that august body which, in its capacity as the national representative, and the director and coordinator of the affairs of the community, must set the example, and facilitate the application of such a vital principle to the lives and activities of those whose interests it safeguards and represents.

“O ye discerning ones!” Bahá'u'lláh has written, “Verily, the words which have descended from the heaven of the Will of God are the source of unity and harmony for the world. Close your eyes to racial differences, and welcome all with the light of oneness.” “We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations,” He proclaims, “...that all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that

diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled.” “Bahá’u’lláh hath said,” writes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “that the various races of humankind lend a composite harmony and beauty of color to the whole. Let all associate, therefore, in this great human garden even as flowers grow and blend together side by side without discord or disagreement between them.” “Bahá’u’lláh,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá moreover has said, “once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the spirit shineth forth.”

“God,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself declares, “maketh no distinction between the white and the black. If the hearts are pure both are acceptable unto Him. God is no respecter of persons on account of either color or race. All colors are acceptable unto Him, be they white, black, or yellow. Inasmuch as all were created in the image of God, we must bring ourselves to realize that all embody divine possibilities.” “In the estimation of God,” He states, “all men are equal. There is no distinction or preference for any soul, in the realm of His justice and equity.” “God did not make these divisions;” He affirms, “these divisions have had their origin in man himself. Therefore, as they are against the plan and purpose of God they are false and imaginary.” “In the estimation of God,” He again affirms, “there is no distinction of color; all are one in the color and beauty of servitude to Him. Color is not important; the heart is all-important. It mattereth not what the exterior may be if the heart is pure and white within. God doth not behold differences of hue and complexion. He looketh at the hearts. He whose morals and virtues are praiseworthy is preferred in the presence of God; he who is devoted to the Kingdom is most beloved. In the realm of genesis and creation the question of color is of least importance.” “Throughout the animal kingdom,” He explains, “we do not find the creatures separated because of color. They recognize unity of species and oneness of kind. If we do not find color distinction drawn in a kingdom of lower intelligence and reason, how can it be justified among human beings, especially when we know that all have come from the same source and belong to the same household? In origin and intention of creation mankind is one. Distinctions of race and color have arisen afterward.” “Man is endowed with superior reasoning power and the faculty of perception”; He further explains, “he is the manifestation of divine bestowals. Shall racial ideas prevail and obscure the creative purpose of unity in his kingdom?” “One of the important questions,” He significantly remarks, “which affect the unity and the solidarity of mankind is the fellowship and equality of the white and colored races. Between these two races certain points of agreement and points of distinction exist which warrant just and mutual consideration. The points of contact are many.... In this country, the United States of America, patriotism is common to both races; all have equal rights to citizenship, speak one language, receive the blessings of the same civilization, and follow the precepts of the same religion. In fact numerous points of partnership and agreement exist between the two races, whereas the one point of distinction is that of color. Shall this, the least of all distinctions, be allowed to separate you as races and individuals?” “This variety in forms and coloring,” He stresses, “which is manifest in all the kingdoms is according to creative Wisdom and hath a divine purpose.” “The diversity in the human family,” He claims, “should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord.” “If you meet,” is His admonition, “those

of a different race and color from yourself, do not mistrust them, and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness.” “In the world of being,” He testifies, “the meeting is blessed when the white and colored races meet together with infinite spiritual love and heavenly harmony. When such meetings are established, and the participants associate with each other with perfect love, unity and kindness, the angels of the Kingdom praise them, and the Beauty of Bahá’u’lláh addresseth them, ‘Blessed are ye! Blessed are ye!’” “When a gathering of these two races is brought about,” He likewise asserts, “that assemblage will become the magnet of the Concourse on high, and the confirmation of the Blessed Beauty will surround it.” “Strive earnestly,” He again exhorts both races, “and put forth your greatest endeavor toward the accomplishment of this fellowship and the cementing of this bond of brotherhood between you. Such an attainment is not possible without will and effort on the part of each; from one, expressions of gratitude and appreciation; from the other, kindness and recognition of equality. Each one should endeavor to develop and assist the other toward mutual advancement.... Love and unity will be fostered between you, thereby bringing about the oneness of mankind. For the accomplishment of unity between the colored and white will be an assurance of the world’s peace.” “I hope,” He thus addresses members of the white race, “that ye may cause that downtrodden race to become glorious, and to be joined with the white race, to serve the world of man with the utmost sincerity, faithfulness, love, and purity. This opposition, enmity, and prejudice among the white race and the colored cannot be effaced except through faith, assurance, and the teachings of the Blessed Beauty.” “This question of the union of the white and the black is very important,” He warns, “for if it is not realized, ere long great difficulties will arise, and harmful results will follow.” “If this matter remaineth without change,” is yet another warning, “enmity will be increased day by day, and the final result will be hardship and may end in bloodshed.”

