

TRUSTEES OF THE MERCIFUL

*the Station, Responsibilities
and Duties of the
Local Spiritual Assembly*



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The Station, Responsibilities
and Duties of the Local Spiritual Assembly

Prepared by
National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United States
for use only in the
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A DIVINELY APPOINTED INSTITUTION

1. Words of Bahá'u'lláh

The affairs of the people are placed in charge of the men of the House of Justice of God. They are the trustees of God among His servants and the day-springs of command in His countries.

O people of God! The trainer of the world is justice, for it consists of two pillars: Reward and punishment. These two pillars are two fountains for the life of the people of the world. Inasmuch as for each time and day a particular decree and order is expedient, affairs are therefore entrusted to the ministers of the House of Justice, so that they may execute that which they deem advisable at the time. Those souls who arise to serve the Cause sincerely to please God will be inspired by the divine, invisible inspirations. It is incumbent upon all to obey.

Administrative affairs are all in charge of the House of Justice; but acts of worship must be observed according as they are revealed in the Book. (1)

It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding such laws as have not been expressly revealed in the Book. Of these whatever they deem advisable and proper that must they enforce. (2)

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá, . . . It behooveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God. . . . It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His

sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God commanded you. (3)

2. Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself... it is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. (4)

It is incumbent upon every one not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it, that things may be properly ordered and well arranged. Otherwise every person will act independently and after his own judgment, will follow his own desire, and do harm to the Cause.

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them. In this day, assemblies of consultation are of the greatest importance and a vital necessity. Obedience unto them is essential and obligatory. (5)

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of

one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition:- They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness... If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One. Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. Should they endeavor to fulfill these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the center of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of spirit. (6)

3. Words of Shoghi Effendi

And, now, that this all-important work may suffer no neglect, but rather function vigorously and continuously in every part of the Bahá'í world; that the unity of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh may remain secure and inviolate, it is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the Kitáb-il-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book, in every locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine, a local "Spiritual Assembly" be forthwith established. To it all local matters pertaining to the Cause must be directly and immediately referred for full consultation and decision. The importance, nay the absolute necessity of these local Assemblies is manifest when we realize that in the days to come they will evolve into the local House of Justice, and at present provide the firm foundation on which the structure of the Master's Will is to be reared in future.

These local Spiritual Assemblies will have to be elected directly by the friends, and every declared believer of 21 years and above, far from standing aloof and assuming an indifferent or independent attitude, should regard it his sacred duty to take part conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation and the efficient working of his own local Assembly.

Pending its establishment, and to insure uniformity throughout the East and throughout the West, all local Assemblies will have to be re-elected once a year, during the first day of Ridván, and the results of polling, if possible, be declared on that day.

In order to avoid division and disruption, that the Cause may not fall a prey to conflicting interpretations, and lose thereby its purity and pristine vigor, that its affairs may be conducted with efficiency and promptness, it is necessary that every one should conscientiously take an active part in the election of these Assemblies, abide by their decision, enforce their decree, and cooperate with them wholeheartedly in their task of

stimulating the growth of the Movement throughout all regions. The members of these Assemblies, on their part, must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal.

The various Assemblies, local and national, constitute today the bedrock upon the strength of which the Universal House is in future to be firmly established and raised. Not until these function vigorously and harmoniously can the hope for the termination of this period of transition be realized. It devolves upon us whose dearest wish is to see the Cause enter upon that promised era of universal recognition and world achievements, to do all in our power to consolidate the foundations of these Assemblies, promoting at the same time a fuller understanding of their purpose and more harmonious cooperation for their maintenance and success. (7)

That the Spiritual Assemblies of today will be replaced in time by the Houses of Justice, and are to all intents and purposes identical and not separate bodies, is abundantly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself ... Not only will the present-day Spiritual Assemblies be styled differently in future, but they will be enabled also to add to their present functions those powers, duties and prerogatives necessitated by the recognition of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, not merely as one of the recognized religious systems of the world, but as the State Religion of an independent and Sovereign Power. And as the Bahá'í Faith permeates the masses of the peoples of East and West, and its truth is embraced by the majority of the peoples of a number of the Sovereign States of the world, will the Universal House of Justice attain the plenitude of its power, and exercise, as the supreme organ of the Bahá'í Commonwealth, all the rights, the duties, and responsibilities incumbent upon the world's future super-state. (8)

