

Ten Year Retrospective, 24 July 2023

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES – NORTH AMERICA¹

1. Introduction
 2. Settings for learning together about contributing to prevalent discourses
 3. Reimagining the annual conference
 4. Evolution of the publications work
 5. Vision of growth and approach to learning
 - 5.1 Objects of Learning
 - 5.2 Elements of the conceptual framework
 - 5.3 Generating and applying knowledge
 6. A lifetime of inquiry
- Appendix: Small Group Initiatives

1. INTRODUCTION

On 24 July 2013, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada received a message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies with respect to “the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.” The House of Justice encouraged the Association to focus on building capacity for engaging in

¹ Written in collaboration with the Executive Committee’s subcommittees, staff, and other close collaborators.

the discourses of society, with a particular emphasis on professional and academic discourses. Since then, the Association has progressively learned how to translate this and subsequent guidance into action. Now, ten years later, we feel moved to reflect on the advances made in several related areas: fostering evolving conversations within collaborative settings—such as reading groups, writing groups, and seminars—about contributing to professional and academic discourses from a Bahá'í perspective; reimagining the annual conference; advancing the Association’s publishing endeavors; and strengthening the capacity of the Association to operate systematically.

These developments have entailed learning about how various elements of the conceptual framework discussed in the 24 July 2013 message,² including learning in action itself, apply to the work of the Association. Attentiveness to these elements has helped generate new strengths—and given rise to new challenges—which have disclosed new

² “Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013).

References to “the conceptual framework” in this document should be understood in light of this description by the Universal House of Justice, which is explored in section 5.2.

possibilities for advancement.

We have correspondingly refined the mandate of the Association in the light of continuing guidance, such as the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. To this end, we created numerous spaces for consultation and reflection within and between committees, with staff and collaborators, and with our senior institutions. This process led to the generation of the following mandate:

The Association plays a role in fostering the intellectual life of the community, focusing in particular on helping to build the “capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions” in a manner that “enrich[es] the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission.”³ It aims to enable participants of varying backgrounds and academic interests to effectively explore how “to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.”⁴

Recognizing that all visions evolve, we view this mandate as a point

3 Universal House of Justice, 7 September 2015.

4 Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021.

of reference that helps to unify the Association’s various activities and consolidate our understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between its work and the pattern of activity in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. That is, the activities of ABS are understood to complement, and to be nurtured by, the society-building endeavours of the wider Bahá'í community.

In the following retrospective, we outline the main developments of ABS over the last ten years, referring to the 24 July 2013 message as our guide. We also highlight some of our key objects of learning as well as our approach to applying relevant elements of the conceptual framework to the work. A theme that runs throughout this report is how the Association can strengthen its capacity to further expand and consolidate its endeavours in alignment with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

2. SETTINGS FOR LEARNING TOGETHER ABOUT CONTRIBUTING TO PREVALENT DISCOURSES

In the fourth paragraph of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice explains:

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to

explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

And further:

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity.

Based on this guidance, the Association has fostered a still-evolving set of activities that aim to promote learning about participation in a variety of academic, professional, and thematic discourses prevalent in society. The Committee for Collaborative Initiatives (CCI) coordinates this dimension of the Association's work, which, as it evolves, is increasingly contributing to the evolution of the annual conference and the publications work.

Specifically, the Association has created several specialized settings and complementary spaces to help enhance the abilities of the friends to "examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within" prevalent discourses. These settings aim to enable the friends to foster patterns of collaborative scholarship connected with the Association

itself. They may additionally stimulate individuals and groups to pursue their own interests independently, perhaps sharing the results of their inquiries at the annual conference. Inevitably, as these independent initiatives proliferate, many will occur outside our immediate awareness, albeit inspired directly or indirectly by the settings the Association has established. As such, these settings can serve as catalysts for a range of initiatives aiming to contribute to the world of ideas.

The main types of specialized settings are ABS workshops, reading groups, writing groups, other small collaborative projects, seminars, and working groups. These spaces are described immediately below; a list of the workshops, reading groups, and seminars currently known to the Association appears in Appendix A.

WORKSHOPS

Workshops are typically half-day sessions that help familiarize participants with the aims of the Association and its approaches to contributing to professional and academic discourses. They explore themes such as the dispositions conducive to participating constructively in discourses, how to read prevalent discourses for their underlying assumptions, and how attending to the elements of the conceptual framework helps to ensure coherence between the efforts of ABS and the community-building work and social action. The final section of the workshop discusses possibilities for participants' further

engagement in ABS activities (by, for example, forming their own reading groups, as discussed in the next section).

These workshop sessions are currently offered once or twice a month depending on the availability of facilitators and the number of registrants for a given session, with an intensification of offerings in the lead up to the annual conference. Sessions usually bring together between eight and twenty participants and two facilitators. These facilitators are invited to reflect individually and collectively on ways to improve the materials and the workshop space itself based on their experiences.

In the years since the 24 July 2013 message was received, the community has become more familiar with the work of contributing to discourses, particularly since *Ruhi Book 14, Unit 1* became available. As the community's capacity to engage with discourses grows, it is not entirely clear whether and in what form this workshop will continue to be needed. For the time being, it provides a helpful introduction for those wanting to be connected with ABS.

READING GROUPS

A reading group is a small group that forms to read a book or a set of texts from a given field or on a given theme, and to thoughtfully explore the content in a collaborative environment. It is an accessible way for participants to develop their understanding of a specific

discourse and how it correlates with the teachings of the Faith. Once formed, these groups often come together for six to twelve two-hour sessions, though some develop into longer-term efforts. Reading groups cover an ever-expanding range of themes, such as climate change, education for justice, health promotion, influential women thinkers, reparations and reconciliation, world government narratives, technology and values, and many others (as noted in Appendix A). All reading groups aim to analyze the text(s) they are studying in the light of the writings of the Faith, the experience of the community, and the framework for action that organizes the Bahá'í community's efforts to transform society. They are envisioned as inviting, thoughtful settings in which the friends can "reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work" (24 July 2013).

Reading groups are typically facilitated by one or a few individuals whose primary purpose is to encourage a consultative environment in which participants strive to correlate insights from the text(s) being studied with those from other key sources of knowledge, such as pertinent writings of the Faith, the experience and learning of the participants, and the discussion that ensues within the reading group setting itself. The facilitators are additionally responsible for arranging the meetings (most commonly through online video conferencing), identifying a text or set of texts, designing a reading schedule, distributing materials,

making necessary adjustments to the line of inquiry based on reflections with the group, and liaising with the Association. In some cases, they draft framing questions to assist their groups to read and consult. They may also encourage participants to use informal writing as a tool for clarifying and articulating individual and collective insights that could potentially be shared with others.