A tremendous effort is required by both races if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. Casting away once and for all the fallacious doctrine of racial superiority, with all its attendant evils, confusion, and miseries, and welcoming and encouraging the intermixture of races, and tearing down the barriers that now divide them, they should each endeavor, day and night, to fulfill their particular responsibilities in the common task which so urgently faces them. Let them, while each is attempting to contribute its share to the solution of this perplexing problem, call to mind the warnings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and visualize, while there is yet time, the dire consequences that must follow if this challenging and unhappy situation that faces the entire American nation is not definitely remedied.

Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period,

such grievous and slow-healing wounds. Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part, show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds. Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved. Let neither think that they can wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith. Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country. Let them rather believe, and be firmly convinced, that on their mutual understanding, their amity, and sustained cooperation, must depend, more than on any other force or organization operating outside the circle of their Faith, the deflection of that dangerous course so greatly feared by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the materialization of the hopes He cherished for their joint contribution to the fulfillment of that country's glorious destiny.

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (pp. 28-34)

5. The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 April 1996

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

With regard to the question of what public role might be played by the Bahá'í Faith in America to ameliorate in the immediately foreseeable future the plight of African-American males, the size and influence of the Bahá'í Community are, alas, too limited for it to have a determining impact on conditions which have, after all, been hundreds of years in the making. As is well known, since at least the middle of the last century significant numbers of Americans, both black and white, have long labored, often with immense resourcefulness, to counteract the baleful legacy of racism in their country, in all its complex dimensions, structural and otherwise. Indeed, when one meditates on the sweep of United States history, one can see how unlikely it is the bitter predicament of black males will be quickly or easily resolved. The obstacles are not of such character that, for example, legal reforms could dissolve them. This is not a counsel of despair. Nor is it an equivocation or a suggestion that the requirements of divine justice ought to be deferred. Nor is it to say that Bahá'ís have no critical role to play. On the contrary, the concern is with Bahá'í fundamentals, with looking deeply into underlying causes and identifying strategic lines of action which make the wisest use of our limited resources at this point in the development of the Bahá'í community.

If we are to avoid becoming entrapped in the enervating coils of cynicism which are a characteristic of this age of transition, we must, as the “custodians of...the forces of love”, ground our efforts in indomitable faith. In the future the Cause of God will spread throughout America; millions will be enlisted under its banner and race prejudice will finally be exorcised from the body politic. Of this have no doubt. It is inexorable, because it is the Will of Almighty God. However, as the House of Justice has been trying to get the friends to understand for some time, the necessary precondition to translation of our community's social vision into reality is a massive expansion in the number of committed, deepened believers who are well-grounded in the essentials of the Cause. Those who fail to comprehend the urgency assigned to the objective of achieving a large expansion have obviously failed to appreciate the moral imperative behind this aim.

Parallel to the process of large - scale enrollment, the institutions of the Faith, including those at the grassroots of the community, will gradually come to function with greater efficiency and increasing harmony, thereby enhancing their potential in stimulating the processes of social development.

Concerning the comparison you have drawn in your letter between the situation of the Bahá'í community in Iran and the African-American people generally, it is noteworthy that, while the plight of the Iranian friends is grievous, it is in some essential aspects more tractable. Furthermore, since the community is organized around the Divine Teachings and empowered by the Word of God, the effects of victimization on the Iranian believers is likely to prove, in the long view, less devastating than the effects of that which has been inflicted upon the African-Americans.

