

## The Role and Function of Bahá'í Institutes in The Life of The Bahá'í Community

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, has explained that the Faith itself is like a living being whose growth and development are organic in nature. Organic growth proceeds in a logical succession of stages, each stage allowing the organism to concentrate on perfecting a given organ or function that is necessary to all subsequent stages.

Recent communications from the Universal House of Justice make it clear that the stage of development we are now entering will be a four-year, from Ridván, 1996, to Ridván, 2000, and that one of the dominant themes of this plan will be a significant development of the organ of training institutes. The institutes represent a major focal point of the most fundamental of all functions of the Baha'i Faith, namely, education.

Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Baha repeatedly designates the Manifestations of God as the "Educators of humanity," and one of the titles of Baha'u'llah is that of Divine Educator or Teacher. Education is therefore the central purpose of the Revelation of God and Baha'u'llah's revelation is nothing less than a divine system of education.

However, this divinely-ordained system can only be gradually and progressively established, and in an orderly and systematic fashion. The first stage of the process was the preparation given by the Bab, whose principle mission it was to proclaim and demonstrate the inadequacy of the previously existing systems of education. The next stage was the revelation of Baha'u'llah, which laid down the fundamentals of the process: the knowledge of God, an understanding of His purpose for mankind, and an appreciation of the current condition of humanity, with its fundamental illness of disunity and the consequent need for the establishment of planetary unity

Next, 'Abdu'l-Baha elaborated, particularly in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, a systematic process of establishing "schools" or "teaching outlets" all over the world. This plan was executed by Shoghi Effendi, who oversaw the establishment of the Administrative Order of the Faith throughout the world. Of course, this Administrative Order is not an end in itself but rather the structure that is necessary for the systematic delivery of divine education to all the peoples of the world.

Now that the Administrative Order is being progressively elaborated, established, developed and implanted, the time has come for us to reap the benefits of this groundwork in the form of a generalized, systematic, and diversified system of education. Training institutes can be seen as institutions specifically designed to deliver this programme of education.

In any organic process of development, growth is both qualitative and quantitative, but qualitative growth always precedes quantitative growth. Qualitative growth is characterized by two things: specialization and complexification. In the early stages of the development of the Faith, everyone did everything --- public relations, proclamation, teaching, organization, etc. Now we have arrived at the point of complexification where more and more specialized abilities are needed. The training institutes are conceived precisely for the purpose of allowing for diversified and specialized training, while of course maintaining the important process of deepening in the knowledge and understanding of the Faith in general. The quantitative phase of the current growth process will see a substantial increase in the number of believers in Baha'u'llah. This phase has been characterized, first by Shoghi Effendi and more recently by the Universal House of Justice, as "entry by troops." Thus, the training institutes, and the more effective teaching of the Faith that will flow from them, will not only enrich the quality of Baha'i life, both individual and community, but will also result in quantitative growth.

It is clear, and the House of Justice has confirmed, that the institution of the Counsellors and Auxiliary Boards will be very closely involved in the development of the training institutes. Indeed, this arm of the Administrative Order represents the spiritually learned, and has been conceived and developed for its members to function as teachers and educators.

But more importantly, the training institute is an organ of the Faith in which every Baha'i can and should participate, both as a teacher and as a student. By their very nature, administrative functions, whether elected or appointed, involve a minority segment of the community (at least at any given time). Of course, in the Baha'i Faith there is no presumption that those who serve administratively have any more talents or dedication than those who do not. Hopefully any dedicated Baha'i would be fully qualified to serve in an administrative post. The simple point is that administrative service is not designed to involve a majority segment of the community (again, at a given time). But the training institutes are so designed.

Thus, we should greet this development in the Faith with the greatest enthusiasm, for it gives us all new opportunities for self-development, for sharing our talents with others, and for becoming an instrument in their development. In this regard, the House of Justice has stressed that the forms of the training institutes and their programmes can be diversified and can exist on the national, regional or local level. In the coming months, the National Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors and members of the Auxiliary Board, will progressively elaborate this question so that this central organ of the four year plan will function in a healthy and vital manner.