A few reading groups have built on this informal writing, evolving into writing groups (discussed below) whose participants eventually present and receive feedback on their work at seminars or during breakout sessions at the ABS conference. Other reading groups have simply given rise to new reading groups. We are, consequently, beginning to see how these reading groups can serve as portals to additional ABS activities, which can in turn lead to yet new reading groups. At the same time, we recognize the value of the reading group in its own right: any short-term reading group can stand on its own as an important contributor to the goals of the Association.

While momentum is building, there is still much to learn about how to multiply these specialized settings; to assist more groups to embark on longer-term, complex efforts; and to enable groups focusing on similar themes to coalesce into more sustained working groups (discussed below). We are also finding that reading groups can benefit from accompaniment. To date, such accompaniment has included regular, one-to-one, or small-group

discussions with facilitators to reflect on progress, opportunities, challenges, and the knowledge being generated within their respective reading groups. We have also held facilitator gatherings where learning can be shared between them. As reading groups and related endeavours multiply, it has become evident that more attention must be paid to how the system of accompaniment, facilitation, coordination, and capacity building can correspondingly evolve.

WRITING GROUPS

The Association has also been exploring how to develop collaborative writing groups that can make significant advances in producing content for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (JBS) and other fora. Of particular concern is how to create consultative environments that enhance individual and collective research, writing, and review. One key example of such a collective initiative led to the JBS special issue on constructive resilience (Vol. 30, No 3). This issue was the fruit of a multi-year collaboration between scholars in a range of disciplines, arising from a series of readings groups and seminars on related themes. This group of authors decided to write a set of essays and consulted on their work at various stages of the writing process. One finding coming out of this initiative was that earlier involvement by the JBS Editorial Committee could lead to a smoother process of moving from group collaboration to publication.

Building on this learning, another

group of collaborators is now submitting six essays for joint publication in JBS. This initiative arose out of a reading group focused on the harmony of science and religion during the summer of 2020. This reading group led to another group that decided to do an in-depth study of Helen Longino's book *Science and Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*, correlating insights from this book with guidance from the writings of the Faith regarding consultation and other related topics. Inspired by this study to begin a writing process, the group began by arriving at a shared vision of a general area of focus for a set of essays, to be authored individually or by pairs. With this vision in mind, it then devoted its already-established weekly pattern of meeting to sharing and providing feedback on the abstracts, outlines, drafts, and redrafts of their respective papers. The core aim of the group was to learn how to foster a humble posture of learning as it applies to the writing and review process—one in which each member of the group felt accompanied by the other members to strengthen his or her paper. The group also held a two-day seminar with a wider group of participants to obtain additional constructive feedback on their papers. Some months later, the group shared the six draft essays with the JBS editor for his initial input. The editor's written comments on each paper, supplemented by a consultation with the group, proved extremely helpful. The members subsequently continued to assist each other to review

and revise their respective drafts with a view to both formally submitting them to JBS and presenting them at a seminar at the 2023 annual conference. This "early and often" model of soliciting feedback from the JBS editor and other collaborators, combined with the group's regular space for consultation on the development of each author's paper, has helped to foster unity of vision and a sense of shared enterprise for the project amongst both the authors and JBS.

Simultaneously, collaborative writing has been emerging out of the methodologies' seminars—distinctive meetings convened in response to the Universal House of Justice's reference in the 24 July 2013 message to disciplinary methodologies. Writing has emerged organically in this context, with groups focused on different disciplines' methodologies initially creating documents for their own internal use. This in turn has led to collaborative writing aimed at wider circulation, including through publication in JBS. A specific writing project currently under way is organized around what is referred to as scholarly "response," in which an initial paper (in this case, a collaboratively written article on methodological trends in the social sciences) is circulated to others with relevant backgrounds to generate a set of written responses, which in turn inform a response by the authors of the initial article. The collaborators in this inherently dialogical process are conceiving of this project as an exercise in consultative inquiry. The aim is to publish

in a special volume of JBS, with three goals: to illustrate a processes-oriented approach to collective learning about methodology, to create a resource that can be studied by others who are learning to navigate methodological decisions in the social sciences and other fields, and to help foster the capacity to participate in discourses on this theme. While this project is in its early stages, there is a shared understanding between the writing collaborators and the Editorial Committee of the importance of learning about how this “response” format can promote rigour and clarity of thought while adhering to consultative standards of unity, candor, courtesy, affection, and generosity in a mutual search for truth, thereby eschewing the often combative stance of academics towards each other’s writing.

OTHER SMALL COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

The Association has become increasingly aware of the need for sustained consultation and collaboration among the friends as they seek to bring insights from the Faith to bear on their fields. As noted above, reading groups offer a simple yet potentially powerful first step towards this end. The Association aims to encourage the emergence of more complex projects from among some of these reading groups. A small but growing number of these have already developed, and we hope to learn how to support more of them in the coming years. We have gained some initial experience with helping groups

that have been collaborating on a project online to meet in person in order to work more intensively, and we aim to expand such types of support.

To date, most of these sustained endeavours have been writing projects, as described above. Others are focused, at least initially, on less formal kinds of writing as a means of capturing and sharing insights arising from group learning processes. Still others have been focused on attending professional or academic conferences together to collectively read the discourse and reflect on how one might contribute more effectively to it. To encourage such endeavours, the Association has held gatherings for these groups to discuss their connection with seminars and other activities. As noted above, we also assume that other small projects are emerging that we are not aware of, just as some reading groups are likely emerging that we are not aware of.

One small collaborative project, which grew out of a reading group about economic inequality, has produced a document for study with undergraduate students that interrogates the underlying assumptions of introductory economics courses. It seeks to equip students to keep their thinking coherent and aligned with the Bahá’í conceptual framework for social transformation even as they engage with the discipline of economics. Having prepared and refined the document, the group has held several online sessions with students, and will be holding an in-person seminar at the 2023 annual conference. This project has inspired a

similar effort to examine materialist assumptions that are often overlaid onto the scientific study of evolutionary biology and neuroscience, which will also be the focus of a seminar at the 2023 annual conference. Such efforts are contributing to the Association's emerging approach to engaging students in its activities in ways that are complementary to, rather than redundant with, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) seminars for students.

Beyond small projects of these kinds, which arise directly or indirectly from ABS-fostered processes, we are also attempting to stay abreast of more advanced endeavours at the frontiers of learning, including the establishment of academic centers, research labs, and so forth, initiated by Bahá'ís and likeminded collaborators. For instance, we have been following developments with the Center on Modernity in Transition, which partners closely with universities such as Duke and NYU; the Center for Resilient Communities at West Virginia University; and the Centre for Digital Tools and Social Transformation at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. We hope to follow and learn from other similar endeavours so that insights gained in these spheres of activity can, over time, be shared appropriately within relevant ABS spaces, and so that systematic learning can begin to occur across a growing range of related initiatives. At some point, it may be appropriate for ABS to also take a role in generating these kinds of initiatives, by convening

spaces in which insights can be shared across academic and professional endeavors of a similar nature, leading to the formation of academic or professional centers.