Moreover, it is wholly conceivable that a tiny handful of secular and clerical rulers who control the government there could, more or less at the stroke of a pen, effectively emancipate that community from the bulk of its practical difficulties. Nonetheless, we are the only ones in the world who would so persistently direct the focus of international attention toward achieving the aim of lifting the shackles from our co-religionists. There is no one else to take the lead.

The House of Justice sympathizes with your frustrations. It feels, however, that the best contribution which the friends can make is to carry on with the work of the kind you are already doing, demonstrating the Bahá'í spirit to others, showing their love for mankind and patiently, determinedly working to bring about change in the hearts and minds of those they are able to reach. It is a question of being in this struggle for the long term, of advancing the issue as much as feasible, given the conditions with which one has to work. In this respect, the powerful example of the Hand of the Cause Louis Gregory is an invaluable source of inspiration and encouragement.

Your sedulous efforts to effect greater understanding, unity and love between the races are praiseworthy and will undoubtedly attract divine confirmations. Be assured of the continued prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your efforts may yield fruit.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
[signed For the Department of the Secretariat]

6. The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 March 1998

The Bahá'í World Centre
Department of the Secretariat

March 24, 1998

The Universal House of Justice has received your email message of 24 March 1998 in which you raise a number of questions concerning race unity in the United States, and we have been instructed to reply as follows.

The continuing problem of racism remains, as the President of your country has himself indicated in recent months, an issue of fundamental importance for the American people. Given that the problem has been created and reinforced over a period of several hundred years, it is reasonable to suppose that its remediation will occupy the Bahá'í community and the nation of which it is a part for some generations to come.

Many of your questions relate to the relative seriousness of the race issue as compared to other issues. You ask, for example, whether the building of harmony between the races is still “the most vital and challenging issue facing the American Bahá'í community”. What is more important to understand is that the achievement of race unity is far from complete. There is little to be gained by trying to invent a precise way of ranking various complex problems such as racism or by attempting to resolve these problems on a piecemeal basis. The piecemeal efforts of those outside of the Bahá'í community who are concerned with the many grievous ills facing humanity have had little lasting success. Their well-meaning endeavours have suffered from a lack of appreciation of the spiritual origin of these illnesses and a lack of understanding that the only lasting solution lies in acceptance of the remedies of the Divine Physician.

You have also inquired as to the appropriate response when one feels offended by the comments of others during the discussion of matters pertaining to race. Owing to the legacy of victimization and also the sense of guilt which many feel in relation to this issue, the race-unity work can often arouse strong emotions. Thus, it is inevitable that there will be exaggerated expressions on the subject from time to time. Consultation, as you know, should be courteous and loving, but it should also be frank. In this area, as in others, the friends should be guided by the spirit of the teachings and strive for the golden mean.

Department of the Secretariat

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7. Message from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

The following message from the Universal House of Justice appeared in *The American Bahá'í*, August 20, 2000, Vol. 31, No. 6, pp. 1, 5

March 14, 2000

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

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received a message of unusual interest from a group of 10 Bahá'ís in North Carolina who have initiated a pilot program called “A Supreme Effort, white Bahá'í men ‘contributing their share to the solution of the problem’ of racism in America.” We have been asked to write as follows.

The House of Justice was deeply touched by the pure-hearted response of these friends to the Guardian's urgent appeal in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, and it feels that so sincere a commitment to the principles lying at the heart of so vital an issue deserves to be encouraged wholeheartedly. It is important, too, that the Bahá'í institutions offer guidance that will assist them to deal successfully with the complexity and sensitivity of the challenge they have assumed.

The initiatives of white Bahá'ís, so indispensable to the solution of a problem that involves the black and white races equally, must, of course, be readily and genuinely welcomed; and nothing should be done to dampen their zeal. But to attach the label “white Bahá'í men” to their endeavor can raise unnecessary problems. For one thing, it is illogical that white men should be seen to be more concerned about this matter than white women, or indeed any other segment of the United States Bahá'í community; yet such an impression can be given by this designation. For another, these friends could appear as attempting to imitate the Black Men's Gathering, whereas the Gathering is a distinctive activity with a different agenda. It does not concern itself chiefly with race unity in the Bahá'í community as such. It addresses itself to a special situation faced by a minority that has suffered severe social and spiritual afflictions imposed upon it by the majority. The program of the Black Men's Gatherings is unique and exemplary as an avenue for transcending the legacy of anguish, frustration and social pathology that is peculiar to black men in the United States; it urges them towards a fullness of life within the spirit and principles of the Bahá'í Revelation.

