



A New Vista: The Five Year Plan

The first of a series of articles by Member of the Board
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THERE IS A PROFOUND difference between the concept of planning as understood by the world at large and its Bahá'í expression. Normally planning is understood as a means of designing the future. But in the context of the work of the Bahá'í community, planning implies striving to align the work of the Cause with the Divinely impelled processes.¹ The Universal House of Justice explains this in relation to the Five Year Plan:

“At its core it is a spiritual process in which communities and institutions strive to align their pursuits with the Will of God.”²

The forces in operation in the world have brought the Bahá'í community to a moment of utmost significance, a time of profound “changes occurring in the fortunes of the Faith”,³ a high watermark of achievement. The synchronisation of the triple processes referred to by the beloved Guardian,⁴ destined to occur at the end of the luminous Twentieth Century culminated in the announcement by the Universal House of Justice of the opening of the fifth epoch of the Formative Age.

The fifth epoch will no doubt effect major changes, consolidating the emergence of the culture of growth which has occurred in the Bahá'í community. The arrival of this moment, which the Universal House of Justice expresses gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for having been able to recognise,⁵ had been intimated in certain of its recent statements. The emergence of a culture of growth in which we are able to conceive of large-scale expansion; our entry into the learning mode; the emergence of Training Institutes throughout the world as an indispensable “engine for the process of entry by troops”,⁶ the completion of constructions on God's Holy Mountain; and the internal processes of institutional consolidation becoming synchronised with external processes towards peace, all had been early signals of this new stage. But the emerging oneness of mind and unity of thought at the conference of the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members in the Holy Land in January transformed those early intimations into “a recognisable reality”.⁷ In its Ridván report, some three months later, the Universal House of Justice further indicated that a “coherence of understanding”⁸ was everywhere apparent, that a “new state of mind”⁹ had emerged and we had reached a “moment of consciousness”.¹⁰

On this basis, might we not reasonably assume that in addition to “the enrichment of the devotional life of the community”¹¹ another feature of the new epoch will be the unity of vision and understanding which will become increasingly apparent everywhere? And we begin to realise how significant it is to arrive at unity of vision, profound and universal, that it can signalise the start of a new epoch!

In these last few months, the flow of guidance from the Head of the Faith has been phenomenal. On January 1 the Universal House of Justice issued the new document The

Institution of the Counsellors; on January 9, 2001 the seminal letter elaborating the requirements of the new Plan was issued; January 16 saw the announcement of the fifth epoch in an address to the Bahá'ís of the world; in April the amazing analysis contained in the document *Century of Light* was released; and following the Ridván message, the Universal House of Justice issued two major statements in connection with the opening of the terraces on Mount Carmel. The accumulated wealth of guidance – penetrating insight about the condition of the world and the challenges and opportunities it provides, together with detailed instruction and inspiration for the work of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh – is quite staggering.

It is against this backdrop of change that the Bahá'í community moves into the next stage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan. The central aim of the new Plan remains the advancement of the process of entry by troops, but also its acceleration through systematic action on the part of individuals, communities and institutions. The guidance of the January 9, 2001 letter is nothing less than the next phase of the process of entry by troops.¹² This Plan also represents the first steps in the long-term direction of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh until the year 2021, the centenary of the start of the Formative Age of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Institute Process

A major theme of the Plan is the critical importance of the Training Institute as the agency for the development of human resources needed to advance the process of entry by troops. And it is here that we realise how critical it was to spend the last two Plans, establishing and then augmenting the Institute process. This essential instrument is now available to serve the needs of the new Plan.

The Institute nurtures a process of organic growth. That is to say from among the new and old believers, souls are trained with the necessary requisites to have confidence to teach the Cause and to have the spiritual condition and passion to be effective in doing so. As this happens, growth is accelerated and human resources are multiplied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá alludes to the organic process of growth in the Tablets of the Divine Plan:

“During the lifetime of Jesus Christ the believing, firm souls were few and numbered, but the heavenly blessings descended so plentifully that in a number of years countless souls entered beneath the shadow of the Gospel. God has said in the Qur'an: 'One grain will bring forth seven sheaves, and every sheaf shall contain one hundred grains.' In other words, one grain will become seven hundred; and if God so wills He will double these also.”¹³

In one of the most moving passages of the Plan letter, the Universal House of Justice portrays a compelling vision of the transformed Bahá'í community. Training and encouragement are identified as the factors whose effectiveness leads to the fostering of the culture of growth.¹⁴ The training process and the raising up of resources is then associated with the emphatic promise of Bahá'u'lláh, given in the closing years of His earthly life to the Master, that souls will arise and special beings will appear who will work for the triumph of the cause of the unity of mankind. How thrilling to know that the cry of the Master “I am waiting, eagerly waiting for these holy ones to appear; and yet, how long will they delay their coming?”¹⁵ is being systematically answered.