SEMINARS

In the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice states that as clarity and unity of thought gradually emerge within the Association, "a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts." Since 2017, the Association has been developing its capacity to hold one to three-day seminars—in person, online, and hybrid—on a range of topics (listed in Appendix A).

To date, we have generated several points of learning regarding the benefits of seminars. In the first place, we have found that seminars can vary in terms of format and size, and yet still contribute to the objectives of ABS. Some seminars have been organized by working groups (discussed below) and have convened dozens of people at a time for relatively broad and inclusive conversations about important trends across a range of discourses in related fields. These include Health Working Group and Media Working Group seminars. Other seminars have gathered smaller groups of collaborators for

more specific conversations informed by substantial preparatory reading. These include seminars on themes in the areas of Africana Studies, narrative ethics and media practice, and cooperatives and next systems. Some of these, as well as other seminars, such as those focused on science and religion, community action, and methodologies, have created spaces for participants to discuss and provide consultative feedback on each other's written work. It has been heartening to witness this diversity of approaches, which has allowed for both a wide range of participation and rigorous engagement with prevalent discourses.

As to other points of learning, we have found that seminars help participants to reflect on how to explicate the principles of the Faith in relation to contemporary perspectives, and to appreciate that the conversation about a given theme has different layers to it, thus demanding both depth and flexibility of thought. Seminars have also been found to draw naturally upon other ABS processes and activities, such as reading and writing groups, thus reinforcing the growing coherence between these activities. They additionally foster a culture of accompaniment among participants with different levels of experience. Finally, allowing sufficient time in these spaces for informal conversation, stories, and the arts evidently plays a key role in building bonds of friendship and "consolidate[ing] understanding".

One major objective of the Association is to multiply these

seminars while ensuring that they are coherent with other ABS activities, including the annual conference, as noted in Section 3 below. Other objectives include further systematizing the logistical organization of these seminars, opening them up to greater participation from the wider community, and perhaps jointly hosting seminars with other groups of scholars or like-minded organizations. On this last point, the Association aims to become much more proactive at inviting academics and professionals to participate in seminars concerned with examining various exigent issues facing humanity today.

WORKING GROUPS

The term "working group" was initially used to describe a range of collaborative efforts. Since that time, it has evolved to signify a group that fosters learning among a growing network of individuals and small collaborative groups within a shared academic or professional field. The spaces organized by working groups—including reading groups, seminars, and other special gatherings—allow participants to enter into a sustained conversation with one another, identify common interests, consult on questions of shared relevance, receive encouragement and support, and initiate or develop new lines of inquiry and new collaborative endeavors. As such, the structure of a working group shows promise as a means of strengthening and extending CCI's scheme of coordination at the level of a discipline or field.

As this understanding has crystallized, CCI has become more systematic in its accompaniment of working groups as a whole, and more particularly of those serving as conveners or coordinators of these groups. The committee has continued to learn especially from a small number of working groups at varying levels of development and activity (Economies, Health, Media, and Africana Studies), which have organized seminars in addition to reading groups and small projects. Two of these working groups held thematic seminars over the summer of 2022 (a seminar on “Narrative, Ethics and Media Practice” by the Media Working Group, and a seminar on reparations by the Africana Studies Working Group). The Media and Health groups have also organized seminars that convened broad conversations among participants across a variety of subfields and topics.

One of the objectives of CCI is to “multiply working groups while also building their capacity to evolve independently.” CCI has gradually helped certain working groups to define and operate according to cycles of annual activity that include the regular launching and accompaniment of reading groups and small projects as well as more intensive spaces like seminars. In 2020-21, to generate experience that could further inform the functioning of other groups, the CCI coordinators decided to focus on accompanying the Media Working Group—a relatively advanced group—in order to help it establish

its cycle of annual activity. In 2021-22, the Health Working Group was accompanied more intensively along the same lines. The CCI coordinators have been assisting these teams to reflect on and adjust their respective schemes of coordination to develop structures and practices consistent with the need for a growing number of collaborators to organize seminars, facilitate reading groups, and learn from longer-term projects. Moreover, while maintaining ongoing lines of action, these working groups have also been exploring how to help some small initiatives enhance the rigour and depth of their efforts. For one group, this has involved organizing three thematic seminars over the course of a four-month period during the spring and summer of 2023. Another has made preliminary plans to organize a larger seminar aimed at inviting colleagues and professional contacts from the wider society into a sustained process of study and consultation.

While the overall number of working groups has not so far increased in 2022-23, the work of the active groups has continued to expand and deepen. It seems clear that working groups can serve as important structures for supporting sustained intellectual inquiry. A major area of learning now is how to continue multiplying them, given both the importance of accompanying one another in the field of service and the current limitations of CCI’s human resources.

3. REIMAGINING THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

In addition to multiplying and strengthening specialized settings, we have also explored how to respond to the House of Justice's guidance that, "existing activities, such as the hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined" (24 July 2013). Towards this end, we have taken several steps to reimagine the conference over the past ten years in view of the importance of encouraging more active participation at the gathering, fostering relationships among participants in similar fields, engaging the youth, increasing the conference's coherence with other ABS endeavours, and aligning it with the emerging patterns of community life more generally. As an example of this last point, we have sought to collaborate early in the planning process with relevant Bahá'í institutions in the community hosting the conference, striving to ensure that our communications and programming support and are consistent with their community-building processes. We still have much to learn in this respect.

Also, with respect to communications, we are exploring how to help the Bahá'í community, and in particular young adults who are familiar with programs of ISGP, understand the place of the annual conference in relationship to ABS' overall mandate and specialized settings. We have consequently reached out to the coordinators of ISGP to explore ways in which we can support each other's objectives. To this end, ISGP graduates have been

drawn upon to support ABS reading groups, working groups, and seminars, as well as to present at the conference. The ISGP coordinator in Canada has also presented at the conference to help the audience better understand the nature and purpose of ISGP seminars. Nevertheless, an ongoing question is how to build on these connections and more systematically engage young adults who have benefitted from the institute's programs.

A number of considerations with respect to the conference have been discussed with members of the Universal House of Justice, members of the Continental Board of Counsellors, members of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States, other collaborators, and the National Assembly of Canada itself. These include: 1) the costs involved in attending an annual continental conference, which have rendered it inaccessible to many (if not most); 2) the possibility of decentralizing the conference over time to make it less costly and more geographically accessible to more participants; 3) how the conference might evolve into a space that is directly pertinent to ABS working groups and other small-group initiatives; 4) the amount of time and resources consumed by planning the conference over the course of a year, which can hamper the capacity of the Executive Committee, subcommittees, and other collaborators to initiate and develop new, potentially worthwhile, lines of action; 5) the sentiment that not holding a continental conference

may have negative repercussions in the community, which has grown accustomed to gathering together to explore the development of Bahá'í thought on an annual basis; 6) and the fruitfulness of adopting a gradual approach to reimagining the conference, noting in particular the importance of developing new lines of action and approaches while also working to organically refine ongoing efforts.