The use of the term “white Bahá'í men” to designate a program of activities in the community could be provocative and confusing in view of the current tensions that characterize the multicultural environment in the United States. It could produce the impression, God forbid, that the Bahá'í community is paradoxically divided along racial lines in what should be a common effort of all the diverse elements represented within it. White Bahá'ís can certainly find other ways to demonstrate boldly their involvement in

seeking a solution to the problems of racism without attaching such a designation to their efforts.

It has also to be borne in mind how strong is the tendency among your compatriots to rush into popularizing notions and concepts that appeal to their imagination - a tendency that often allows for only a superficial treatment of seriously important things. The hoped-for success of this pilot program in North Carolina could well induce Bahá'ís in other parts of the country with similar well-intended motives to apply such terminology to their activities; the friends from other ethnic groups might be similarly influenced. Nothing could be more damaging to the reputation of the Bahá'í community than to have groups bearing various cultural identities springing up all over the country in the name of the Bahá'í Faith with apparently different ethnic versions of what should be a united effort by the diverse elements of the community to realize a common goal, namely, the oneness of humankind.

These comments are not meant to detract in the least from the highly admirable initiative of the dear friends in North Carolina, but rather to improve the possibilities for their success. Indeed, the aims they have set for themselves are most laudable.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

8. The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 3 June 2007

Transmitted by email: ...

Mr. ...

...

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 19 August 2004, inquiring as to the role and future of people of African descent in America, and has asked us to reply as follows. We regret that the pressure of work at the Bahá'í World Centre has prevented us from writing to you sooner.

The sincere spirit of love and devotion which prompted your eloquent email letter is warmly acknowledged, and it was encouraging to note that you are reflecting deeply on your own identity and responsibilities as a Bahá'í and participant in the Black Men's Gatherings. The African-American believers indeed hold a special place in the Bahá'í community of that country. You may be familiar with the following excerpts from letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian, but it is fitting to recite them here.

The Negroes, though they themselves may not realize it, have a contribution to make to the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. His teachings and the society He has come to establish are for every race and every nation, and each one of them has his own part to play and the gift of his own qualities and talents to give to the whole. (10 December 1942)

The Guardian feels very strongly that the Negro Bahá'ís have great responsibilities, both towards their own race and towards their fellow-believers. They must not only arise to teach the Cause to the members of their own race, but must do all in their power to ensure that within their Bahá'í Community itself the Negro and white believers understand and love each other and are truly as one soul in different bodies. Our allegiance as believers is to Bahá'u'lláh; we must fix our attention and devotion on Him, and His Will, and, heedless of the shortcomings of our fellow-Bahá'ís, act as He would have us toward them. (23 November 1941)

It is always important to remember that with the coming of Bahá'u'lláh the human race as a whole was summoned to recognition of its oneness, and this has launched it on a wholly new stage in its spiritual and social evolution. He has stated clearly that His message and the glorious prospects envisaged belong to every people on the planet. "The summons and the message", He wrote, "which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty."

Yet, it is clear, too, from the Teachings that every people, through its inherent potentialities and particular range of experience, will make its own distinct contribution

to the creation of a new civilization. To the extent that African-Americans who embrace the new Revelation arise to do their part by adhering to the Teachings will the gifts which are uniquely theirs be realized in the splendors of the Golden Age. The “pupil of the eye”, Bahá’u’lláh’s metaphoric reference to Black people, will no doubt acquire clear meaning as they conscientiously strive over time to fulfill the divine purpose for which the Blessed Beauty came. There can be no doubt that Americans of African descent can find in themselves the capacity, so well developed as a result of their long encounter with injustice, to recognize and respond to the vision of love and justice brought by the Promised One of all ages. Imbued with that vision, past and present sufferings are transformed into measures of patience, wisdom and compassion—qualities so essential to the effort to moderate the discordant ways of a confused world and aid the healing of its spiritual ills. What better than the transformed character of a bruised people to smooth the course, to offer perspectives for new beginnings toward world order!