Another vital area in this new Plan is the education of children. Indeed, the House of Justice states that the increasing consciousness of the crucial importance of the spiritual education of children was a major legacy of the Twelve Month Plan.

Systematic Programmes of Growth

According to the House of Justice, essentially the Plan is aimed at effecting a deeper penetration of the Faith in every region of every country. To do this, we have been given a detailed blueprint, born of the experience of the Area Growth Programme pilots which took place in the last two years on the five continents. To achieve this deeper penetration methodically, systematic programmes of growth will be adopted. This will require the dividing up of the territory into areas, assessing their stage of Bahá'í development and

men ensuring the progressive development of the areas. This is similar to how the beloved Guardian implemented the first global Plan, the Ten Year Crusade. He analysed the conditions and grouped countries together and ensured the systematic development of each through successive stages of progress.

The implementation of the programme consists firstly in dividing up the country (or in our case the four parts of the United Kingdom) into areas consisting either of a collection of towns and villages or a large city and its suburbs. This is done on the basis of a number of factors such as culture, patterns of transport, and infrastructure.¹⁶ We are fortunate in this country to have the institution of the Bahá'í Councils which has been able to conduct the task of designating the areas in consultation with all the institutions working at the regional level. This work has been delegated to them by the National Spiritual Assembly which has also provided guidance to the whole community in the framework of the national Plan which it has developed. This framework also includes other "indispensable activities"¹⁷ referred to by the House of Justice.

Having completed the identification of the areas, naturally they will be in various stages of Bahá'í development. Broadly, these are identified as follows:

- Some areas will not yet be open to the Faith. These will need to be progressively opened through the settlement of home-front pioneers
- Some areas will consist of a few isolated localities and groups. Within the Plan, the localities in these areas will need to be strengthened
- Some areas will consist of established communities with a vigorous Institute process. Again these areas will also need to be further strengthened
- Finally, some areas will consist of strong communities with a core of deepened believers ready for accelerated growth.¹⁸

Clearly within each of these categories there will be many degrees. For example there will be those areas with established communities but which lack a vigorous Institute process. Naturally, a priority for these areas will be for communities to establish or strengthen the Institute process. Similarly, there will be areas which have strong communities with deepened and devoted believers, but in such areas the Universal House of Justice explains that we should not rush to establish these intensive programmes of growth until all the propitious conditions have been achieved. These can be summarised as follows:

- A sizeable number of believers who have a high level of enthusiasm, are devoted, capable, understand the prerequisites for sustainable growth and can take ownership
- Basic experience of a few communities in holding children's classes, devotional meetings, and Nineteen Day Feasts
- Reasonable degree of administrative capability in at least a few Assemblies
- Active involvement of Auxiliary Board members' assistants in promoting community life
- A pronounced spirit of collaboration among the various institutions in the area
- Above all, the strong presence of the Training Institute with a scheme of coordination that supports the systematic multiplication of study circles.¹⁹

Experience worldwide (and also in this country) has shown that these are among the necessary conditions for starting and sustaining intensive activity in an area. And although this is a challenging list of conditions and we may feel it would be some time before any area is ready for this stage of development, these conditions provide the general direction, the compass, for every locality and ultimately every area. The clarity of this direction inspires confidence in us. One of the most moving comments I heard was from a believer living in one of the remote Scottish islands who at a gathering to study this guidance said with total confidence: "Although we are very few in number I now know exactly what I need to do to get started. And I am sure that my steps are set in the right direction!"