Owing to the Coronavirus pandemic, reimagining the conference has also meant learning how to host it online, which we did three years in a row. This in turn entailed learning how to improve accessibility to content, such as by providing captions and additional resources for all recorded presentations.⁵ During this period, we also reframed the call for presentations to specifically welcome contributions aimed at exploring how to participate in relevant discourses in the light of the teachings of the Faith and in view of the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

With all these considerations in mind, we have developed the following vision for the conference by drawing upon guidance from the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice:

The overarching objective of the ABS conference is to serve as an

5 As the presentations are released in various formats, these resources accompany them, providing value for years to come. Further work has been completed to prepare the conference platform for ongoing use.

uplifting, welcoming space for participants to explore learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses essential to the generation of knowledge and the progress of humanity. As one among a growing constellation of ABS activities concerned with promoting the intellectual life of the community, it aims to foster an animated conversation among diverse participants about how “to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.”

We have correspondingly identified the following objectives of the conference.

First—in view of the importance of fostering coherence between the various ABS activities—the conference aims to serve as a space of convergence where participants in various collective initiatives (e.g., working, reading, writing, and seminar groups) share with other conference participants insights into the fruits of their learning about how “to explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity.”⁶

6 This is in keeping with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice that “[o]ne of the aims would be to foster a wider participation and to encourage and

Second—in view of the importance of fostering inclusion and diversity—the conference aims to serve as an accessible portal that enables growing numbers of participants with a range of backgrounds and interests to become acquainted with, participate in, and thus benefit from, various ABS capacity-building endeavours.

Third—in line with the conviction that ABS is an association that seeks to harmonize different perspectives—the conference aims to feature scholars and professionals who are contributing substantially to various discourses of pressing concern.

In accordance with these three objectives, we envision the conference as a space that promotes both individual and collective learning about how to participate in relevant discourses from a Bahá'í perspective; stimulates engagement in (and serves as a portal to) other ABS activities, such as working groups, reading groups, writing groups, seminars, and other collaborative initiatives aimed at building capacity to contribute to discourses in academic and professional fields; sharpens clarity of thought among a widening circle of participants about the aims and approaches of ABS in a manner that is progressively inclusive of, and accessible to, diverse populations

and age groups; assists young people to understand that contributing to professional and academic discourses is a core dimension of service that is coherent with the community-building process in which they are engaged; and creates an environment in which conference participants increasingly see themselves as 1) active participants, rather than passive recipients, during the conference itself, 2) part of a learning process that is coherent with (i.e., that builds upon and further enriches) other ABS activities, and 3) contributing to a collective endeavour that is consistent with the provisions of the Plan.

In August 2023, the conference resumes as an in-person gathering in Atlanta, Georgia. A number of seminars will be hosted in conjunction with the conference that will build on the initiatives undertaken throughout the year; they will also complement the plenary and breakout sessions by helping to infuse the annual conference with a dynamic approach to collective learning. As noted above, ongoing considerations include how to make the conference more accessible than it currently is; whether decentralizing the conference plays a role in this regard; how to moderate the amount of energy that goes into planning a conference so that other promising lines of action are not sacrificed; and how, concurrently, to reinforce the vision that the conference is part of a larger interlinked process of learning that upholds the role of the scholar and the efforts of the friends more generally to advance the intellectual life of the community.

inspire many to attempt to correlate ideas within their fields with Bahá'í thought" (Letter dated 7 September 2015).

4. EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLICATIONS WORK

The editorial process for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has evolved considerably during the last ten years, becoming not only more rigorous and systematic, but also more collaborative and more characterized by a spirit of accompaniment.

The beginning of this period was marked by a concerted effort to establish and maintain a regular publishing schedule to ensure a consistent stream of high-quality scholarly articles. JBS also shifted to an online-first publication model, facilitating access to its content. As part of this transition, previously published articles were also made available online.

In addition to these logistical improvements, JBS's Editorial Committee has seen a transformation in its mode of operation. It has expanded its previously narrow focus on soliciting and receiving articles for possible publication by individual authors; while this continues to be an important part of the Committee's work, it is now complemented by the support and accompaniment of collaborative writing projects that emerge out of other collective initiatives, such as reading groups. Examples of such endeavours are provided in Section 2 above (see the "Writing Groups" subsection). Collaborative writing lends itself to the development of thematic issues of the *Journal*, in which authors approach a common topic from a range of perspectives and benefit from each other's

insights as they develop their articles. A thematic issue of this kind has the potential to make a signal contribution to a particular area within Bahá'í studies, accelerating the development of further thought. Collaborative writing processes have so far resulted in a thematic issue on Constructive Resilience, with two other thematic issues (on science and religion, and on disciplinary methodologies) in development.

The emphasis on collaboration also extends to the committee's approach to article review, which continues to evolve to better combine a spirit of consultation and accompaniment with the rigour necessary to meet the high standards expected of an academic journal. While experience in this area is still in its early stages, a collaborative review process, in which a qualified peer reviewer consults with the author on how to strengthen his or her article, has proven to be a rich source of learning for all involved. Authors in this process express feeling supported and accompanied; reviewers gain experience in mentoring; and the Editorial Committee learns how to initiate and sustain a conversation between scholars that is at once rigorous and consultative. Authors are also being more systematically encouraged, where possible, to draw upon insights from previous articles published in JBS and other Bahá'í publications. A major objective here is to inspire authors to write in a manner that illustrates an attempt on their part to contribute to discourses that may already be grounded in valuable insights and theory.

As with JBS, ABS Publications (ABSP) is considered an integral part of the evolving network of ABS activities—reading groups, working groups, writing groups, seminars, the annual conference, among others—that both benefits from, and contributes to, their evolution. Over the last two and a half years, ABSP has been working to build an independent press that can become the preeminent publisher for Bahá'í scholars in North America who are striving to contribute to the intellectual life of the Bahá'í world. The audience for these books consists primarily of individuals seeking to understand how to advance prevalent discourses in society within and across disciplines by exploring how ideas and theories found in contemporary thought relate to Bahá'í teachings. The audience also includes individuals interested in commentary on the teachings themselves. Based on the experience of the Association with Wilfrid Laurier University Press (WLUP) and subsequent investigation into other university presses, it was concluded that it is most propitious for the Association to develop its own independent press. Notably, few authors submitted suitable manuscripts while the Association was collaborating with WLUP. Since becoming independent, ABSP has published two books, by Michael Karlberg and John Hatcher respectively, and is on course to publish at least one book per year over the next few years, building momentum and expanding from there. The ABS Publications Committee is also working on making available again

previously published books that have long been out of print, such as *Logos and Civilization* (Nader Saiedi) and *Planning Progress* (June Thomas), while select essays from *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi* (proceeding from the 9th annual ABS conference) are being considered for republication in JBS.