I consider it my duty to warn every beginner in the Faith that the promised glories of the Sovereignty which the Bahá'í teachings foreshadow can be revealed only in the fullness of time; that the implications of the Aqdas and the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá... are too far-reaching for this generation to grasp and fully appreciate. I cannot refrain from appealing to them who stand identified with the Faith to disregard the prevailing notions and the fleeting fashions of the day, and to realize as never before that the exploded theories and the tottering institutions of present-day civilization must needs appear in sharp contrast with those God-given institutions which are destined to arise upon their ruin. I pray that they may realize with all their heart and soul the ineffable glory of their calling, the overwhelming responsibility of their mission, and the astounding immensity of their task. (9)

For Bahá'u'lláh... has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these, He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth. (10)

Who else can be the blissful if not the community of the Most Great Name...?... They alone can recognize, amidst the welter of a tempestuous age, the hand of the Divine Redeemer that traces its course and controls its destinies...

Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary

instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop. It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá'í community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society. (11)

II CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS OF THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

1. Conduct of a Local Assembly

Functions

The various functions of the local Spiritual Assembly, and its nature as a constitutional body, are duly set forth in Article VII of the By-Laws of the National Spiritual Assembly, and are more definitely defined in the By-Laws of a local Spiritual Assembly approved by the National Spiritual Assembly and recommended by the Guardian. Each local Spiritual Assembly, and all members of the local Baha'í community, shall be guided and controlled by the provisions of those By-Laws.

Meetings

In addition to its observance of the general functions vested in the institution of a Spiritual Assembly, each Spiritual Assembly has need of a procedure for the conduct of its meetings. The following items represent the outline of the parliamentary rules of procedure which the National Spiritual Assembly has adopted and recommends to each and every local Spiritual Assembly throughout the United States.

Calling of Meetings

A meeting of the Spiritual Assembly is valid only when it has been duly called, that is, when each and every member has been informed of the time and place. The general practice is for the Assembly to decide upon some regular time and place for its meeting throughout the Bahá'í year, and this decision when recorded in the Minutes is sufficient notice to the members. When the regular schedule cannot

be followed, or the need arises for a special meeting, the secretary on request by the chairman or any three members of the Spiritual Assembly, should send due notice to all the members.

Order of Business

Roll call by the Secretary (or Recording Secretary).

Prayer

Reading and approval of Minutes of previous meeting.

Report of Secretary (or Corresponding Secretary), including presentation of letters received by the Assembly since its last meeting, and of any and all recommendations duly adopted by the community at the last Nineteen Day Feast.

Report of Treasurer.

Report of Committees.

Unfinished business.

New business, including conferences with members of the community and with applicants for enrollment as members of the community.

Closing prayer.

Conduct of Business

A Spiritual Assembly, in maintaining its three-fold function of a body given (within the limits of its jurisdiction) an executive, a legislative and a judicial capacity, is charged with responsibilities for initiating action and making decisions. Its meetings, therefore, revolve around various definite matters which require deliberation and collective decision, and it is incumbent upon the members, one and all, to address themselves to the subject under discussion and not engage in general speeches of an irrelevant character.

Every subject or problem before an Assembly is most efficiently handled when the following process is observed: first, ascertainment and agreement upon the facts; second, agreement upon the spiritual or administrative Teachings which the question involves; third, full and frank discussion of the matter, leading up to the offering of a resolution; and fourth, voting upon the resolution.

A resolution, or motion, is not subject to discussion or vote until duly made and seconded. It is preferable to have each resolution clear and complete in itself, but when an amendment is duly made and seconded, the Chairman shall call for a vote on the amendment first and then on the original motion. An amendment must be relevant to, and not contravene, the subject matter of the motion.

The Chairman, or other presiding officer, has the same power and responsibility for discussion and voting upon motions as other members of the Assembly.

Discussion of any matter before the Assembly may be terminated by a motion duly made, seconded and voted calling upon the Chairman to put the matter to a vote or to proceed to the next matter on the agenda. The purpose of this procedure is to prevent any member or members from prolonging the discussion beyond the point at which full opportunity has been given all members to express their views.