As to the need for scholarly works that will interpret the meaning of the issues created by the cruelties of slavery, it is not an empty hope that souls illumined by the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh and equipped with trained minds will arise to author the kinds of treatises and books you rightly feel will promote understanding. But for those who have turned towards Him, the vision of human purpose given by the Divine Word illumines the way forward for all peoples. The legacy of pain passed down from the global history of man’s cruelty to man so burdens and confuses peoples of various climes that there can be no more immediate necessity than to spread knowledge of that Word far and wide. Has it not conveyed the vital truth that “the Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty”? Surely, for any believer knowing this, the foremost act, the most important duty, is to present the Bahá’í message to all who will receive it now.

Regarding the question of slavery, its horrifying aftermath in America and the abetment of Christians, you are no doubt aware that enslaving other human beings and otherwise discriminating against them were not unique to members of this religious community. Centuries before the African slave trade was introduced to the West, it was practiced by Muslims in the East. In fact this act of enforced, uncompensated labor and the humiliation it imposed have been a common part of mankind’s history stretching back to ancient times; Africans have themselves imposed slavery on different tribes residing among them. It is a sobering fact that this form of oppression has injured the lives of human groups across the planet. Erasing the scars so deeply etched on human consciousness requires a monumental remedy that only a Revelation of the global magnitude of the Bahá’í Faith can ensure. All so afflicted can now find relief in Bahá’u’lláh’s assertion that, as the Divine Physician, He has prescribed the remedy for all that ails the world of humanity.

You have mentioned your disappointment with the corruption and powerlessness of the Church and the Christian clerics, but how else would they be when Bahá’u’lláh has declared that power has been seized from the clergy? It is not to be expected that the Church can regain the spiritual capacity adequately to influence the significant social and

moral change needed to rectify the problems created by the baleful history to which you have referred. Certainly you know that the current situation is no worse with the Christian clergy than with the clergy of other faiths. Think, for instance, of the woeful fate that Bahá'ís in Iran have been facing for many scores of years at the hands of the Muslim clergy. One must, however, separate the deeds of religious leaders from the Teachings they profess to uphold. The religion taught by Christ, it is only fair to recognize, did not advocate slavery and the spate of other evil deeds practiced by His followers. For the Africans brought to America as slaves, believing in the religion of their oppressors was in a sense ironic but not surprising. The message to which their souls responded came, after all, from a divine Source. So despite all that was wrong with the ill deeds of so many that claimed to believe in that creed, the fact that Black people, notwithstanding their geographical and cultural origins, did recognize the Manifestation of God in Christ was a mark of the divine favor vouchsafed to them by a merciful Providence. This clearly enabled them to endure and transcend the dire circumstances in which they were mired. The history of slavery in that land testifies abundantly of feats of their spiritual transcendence in outstanding examples of courage, fortitude and creativity, which demonstrate the profound effect of the Christ spirit on their lives. Ultimately, of course, Christians played a major role in the fight for emancipation of the slaves, and it is just that this be acknowledged with gratitude, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has advised. But those were the happenings of yesterday, and we are now living in a new Day. Centuries have elapsed, and we know that the dispensation associated with Christ, as with every other Manifestation of God before the Báb, has passed. The long promised springtime has indeed come with the appearance of the Everlasting Father, Bahá'u'lláh.

Appreciating the uniqueness of this Day of Days ushered in by the Blessed Beauty surpasses by far the effect, however valuable, of any scholarly effort to provide interpretations of the dreadful acts and consequences of slavery; for with the vision of the future unveiled by His Word all things become new and memories of a horrific past fade in the brilliance of the new Light. This vision assumes a special luminosity when considered in the sense of Bahá'u'lláh's characterization of the first Ri'ván, the time of His great announcement in Baghdad, as the Day whereon "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification", whereon "the breezes of forgiveness were wafted over the entire creation". How clearly, then, He created a new beginning, separating the past from the present and beckoning the entire human race to the path leading towards realization of the ultimate and most glorious purpose for which it was created. In this same context, valuable understanding can as well be gained from a statement by Shoghi Effendi on the social evolution of humanity in face of the current challenge of the Bahá'í message. He wrote:

The long ages of infancy and of childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race

reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.