5. VISION OF GROWTH AND APPROACH TO LEARNING

We have learned much about the pattern of action that enables the Association to advance its work and achieve coherence among its different areas of focus. To this end, we have sought to enhance our approach to learning in action itself. Indeed, strengthening the Association's capacity to operate in a mode of learning and to nurture a culture of accompaniment has proven increasingly vital to advancing every facet of the work. While this is evident throughout this document, it is the specific focus of this section, which outlines the Association's objects of learning and discusses ways in which we have endeavoured to apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 message. This section also addresses how we have paid attention to the generation and application of knowledge and the subject of methodology.

5.1 OBJECTS OF LEARNING

In our effort to articulate the mandate of the Association discussed in the

introduction to this report, we concurrently sought to articulate its overarching objects of learning. In doing so, we again found inspiration by relating the experience we had accrued to date with the guidance of the 30 December 2021 message. We consequently identified six objects of learning, which are presently conceived of as follows.

The **first** object of learning is how to **multiply the number of settings and processes**—including seminars, reading groups, writing groups, and conferences—in which participants can collaborate, generate collective insights, and share learning about how “to explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity” (30 December 2021).

As alluded to in Section 2 above, which discusses these different settings in detail, questions now before us include: How can we continue to build the capacity to expand and consolidate these settings in view of the growing complexity of the work? How can we do so in a manner that also supports both individual and collaborative initiatives not formally tied to the Association? What human resources are now needed to build momentum in this area, taking into consideration the central roles that both accompaniment and systematization demonstrably play in fostering organic growth?

The **second** object of learning is how to **enable growing numbers of diverse participants**, intent “on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation”,

to assist each other to “contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of [spiritual and material] progress” (30 December 2021). The Association has long been concerned with increasing the diversity of those participating in and coordinating ABS activities. However, we gleaned from the 30 December 2021 message that it is especially important to stress this object of learning given the emphasis the Nine Year Plan places on expanding nuclei and fostering universal participation—albeit recognizing that ABS activities may not be of interest to everyone.

The Association has seen some progress in this regard, specifically owing to the emergence of reading groups and seminars that explore such themes as promoting racial harmony and the role of women in society. In addition, reading groups and seminars concerned with other themes are striving to diversify their circles of participation. The same is true of the annual conference, particularly beginning with the Atlanta conference in 2018. It is, moreover, anticipated that the plenary sessions, breakout sessions, and, to some extent, the seminars at the annual conference this year will go some way towards meeting this objective. The role of the arts (discussed below) is also understood to be vital for promoting broader involvement in ABS activities.

This progress notwithstanding, we are continually asking ourselves: How can the Association continue to encourage greater diversity of participation within its constellation of small- and large-group settings?

The **third** object of learning is to **develop an outward-looking culture** in which participants in different ABS spaces understand themselves to be actively building collaborative learning processes with scholars and professionals in the wider society, and that are concurrently aligned with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan. A major step in this regard has been the efforts of reading groups and working groups to study texts by a range of thinkers and discover points of unity between insights stemming from those texts and the teachings of the Faith. Some reading groups and working groups have also welcomed participants from the wider community, which has added greatly to the quality of their conversations. The same is true of some seminars and panels at the annual conference. There is, consequently, an emerging pattern of learning about how to go beyond inward-looking conversations and provide, “in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match [our] commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds” (30 December 2021). Nevertheless, we are conscious that these spaces would be further enriched through a more concerted effort to translate this outward-looking orientation into concrete practice.

Questions before us thus include: How can we promote “deep dives” on a given topic in collaboration with academics and professionals from the wider community, perhaps producing a monograph based on the proceedings (an example being the seminar

on Marxism and the Bahá’í Faith held many years ago)? How can we further involve such scholars and practitioners in spaces and processes that facilitate shared understanding regarding exigent issues of the day?

The **fourth** object of learning is how to **help young people—in particular university students and recent graduates—view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service that is coherent with the imperatives of community-building and social action, the objectives of the training institute, and the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.** While the number of youth and young adults participating in our annual conferences, seminars, and reading groups is relatively small, we are seeking to expand this engagement over time. The 24 July 2013 letter provides a vision of rising generations of youth, shaped by the institute process, who will “wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world.” Consistent with this vision, it has become clear that the prior participation of young people in the training institute, community-building process, and ISGP seminars enhances the quality of their participation in ABS spaces and endeavours.

The growing pattern of activity within ABS concurrently provides an increasing range of opportunities for young people to develop their abilities to participate in professional

and academic discourses. Fostering both discipline-specific forms of engagement (particularly among former ISGP participants) as well as patterns of mentorship within professional and academic spaces appear to be distinct contributions the Association can make. Recent efforts along these lines have included the development of an economics seminar that assists students to scrutinize the assumptions underlying their fields through the lens of the Bahá'í teachings (see earlier discussion in Section 2). This seminar has been offered several times to small groups of undergraduate students, and it has proven fruitful. Based on this experience, and as noted earlier, another group is developing materials examining the materialistic assumptions that are often overlaid onto the study of evolution and neuroscience. These materials are also meant to assist young adults studying in relevant fields.

Questions before us regarding this object of learning include: What are effective ways to reach and engage undergraduate, graduate students, and young professionals, particularly in view of the many demands on their time? How can we ensure that the Association's efforts to this end are coherent with the other ways young adults are contributing to the Plan? How can we promote a culture of learning in which more experienced academics encourage and mentor younger scholars in their efforts to participate in discourses and advance research relevant to their chosen fields of study? Also, how can we better coordinate our efforts with ISGP,

whose participants emerge from its seminars eager to find discipline-specific spaces in which they can continue building their capacity to participate in discourses of interest to them.

The **fifth** object of learning is how to **assist a growing number of authors to publish articles and books contributing to “the volume of high-quality literature”** that fosters the “intellectual life” of the Bahá'í community by 1) exploring “certain disciplines” and various themes “in the light of the teachings” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2021) and the experience of the community, and 2) correlating insights drawn from the wider society with related themes found in the writings of the Faith. This object of learning, we understand, is consistent with the following statement of Shoghi Effendi:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will ... be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth. (Quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 19 October 1993)

Towards this end, the JBS Editorial Committee continues to advance its learning in the areas described in Section 4, “Evolution of the

publications work,” above. These areas include the encouragement of collaborative writing and the shepherding of thematic issues towards publication; the exploration of the possibilities of collaborative review for strengthening both rigour and a consultative approach to scholarship; and the fostering of a greater historical awareness of prior Bahá’í scholarship. These processes are all in their early stages of development; they have already produced significant results and contributed to advances in the Editorial Committee’s understanding and operations, but much more remains to be learned.