When the Assembly has taken action upon any matter, the action is binding upon all members, whether present or absent from the meeting at which the action was taken. Individual views and opinions must be subordinated to the will of the Assembly when a decision has been made. A Spiritual Assembly is an administrative unit, as it is a spiritual unit, and therefore no distinction between "majority" and "minority" groups or factions can be recognized. Each member must give undivided loyalty to the institution to which he or she has been elected.

Any action taken by the Assembly can be reconsidered at a later meeting, on motion duly made, seconded and carried. This reconsideration, according to the result of the consultation, may lead to a revision or the annulment of the prior action. If a majority is unwilling to reconsider the prior action, further discussion of the matter by any member is improper.

The Assembly has a responsibility in filling a vacancy caused by the inability of any member to attend the meetings. "It is only too obvious that unless a member

can attend regularly the meetings of his local Assembly, it would be impossible for him to discharge the duties incumbent upon him, and to fulfill his responsibilities as a representative of the community. Membership in a local Spiritual Assembly carries with it, indeed, the obligation and capacity to remain in close touch with local Bahá'í activities, and ability to attend regularly the sessions of the Assembly." - Shoghi Effendi.

The Spiritual Assembly, as a permanent body, is responsible for maintaining all its records, including Minutes of meetings, correspondence and financial records, throughout its existence as a Bahá'í institution. Each officer, therefore, on completing his or her term of office, shall turn over to the Assembly all records pertaining to the business of the Assembly. (12)

2. The Nineteen Day Feast

The institution of the Nineteen Day Feast provides the recognized and regular occasion for general consultation on the part of the community, and for consultation between the Spiritual Assembly and the members of the community. The conduct of the period of consultation at Nineteen Day Feasts is a vital function of each Spiritual Assembly.

From Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The Nineteen Day Feast was inaugurated by the Báb and ratified by Bahá'u'lláh, in His Holy Book, the Aqdas, so that people may gather together and outwardly show fellowship and love, that the Divine mysteries may be disclosed. The object is concord, that through this fellowship hearts may become perfectly united, and reciprocity and mutual helpfulness be established. Because the members of the world of humanity are unable to exist without being banded together, cooperation and helpfulness is the basis of human society. Without the realization of these two great principles no great movement is pressed forward."

The Nineteen Day Feast has been described by the Guardian as the foundation of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It is to be conducted according to the following program: the first part, entirely spiritual in character,

is devoted to readings from Bahá'í Sacred Writings; the second part consists of general consultation on the affairs of the Cause. The third part is the material feast and social meeting of all the believers, and should maintain the spiritual nature of the Feast.

Bahá'ís should regard this Feast as the very heart of their spiritual activity, their participation in the mystery of the Holy Utterance, their steadfast unity one with another in a universality raised high above the limitations of race, class, nationality, sect, and personality, and their privilege of contributing to the power of the Cause in the realm of collective action.

Only members of the Bahá'í community, and visiting Bahá'ís from other communities, may attend these meetings, but young people of less than twenty-one years of age, who have studied the Teachings and declared their acceptance of the qualifications of membership in the community, may also attend.

Regular attendance at the Nineteen Day Feast is incumbent upon every Bahá'í, illness or absence from the city being the only justification for absence. Believers are expected to arrange their personal affairs so as to enable them to observe the Bahá'í calender.

Order of Business For the Consultation Period

The Chairman or other appointed representative of the Spiritual Assembly presides during the period of consultation.

The Spiritual Assembly reports to the community whatever communications have been received from the World Center and the National Spiritual Assembly, and provides opportunity for general discussion.

The Assembly likewise reports its own activities and plans, including committee appointments that may have been made since the last Feast, the financial report, arrangements made for public meetings, and in general share

with the community all matters that concern the Faith. These reports are to be followed by general consultation.

A matter of vital importance at this meeting is consideration of national and international Bahá'í affairs, to strengthen the capacity of the community to cooperate in promotion of the larger Bahá'í interests and to deepen the understanding of all believers concerning the relation of the local community to the Bahá'í World Community.