Until an area is ready for this intensive level of activity, our primary task is to build up the strength in our own locality through training and personal and collective teaching. But eventually area after area will begin to achieve the conditions necessary for intensive action. As this happens, the friends will begin to plan as an area and pursue some activities at an area level. But even these are not intended to become a grandiose plan, rather the integration of a few proven lines of action. Among the keys to success will be

the spirit of collaboration, the involvement of the Institute and the attitude of learning. (20) At each stage the planning of specific actions at the level of the area will be for a few months at a time, reviewed and reassessed by the friends in the area, learnt from and reformulated as further lines of action. This concept of action-learning, in other words operating in the learning mode with the aid of the Institute, is inherent to the processes of the Five Year Plan.²¹

Among the initial goals which the House of Justice has identified for these areas is the establishment of the following processes:

- study circles open to all
- children's classes open to all
- devotional meetings open to all²²

The vision of the House of Justice for our community to become an open channel for the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh to reach humankind is now encapsulated in its pellucid guidance. But this is the ultimate vision of the Blessed Beauty:

“The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it.”²³

Therefore in these activities, our orientation will be to embrace all humanity irrespective of whether souls have yet recognised their Lord.

“Verily, We behold all created things moved to bear witness unto Us. Some know Us and bear witness, while the majority bear witness, yet know Us not.”²⁴

Such a reorientation will doubtless present challenges but we must be supremely confident that we can achieve it. The believers in this country have a rich body of experience to draw upon in this regard. One of the most significant achievements of the UK Bahá'í community has been the pioneering efforts to hold devotional meetings open to all. There has been considerable experimentation in unnumbered localities to discover appropriate ways of conducting devotional gatherings not only as an aspect of our own community's spiritual enrichment but also as a way of attracting those who also yearn for the divine medicine. Another major achievement in the UK is the participation of people who are not yet Bahá'ís in the study circle process. Whereas this feature is being experimented with for the first time in some countries, there are many study circles here which have already gained significant experience of being open to all. And in considering how children's education could become open to all, we need only to recall the pioneering efforts made in the UK in the field of education in general and how several of the most celebrated teaching projects have over the years placed the Bahá'í education of children at the heart of their activities.

In addition to these three initial goals which by their nature can and must be open to all, the House of Justice emphasises giving weight to the observance of the Nineteen Day Feast and the strengthening of Local Spiritual Assemblies, and when circumstances permit, the adoption of a small social and economic development project. Taken together, then, these activities become the building blocks of healthy and vibrant communities.

There is guidance too on how areas will develop and the role that regular gatherings will play in that development. Such gatherings will become part-planning, part-training, part-cultural enrichment and artistic expression. They will also engage the new believers who will increasingly take responsibility and become active participants in the work.

In time each of these areas will develop and flourish, growing vibrant and dedicated to the spiritual enrichment of personal lives and whole communities. The growth in each area will be organic and varied, progressing at its own pace, developing in the learning mode. Before long there will be hundreds and thousands of areas with intensive programmes of growth throughout the world through which its peoples will achieve spiritual empowerment.

Such a vision looks heavenwards, yet our feet are firmly on the ground and our actions,

however modest, move us confidently towards the glorious destiny that Bahá'u'lláh has determined for His Cause – “. . . till at last they made the world another world.”²⁵

Finally, we are invited to reflect on the fact that this entire scheme, this whole effort, is intended for the masses of mankind to gain access to “the bounties that Bahá'u'lláh can alone bestow.”²⁶ And in this reflection we should meditate on what is truly at stake:

“In the final analysis, it is this Divine purpose that all our activities are intended to serve, and we will advance this purpose to the degree that we understand what is at stake in the efforts we are making to teach the Faith, to establish and consolidate its institutions, and to intensify the influence it is exerting in the life of society.”²⁷

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References

1. This concept is further elaborated in *Century of Light*, p. 69
2. Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001, para. 20
3. *ibid.* para. 2
4. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World*, pp. 74-75;
Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001, para. 2
5. Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2001, para. 1
6. Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2000, para. 3
7. Universal House of Justice, January 16, 2001, para. 4
8. Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2001, para. 1
9. *ibid.* para. 1
10. *ibid.* para. 1
11. Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2001, para. 9
12. Universal House of Justice, January 16, 2001, para. 2
13. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 7
14. Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001, para. 9
15. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 252
16. Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001, para. 10
17. *ibid.* para. 19
18. *ibid.* para. 10
19. *ibid.* para. 13
20. *ibid.* para. 14
21. *ibid.* paras. 8, 9, 17, 18
22. *ibid.* para. 16
23. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 89
24. *ibid.* p. 15
25. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 10
26. Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001, para. 18
27. Universal House of Justice, May 24, 2001, para. 5