The work of ABS Publications has thus far focused on manuscripts by individual authors, but the Publications Committee is alert to opportunities to learn about collaboration in both writing and review. More central to its pursuit of the object of learning noted above is its continuing development of the capacity to work with multiple authors concurrently on projects at various stages of development. One particular question before both JBS and ABSP concerns writing projects that are of an intermediate length—that is, longer than a typical JBS article but shorter than a book. In the early years of ABS, this type of writing was published in monograph form; more recently, pieces of this nature have found a home in JBS. Both the Editorial Committee and the Publications Committee are considering whether it might be timely to revive the monograph, or a similar form, providing a shorter time horizon to publication than is possible with a book.

At this point, additional considerations related to advancing this object of learning include questions such as: How can we concurrently uphold the integrity of the content and standards of JBS while also encouraging writing that reaches a wider, more diverse, audience—that is, while advancing towards the goal of universal participation? Are there different types of writing and/or other media spaces that would facilitate learning about contributing to academic and related discourses—specifically, are there spaces that would enable reading group participants to contribute writing without burdening them with overly-stringent academic standards? What would it look like to promote more inquiry and writing that draws upon and harmonizes insights accruing across different collective initiatives?

The **sixth** object of learning is **how to draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of “disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding”** (30 December 2021). On this point, and particularly in view of this guidance from the Universal House of Justice, the Association is endeavouring to be more systematic in learning about how the arts consolidate understanding within various fields of inquiry, and how they promote a humble posture of learning in so doing.

The Association has sponsored seminars and working groups focused on discourses related to the arts in order to encourage capacity building among those professionally and academically involved in this area. In these settings,

groups have explored historical and theoretical discourses that examine the nature of the relationship between art and society, the role of the artist in society, and insights from the Revelation pertaining to artistic endeavours. Based on the learning generated in these contexts and other consultative spaces, and in view of relevant guidance of the Universal House of Justice, we have identified three connected areas of inquiry: How can the arts be more effectively integrated into various ABS spaces? What are artists themselves learning regarding advancing discourses about the arts? And how can the arts play a direct role in disseminating learning pertaining to various discourses?

Like seminars and working groups, the annual conference offers an important setting for the advancement of these areas of inquiry. This summer's conference features a plenary panel and several breakout sessions focused on the arts and their place in expansion and consolidation endeavors. We anticipate that ideas and concepts emerging from these presentations will quicken our ongoing learning in the three areas of arts-related inquiry outlined above. In particular, we are eager to learn much more about how the arts can be integrated into ABS spaces in a way that inspires universal participation as well as "intellectual rigour and clarity of thought."

5.2 ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A preeminent factor in the development of the Association has been our

conscious attempt to both clarify and apply elements of the conceptual framework in accordance with paragraph 5 of the 24 July 2013 message. In this paragraph, the House of Justice states:

Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified.

Below, we consider each of the eight elements the House of Justice then proceeds to list, briefly outlining how they have come to shape our mode of functioning as an organization. While the letter does not suggest that these elements are exhaustive, they are presented as the most salient ones for ABS to learn about at this point in its development.

The **first** element is **the relationship between study and action**. This element is a growing feature of the different settings discussed above. For example, we are learning in small settings like reading groups and seminars to conceive of what we read and correlate with the guidance as part of the study

component of this dynamic. With these insights in mind, the attempt to then participate in the relevant discourse is the action component of this dynamic; this could take the form of, for example, the simple act of engaging in a discussion with a colleague, or writing on a related subject. Such action can in turn inform subsequent discussions in the group and enable deeper study of the text and the correlated guidance. We are still at the early stages of cultivating this dynamic, but there is evidence that it is taking hold in various groups. Some group members, for example, are finding ways to link their discussions to social action. Others are striving to ensure that they are more outward-oriented, both in terms of what they are studying and with whom they are acting and collaborating.

In addition, it has become clearer over the past ten years that the Association's mode of learning advances when there are sufficient spaces for reflection. These include quarterly reflection meetings as well as regular smaller meetings and informal discussions that bring together the different committees and collaborators to share insights and review progress, challenges, and opportunities for growth, and study relevant guidance. For example, as we resume an annual in-person conference with several seminars and breakout sessions featuring learning generated within various small group settings throughout the year, the level of collaboration between the Conference Committee and CCI has correspondingly increased. We have

also made a conscious effort within these spaces, and particularly the larger reflection gatherings, to turn to the guidance as a lens through which to understand our experience, our current realities, and the vistas of possibility emerging before us. Our motivation to do so increased with the release of the 30 December 2021 message. We have additionally made some efforts to study Ruhi Books 13 and 14. Studying such guidance has helped us to further appreciate that reading reality and acting to transform it must go hand in hand.

The **second** element is **the need for focus**. There is still much to be learned about how to focus our energies, particularly given our human resources. For example, we have identified several priorities, but have not been able to adequately attend to all of them, such as working more closely with students on university campuses or with academics and professionals from the wider community on exigent issues. However, we are building capacity to concentrate on various lines of action and to better appreciate how they and the corresponding activities are mutually enriching—how, for example, seminars, reading groups, writing projects, other smaller collective endeavours, the conference, and publishing, are related, feed into, and benefit from each other. Moreover, the vision and objects of learning we have identified as an association (see Section 5.1) have both emerged out of, and further shaped, which lines of action we have chosen to assiduously pursue—recognizing, of course, that accumulating experience and regular

input from participants and collaborators may disclose new prospects worth exploring.

The **third** element is **the challenge of fostering capacity and accompanying others in service**. It has become evident that a posture of accompaniment is central to eliciting insights; building momentum; removing, and learning from, obstacles; fostering capacity; and promoting organic growth. As noted under Sections 2 and 4 above, this posture has played a significant role in the development of reading groups, working groups, and, more recently, writing groups. An objective now is to expand the nucleus of friends who can accompany a widening network of facilitators, who can in turn help with encouraging and coordinating the expansion and consolidation of a growing number of collaborative settings that “operate . . . on the principle of universal participation” (OSD, 26 November 2012).

The **fourth** element is **the dynamics of organic development**. As is implicit in the foregoing comments, this element of the framework has proven vital to all aspects of the Association’s work. For example, as noted in Section 2 above, a newly formed reading group is encouraged to see itself as a setting that aims to advance understanding about contributing to a particular discourse. At the outset, the group is encouraged not to take on too much. Rather, its main objective is to create a consultative space in which participants can reflectively develop their capacity to correlate ideas from the

text they are reading with passages from the writings, with their own experience, and with the insights of their fellow participants. At the same time, the group is encouraged to view itself as part of a larger learning process, growing and developing in conjunction with other ABS endeavours. Again, as we gain more experience with these groups and other specialized settings, a question before us is how to multiply these endeavours in a way that strikes a healthy balance between centralization and decentralization and is attuned to all the elements of the conceptual framework discussed in this section.