The summons of Bahá'u'lláh to so outright a departure from the past moves us away from ancient models of activity, such as the experience of the Hebrews at the time of Moses—the prospects of our community do not fit into the framework of the recorded wanderings of that people. For Bahá'u'lláh, in vowing to create a new race, has provided the instruments by which the processes of the social transformation of those composing it are to be guided. He has given us the prescription for a new World Order, declaring that “mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.” As His followers strive to raise up this System, which comprises the institutions of His administration at the local, national and global levels, the spiritual and practical powers of its world-shaping capacity will gradually increase. But we need dedicated souls in great numbers to accomplish what has to be done, and it is for this reason that the House of Justice has set forth a Five Year Plan that calls upon us all to make efforts to advance the process of entry by troops. As you are no doubt aware, this Plan represents the current stage in the operation of the charter of teaching outlined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan He addressed to the North American believers.

The Black Men’s Gathering was inspired by a thought to stimulate African-Americans to respond to the urgent call to action of the Divine Plan and so overcome the crippling effects of a long history of oppression. The participants in the Gathering have wisely concentrated their energies on pursuing the requirements of that charter. Indeed, the fulfillment of their highest hopes for the advancement of the race depends on the extent to which they maintain their dedication to the Five Year Plan and succeeding enterprises that the House of Justice will devise in a continuing effort to accomplish the Master’s scheme for world redemption. What the Gathering does so well is to instill in its participants the desire to strive to realize the potentialities they possess—both from their natural endowments as creatures of God and from the wisdom afforded them by the experience of their particular history—for contributing significantly to that effort. Such consecrated endeavor is the only way by which they can arrive at the furthestmost goal of the common destiny of the entire human race: the Kingdom of God on earth.

One who recognizes Bahá'u'lláh, as you have, and remains steadfast in carrying out His bidding is indeed attuning his soul to the true purpose of his earthly existence; he is contributing towards the building of the World Order the Lord of Mankind proclaimed; and at whatever stage in this development his physical life ends, he will thus have prepared himself for transition to the Celestial City, the ultimate object of one’s lifelong striving. Even so, the reality of the station to which he may attain remains incomprehensible to him in this world. Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the mystery of such a station in an exhortation addressed to believers who are faithful to His instructions:

Ye are better known to the inmates of the Kingdom on high than ye are known to your own selves. ...Would that ye had the power to perceive the things your Lord,

the All-Merciful, doth see—things that attest the excellence of your rank, that bear witness to the greatness of your worth, that proclaim the sublimity of your station! God grant that your desires and unmortified passions may not hinder you from that which hath been ordained for you.

The House of Justice will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines on your behalf that the Blessed Beauty may guide all your devoted endeavors in His path and that the much-loved believers of African descent may be favored by His bountiful grace.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

9. The Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia - 4 January 2009

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

4 January 2009

The National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Australia

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter dated 23 July 2008 (ref. EDA/dl/20080723) has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which is heartened to see that you are engaged in such focused consultations on how best to develop the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. You have raised a number of pertinent questions in this respect, especially related to the Centre's programs of study. While such specifics deserve ample attention, the House of Justice feels it would be timely for you to step back at this important juncture in the development of your community and survey from a broad perspective its challenges and possibilities. In this connection, we have been asked to write to you as follows.

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

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

The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself can be regarded as one area of action, the approach, methods and instruments of which are now well understood. Social action can be considered another. This term is being employed increasingly in consultations among Bahá'ís, as a result of heightened consciousness and enhanced

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

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

The House of Justice wishes us to emphasize that the above scheme should be regarded as merely one way of conceptualizing the work of the Bahá'í community, one that avoids fragmentation and facilitates sound planning. It does not encompass the entirety of Bahá'í endeavour, the defense work being a case in point. Nor should it assume the status of a definition, as reflected in statements such as “There are three areas of Bahá'í activity.” Further, in no way should the friends feel there is a division of labour, in which one group participates in the work of expansion and consolidation, and another group in each of the other two areas. All Bahá'ís should engage in efforts to expand and consolidate the Faith. They also participate, to some extent, in social action and the discourses of society. In the case of the latter two, however, where the work takes on different degrees of formality, the nature of the tasks to be carried out can become quite complex and sometimes delicate, requiring specialized training and preparation.