The **fifth** element consists of **the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity**. To address the complexity of current patterns of activity, the institutional arrangements have evolved into the following configuration: the Executive Committee; the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, which coordinates the settings described under Section 2 and related lines of action; the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* Editorial Committee; the ABS Publications Committee, which focuses on publishing books; the Conference Committee; and various ad hoc and/or short-term task forces. In addition, the number of remunerated ABS staff (now equaling approximately 4.0 full-time employees) has had to grow given the continental mandate of the Association and the evolving complexity of the work. Much of the work entails collaborating with hosts of individuals volunteering their time and energy to facilitate or

coordinate reading groups, working groups, collaborative projects, workshops, seminars, elements of the conference, writing endeavours, and so on. The list of volunteers has been slowly expanding in response. However, we are finding that building a vibrant network of volunteers requires those serving in remunerated positions and close collaborators to devote substantial time to supporting, analyzing, synthesizing, and disseminating learning.

Also critical to advancing the work of the Association has been the systematization of its administrative practices. We have paid significant attention to establishing suitably coherent processes supported by apposite technological solutions. The administrative work involves the provision of support to the Executive Committee and other committees and includes attending to logistical matters related to the annual conference and seminars, book-keeping, managing data, maintaining the website, facilitating the editorial process, keeping minutes, handling correspondence, providing IT support, and carrying out other sundry tasks. As the work of the Association evolves, the volume of the administrative work naturally grows, too. Given the advances over the last ten years, and particularly over the last three years, the question of the human resources required to sustain growth and manage the escalating administrative needs of the organization is a regular topic of consultation. To this end, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada has lovingly encouraged the Association to

be judicious yet clear about its needs going forward, indicating that meeting them is a priority.

The **sixth** element is **the coherence required among all areas of endeavour**. As stated above, the Association has been striving to further articulate its approach to identifying and refining objects of learning, setting goals, and documenting experience and decisions. We have been regularly reflecting on, and identifying, next steps for each line of action; assessing the coherence between these lines of action and how they contribute to and profit from each other; and developing a robust system for the retention, updating, and flow of information. This sixth element we view as tied to the **seventh** element, which consists of **sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions**. Here, a major objective of the Executive Committee—still very much in development—has been to facilitate the creation of plans of action for each of the Association’s areas of focus; to disseminate learning across its committees as appropriate; to create spaces for the ongoing generation of insights aimed at articulating an evolving unity of vision of growth; to consult with and accompany staff members and collaborators in their efforts to further coordinate their work; and to explore possibilities with, and receive guidance from, the senior institutions—all of which, finally, is directly related to the **eighth** element of the framework, namely, **learning in action**.

As alluded to throughout this

document, we have been making a conscious effort to read reality through the lens of relevant guidance, to build on strengths, and to cultivate “an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time” (24 July 2013). We have certainly not mastered this process, but we feel confident in affirming that we are now much more cognizant than we were ten years ago of the power of learning in action to engender growth in the intellectual life of the community, and of the elements involved in doing so. We are similarly more aware that “[a]s unity of thought around essential concepts emerges [it is] useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer” (24 July 2013). These aspects, we believe, have become clearer. They have, consequently, empowered us to more effectively learn how to learn as an association.

5.3 GENERATING AND APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

In the next paragraph of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice goes on to explain that “One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge . . . At

the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions.” As the previous sections of this retrospective attest, this aspect of the framework has received attention in at least three ways. First, within the various settings described under Sections 2 and 3 above, the Association has made a concerted effort to enable participants to “reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” and related discourses. The degree to which this has been achieved has naturally varied from setting to setting and depends upon many factors, such as the duration of the setting or process of inquiry, the experience and time availability of the participants, and the quality of the consultative environment that is created.

Second, we have—particularly in more recent years—focused on expanding our understanding of, and applying, the elements of the conceptual framework required to promote the evolution of the Association itself. In addition to those discussed in the previous subsection (5.2), and in view of the conviction that those engaged in scholarly pursuits “are not exempt from the obligations placed upon any believer” (24 July 2013), we have taken to heart the importance of framing participation in the Association’s activities in line with the Universal House of Justice’s descriptions of enkindled

souls in recent messages. These souls

emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with. . . . (30 December 2021)

Ablaze with divine love, they also strive to disseminate this love

through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity. (22 July 2020)

Third, with a view towards exploring spaces for learning and addressing the vital question of methodologies, the Executive Committee, along with two key collaborators, organized three two-day seminars (2019-21) for graduate students and faculty to assemble and explore the question of methodology within their respective fields and to discuss the implications of the Revelation for this facet of scholarship. Each seminar built on the learning of

the year prior. All three functioned as spaces to consolidate and share insights both within and across disciplinary groups. Throughout the year, in advance of each seminar, participants, organized in disciplinary groups, held online meetings (some more frequently than others) to discuss assigned pre-readings and related questions on themes such as the harmony of science and religion, the limits of objectivity, the nature of knowledge, the implications of materialism for various fields of study, and the qualities and attitudes they want to adopt when participating in the generation of knowledge. These seminars also gave birth to a couple of collaborative initiatives and writing groups, including one on social science methodologies discussed under Sections 2 and 4 above. Plans are currently being made for another methodology seminar to be held in the fall of 2023.

6. A LIFETIME OF INQUIRY

Towards the end of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice stresses the pivotal role of the training institute, but then explains that “whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge.” As such, the House of Justice “looks to rising generations of Bahá’ís to

wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world”; anticipates that “in the decades ahead...a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour”; and asserts that “[t]o this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution.”

We have been learning how participating in the institute constructively affects the work of the Association and how immersing ourselves in its methods and approaches further propels this work forward. *Ruhi Book 14* is directly relevant in this regard, but so are other books, such as *Ruhi Books 2, 10, and 13*. Together, they help to further attune us to the elements of the framework that bear directly on promoting the intellectual life of the community and, hence, the mandate of the Association itself.

These books also assist in disclosing to us the degree to which this arena is pregnant with possibilities—particularly now, given both the momentum being generated around North America as the friends apply the elements of the *Nine Year Plan*, and the growing contingents of youth and young adults benefiting from the programs of ISGP. As noted above, these programs have shaped how participants are thinking about their lives and intellectual development, as well as how they are adopting and applying the conceptual framework. Such developments bode well for the Association as it seeks to

build on the approaches and content of the institute, thus further enabling participants to “enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour” (24 July 2013), “explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity” (30 December 2021).