Indeed, it is in this context that the Universal House of Justice asks you to consider plans for the development of the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. As currently

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

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

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

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre
Board of Counsellors in Australasia
Counsellor David Chittleborough
Counsellor Eric Kingston
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10. Ridván Message 2010

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Ridván 2010

To the Baha'is 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

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.

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 individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Baha'i 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.

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 Baha'i 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.

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 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.

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.

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 Baha’i 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 everyone 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 Baha'i teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

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 Baha'i world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

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.

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.

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

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 Baha'i 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 Baha'i 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.

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 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.

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

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.

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

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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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 Baha’i 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.

In our Ridván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labour at the level of the cluster, they would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community’s engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

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 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.

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 Baha'i 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.

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.

11. Universal House of Justice letter re.: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

29 August 2010

To the Bahá’ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s departure one hundred years ago from Haifa for Port Said signalled the opening of a glorious new chapter in the annals of the Faith. He was not to return to the Holy Land for three years. Referring to that historic moment the Guardian would later write: “The establishment of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh in the Western Hemisphere—the most outstanding achievement that will forever be associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry—had ... set in motion such tremendous forces, and been productive of such far-reaching results, as to warrant the active and personal participation of the Centre of the Covenant Himself...” With the inauguration of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels to the West, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, hemmed in for more than half a century by the hosts of enmity and oppression, burst its restraints. For the first time since its inception, the recognized Head of the Faith enjoyed a freedom of action to pursue unencumbered its divinely prescribed mission.

By any earthly measure, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would have seemed ill prepared to carry out the task before Him. He was sixty-six years old, an exile since childhood, with no formal schooling, a prisoner for forty years, in failing health, and unfamiliar with Western customs and languages. Yet He arose, without thought of comfort, undeterred by the risks involved, and utterly reliant upon divine assistance, to champion the Cause of God. He interacted with diverse peoples in nine countries on three continents. The scope and intensity of His tireless exertions were such as to “dumbfound His followers in East and West with admiration and wonder” and to “exercise an imperishable influence” on the course of the Faith’s future.

Over the next few years, Bahá’ís around the world will joyously call to mind the many episodes associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s historic journey. But this anniversary is more than a time for commemoration. The words uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse. We should, therefore, reflect not only upon what the Master achieved and set in motion but also on the work that remains undone to which He has summoned us. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, He expressed His inmost longing:

O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá” in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.

Nearly a century has passed since these words were recorded. Stage after stage of the Divine Plan has been successfully prosecuted. The Faith has been established in all comers of the world. We are present in those places that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá yearned to visit. Individuals, communities, and institutions are now endowed with the capacity necessary for systematic, sustained, and coherent action. During this precious period of remembrance, then, let each and every one of His faithful lovers arise and act in His Name. Let them offer their share, no matter how humble, to the progress of the Plan He authored-that priceless and everlasting bequest.

12. Letter of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to the American Baha'i community – 16 February 2009

To the American Bahá'í community

Dearly loved Friends,

Your National Spiritual Assembly has reflected on the significance of the outcome of the recent presidential election in light of the Bahá'í teachings about the oneness of humanity and their compelling vision of the destiny of America, and we wish to share the following thoughts.

The election of an African American for the first time to the presidency of the United States is an event that transcends partisan politics. It clearly marks an important new stage in the social evolution of the American people and is an achievement that all Bahá'ís can wholeheartedly celebrate. The citizens of the United States have with this action, as much as with any in the long struggle to combat racial prejudice—the “most vital and challenging issue” confronting the nation—demonstrated their will to embrace more fully the unifying spirit of the age.

The many statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His sojourn in this country nearly a century ago, praising America’s material achievements, her spirit of enterprise, and her democratic form of government, still inspire us. Yet He was also uncompromising in His assessment that our nation, sunk in the morass of engrained racial prejudice, materialism, and accelerating moral decay, would go through a long and difficult period of trials that would gradually cleanse these various impurities from its social fabric, thereby preparing it to realize its ultimate destiny to “lead all nations spiritually.”

Concerning racial issues, much progress has been made since the beloved Master visited these shores. Undoubtedly, it is in large measure a credit to the courage, leadership, and sacrifice of countless individuals, the persistent efforts of organizations of civil society and of various religious institutions, and the bold actions of judicial and legislative bodies that such progress has been possible. The Bahá'í community also played a role, having striven earnestly for nearly a century to uphold by word and deed, in every region of the country, the pivotal principle of the oneness of humankind.

But there can be no sense of complacency nor any rest. The ideals of justice, equality, and unity have yet to be fully realized; the roots of racial prejudice are old, deep, and widespread. No single victory, political or otherwise, however groundbreaking, is sufficient to remove conditions so intractable and institutionalized.

Bahá'ís believe that the ultimate solution lies in the application of spiritual principle in the lives of individuals, in approaches to community-building, and in the operation of social institutions. People of every age and background can increase their individual and collective capacity to further progress through a learning process that is founded upon essential truths contained in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Promising patterns of activity,

now emerging in every part of the country and throughout the world, should give us the confidence to strive with even greater urgency to address the needs of humanity.

Our ultimate success in this will depend, as the Universal House of Justice recently reminded us, “on the qualities that distinguish your service to the peoples of the world. So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural—that even the stranger sees in you loving friends. So high must be your standard of excellence and so pure and chaste your lives that the moral influence you exert penetrates the consciousness of the wider community. Only if you demonstrate the rectitude of conduct to which the writings of the Faith call every soul will you be able to struggle against the myriad forms of corruption, overt and subtle, eating at the vitals of society. Only if you perceive honour and nobility in every human being—this independent of wealth or poverty—will you be able to champion the cause of justice.”

Bahá'ís of every race and ethnicity rejoice with our countrymen in this significant step forward. We remain aware of the challenges ahead and are unswervingly committed to facing and overcoming them. We march forward with unshakeable confidence that God's purpose for His children will not be thwarted, and that Bahá'u'lláh's statement of spiritual reality will be fully realized: “*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*”

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary-General

13. Excerpts on consultation

Consultation Excerpts

The importance

- ◆ consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique order
- ◆ the principle of consultation which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration
- ◆ consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude
- ◆ the views of several individuals are surely preferable to one
- ◆ settle all things, both great and small, through consultation
- ◆ the purpose is to emphasize... consultation must have for its' object the investigation of truth
- ◆ individual initiative, personal ability, and resourcefulness, though indispensable are, unless supported by the collective wisdom, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task
- ◆ the operating expression of justice in human affairs

The foundation

- ◆ members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation.
- ◆ the first duty of the members is to effect their own unity and harmony, in order to obtain good results.

The spirit

- ◆ not arbitrary power but the spirit of frank and loving consultation
- ◆ they must proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care, and moderation to express their views
- ◆ spiritual conference, not the mere voicing of personal views
- ◆ extreme humility, open mindedness, sense of justice and duty, candor, modesty, entire devotion to the welfare and interest of friends
- ◆ purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, devotion to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold
- ◆ When enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject until wranglings, disputations and loud talk vanish
- ◆ patience and restraint, however, should at all time characterize the discussion

The process

- ◆ not to dictate, but to consult
- ◆ he who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right
- ◆ man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure
- ◆ before expressing his own views, he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own
- ◆ not insist upon their own views... ultimately lead to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.
- ◆ it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating his fellow members

The clash/conflict

- ◆ should anyone oppose, he must in no wise feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.
- ◆ the brilliant light which comes from the collision of thoughts is the “lightener” of facts

The outcome

- ◆ Whatsoever is arranged in harmony... its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness.
- ◆ If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce demolition
- ◆ The view of two earnest souls is always better than one
- ◆ And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.
- ◆ all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem

Excepts on consultation prepared for Louhelen Baha’i School by Tod Ewing