APPENDIX A:

SMALL GROUP INITIATIVES

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

2021

Facilitator preparatory sessions: 3
(26 participants)

Workshop sessions: 14
(112 participants)

2022

Facilitator preparatory sessions: 2
(10 participants)

Workshop sessions: 13
(145 participants)

2023

Facilitator prep sessions: 1
(7 participants)

Workshop sessions: 6 as of July 2023
(42 participants)

READING GROUPS

2020

1. Achieving Coherence in Media
2. Arts and the Pandemic
3. Business Capital, Access, and Justice
4. Business Management

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Commodification of Knowledge 6. Constructive Agency 7. Education 8. Evolving Role of Law Enforcement 9. Ideological Foundations of Racism and Crime/Deviance 10. Inquiries into World Order 11. International Property Law 12. Jurisprudence 13. Justice in the Age of Globalization 14. Minds, Brains, and Consciousness 15. Questioning Econ 101 16. Race, Africanity, and the Bahá'í Faith 17. Science, Religion and the Generation of Knowledge (2 groups) 18. Teaching Economics After Covid 19. Youth, Narrative Media, and Cultural Production | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Southern California Media Professionals 12. Speculative Fiction 13. Storytelling and Cinema 14. Technology and Society I 15. Book: <i>The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and The Making of American Capitalism</i> by Edward E. Baptist 16. The Village Storehouse 17. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual/Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health I 18. Urbanism: Housing 19. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers I—Simone Weil |
|--|--|

Total number of participants: 154

Total number of participants: 206

2021

1. Building Structural Competency in the Classroom and Clinical Setting
2. Climate Change
3. Climate Crisis Narratives
4. Education for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization
5. Examining Health Equity
6. Exploring the Role of Asian Pacific Islanders in Eradicating Anti-Blackness
7. Book: *Food Security: From Excess to Enough* by Ralph C. Martin
8. Book: *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* by Sona Arbab I
9. Narrative and Ethics
10. Reparations and Reconciliation

2022

1. Adolescent Nutrition
2. Chaos, Complexity, and the Natural/Human Sciences
3. Climate Change and the Environment
4. Crisis and Opportunity: Towards a Vision of Sustainable Global Development
5. Book: *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience* by Enrique Salmón
6. Critiques of Capitalism
7. Discourses of Diplomacy I
8. Book: *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land* by Leah Penniman
9. Book: *Finding the Mother Tree*, by

Suzanne Simard

10. Book: *Food, Farmer, and Community: Agriculture and the Reconstruction of the World*, by Winnona Merritt
11. Book: *Freedom Farmers: Agriculture Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* by Monica White
12. Historical and Philosophical Understanding of Complexity, Emergence, and Chaos
13. Book: *How To Feed The World*, edited by Jessica Eise and Ken Foster
14. Investigations into Media, Knowledge, and Culture
15. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence I
16. Book: *Life in the Soil: A Guide for Naturalists and Gardeners* by James B. Nardi
17. Book: *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* by Sona Arbab II
18. Nature of Work I
19. Nature of Work II
20. News Articles on Climate and Agriculture
21. Overcoming Material and Spiritual Barriers to Racial Unity: Reviewing *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee I
22. Psychology of Social Change
23. Book: *Resetting the Table: Straight Talk About the Food We Grow and Eat* by Robert Paarlberg
24. Technology and Society II
25. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual / Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health II
26. Book: *Unbowed, A Memoir* by

Wangari Maathai

27. Urbanism: Community & Wellbeing
28. Urbanism: Neighbourhood & Community
29. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers II—Hannah Arendt
30. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers III—Iris Murdoch
31. Whiteness and Patriarchy: Weeding Out Barriers to Oneness, Cultivating Justice and Authenticity, I
32. World Citizenship as a Performative Revolutionary Act
33. World Government Narratives

Total number of participants: 269

2023 (AS OF JULY 24)

1. Discourses of Diplomacy II: Identifying Correlations with Bahá'í Concepts
2. Books: *How to Feed the World*, Edited by Jessica Eise and Ken Foster and *Food, Farmer, and Community: Agriculture and the Reconstruction of the World*, compiled by Winnona Merritt
3. Indigenous Studies
4. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence II
5. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence III
6. Looking at Community Building from an Evolutionary Perspective: Contributions from Anthropology and Neuroscience
7. Methodological Approaches to the Study of Religion

- within the Discipline of History: An Examination of Religion and Speculative Approaches in the Works of Arnold Toynbee
8. Overcoming Material and Spiritual Barriers to Racial Unity: Reviewing *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee II
 9. Book: *Regenesiis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet* by George Monbiot
 10. Book: *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness* by Frédéric Laloux
 11. Speech/Language Pathology
 12. Storytelling and Cinema
 13. Technology and Society III
 14. The Modern Intellectual Tradition I: From the Scientific Revolution to Immanuel Kant
 15. The Modern Intellectual Tradition II: From German Idealism to Nietzsche
 16. The Nature of Work: Perspectives of Race, Gender, Education, and Justice
 17. The Role of Women in Society: An Exploration of Mothers as the First Educators, Equality, and Social Change
 18. Book: *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* by Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi
 19. Towards Vibrant Communities and Gardening
 20. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual / Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health III
 21. Whiteness and Patriarchy: Weeding Out Barriers to Oneness, Cultivating Justice and Authenticity II
- Total number of participants to date: 219*
- SEMINARS
- 2016
1. Education
 2. Health
- 2017
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Health Working Group (WG)
 2. Economies WG
 3. Law WG
 4. Media WG
- Thematic Seminars*
1. Religion and Society
- Total number of participants: 122*
- 2018
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Health WG
 2. Law WG
 3. Media WG
 4. Technology WG
- Total number of participants: 149*
- 2019
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Economies WG
 2. Health WG (a)
 3. Health WG (b)
 4. Law WG

5. Media WG

Thematic Seminars

1. Methodologies in Academic Research
2. Propaganda
3. The Bahá'í Faith and Liberalism
4. Education

Total number of participants: 258

2020

1. Business
2. Methodologies in Academic Research

Total number of participants: 52

2021

Working Group Seminars

1. Media WG (seminar and symposium)

Thematic Seminars

1. Questioning Econ 101
2. Methodologies in Academic Research

Total number of participants: 170

2022

Working Group Seminars

1. Africana Studies WG
2. Health WG
3. Media WG

Thematic Seminars

1. Climate Change
2. Cooperatives and Next Systems

3. Narrative and Local Storytelling
4. Resilient Communities
5. Science and Religion

Total number of participants: 136

2023 (AS OF JULY 24)

Thematic Seminars

1. A Revelation Scientific in Its Method
2. Brain, Behavior, and Mental Health in Youth: Exploring Underlying Frameworks and Forces
3. Climate Change and the Environment
4. Collective Inquiry and Social Action: Considering Participatory Action Research in Theory and Practice
5. Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective
6. Health Equity
7. Navigating Materialist Assumptions in the Study of Biology
8. Technology and Society
9. Telling the Story of an Evolving World Order
10. The Commodification of Knowledge
11. Trust: The Investigation of Truth and Health Care Delivery
12. Methodologies in Academic Research (in planning)

Total number of participants to date: 202