Individual Bahá'ís are to find in the Nineteen Day Fast the channel through which to make suggestions and recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly. These recommendations are offered first to the local community, and when adopted by the community come before the local Assembly, which then may in its discretion forward the recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly accompanied by its own considered view.

Provision is to be made for reports from committees, with discussion of each report. Finally, the meeting is to be open for suggestions and recommendations from individual believers on any matter affecting the Cause.

The local Bahá'í community may adopt by majority vote any resolution which it wishes collectively to record as its advice and recommendation to the Spiritual Assembly.

Upon each member of the community lies the obligation to make his or her utmost contribution to the consultation, the ideal being a gathering of Bahá'ís inspired with one spirit and concentrating upon the one aim to further the interests of the Faith.

The Secretary of the Assembly records each resolution adopted by the community, as well as the various suggestions advanced during the meeting, in order to report these to the Spiritual Assembly for its consideration. Whatever action the Assembly takes is to be reported at a later Nineteen Day Feast.

Matters of a personal nature should be brought to the

Spiritual Assembly and not to the community at the Nineteen Day Feast. Concerning the attitude with which believers should come to these Feasts, the Master has said, "You must free yourselves from everything that is in your hearts, before you enter."

The annual meeting on April 21, called for the election of the Spiritual Assembly, provides the occasion for the presentation of annual reports by the Assembly and by all its Committees.

The Chairman of the outgoing Assembly presides at this meeting.

The Order of Business includes: Reading of the call of the meeting, reading of appropriate Bahá'í passages bearing upon the subject of the election, appointment of tellers, distribution of ballots, prayers for the spiritual guidance of the voters, the election, by secret ballot, presentation of annual reports, tellers' report of the election, approval of the tellers' report.

Assembly members are elected by plurality vote. The believers receiving the nine highest votes on the first ballot are elected unless two or more are tied for ninth place. In case of a tie, a second ballot is cast by those present, and on this ballot the voter is to write the name of one of those who are tied in the first ballot. (13)

3. Enrollment of New Believers

Shoghi Effendi has set forth the qualifications of membership in the following passage:-

"Regarding the very delicate and complex question of ascertaining the qualifications of a true believer, I cannot in this connection emphasize too strongly the supreme necessity for the exercise of the utmost discretion, caution and tact, whether it be in deciding for ourselves as to who may be regarded a true believer or in disclosing to the outside world such considerations as may serve as a basis for such a decision. I would only venture to state very briefly and as adequately as present circumstances per-

mit the principal factors that must be taken into consideration before deciding whether a person may be regarded a true believer or not. Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the True Exemplar of the Bahá'í Cause, as set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present-day Bahá'í administration throughout the world- these I conceive to be the fundamental and primary considerations that must be fairly, discreetly and thoughtfully ascertained before reaching such a vital decision. Any attempt at further analysis and elucidation will, I fear, land us in barren discussions and even grave controversies that would prove not only futile but even detrimental to the best interests of a growing Cause. I would therefore strongly urge those who are called upon to make such a decision to approach this highly involved and ever-recurring problem with the spirit of humble prayer, and earnest consultation, and to refrain from drawing the line of demarcation except on such occasions when the interests of the Cause absolutely demand it." (14) The National Spiritual Assembly provides on request of local Spiritual Assemblies and Area Teaching Committees the necessary forms for reporting the enrollment of new members and the transfer of membership from one locality to another.

III

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Every Spiritual Assembly is urged to realize that the goal of all teaching is to confirm new souls and not merely to add more names to the membership list. A vital realization of the Station of the Manifestation and capacity to sacrifice in devotion to His Faith is and must ever be the aim of all teaching efforts. Understanding of the various laws and principles of the Faith and of its world-wide administrative order can and must be offered after enrollment through teaching classes and firesides. The new believer is to be cherished and carried through the different stages of development until he becomes a firmly

grounded worker for the Cause. The new believer can enter the portals of membership in a spirit of ardor and devotion which is to be kept enkindled until understanding and conscious knowledge are attained.

Moreover, the new believer should be given Bahá'í work to do commensurate with his capacity, since effort to serve deepens his faith.

The next essential is the maintenance of unity and devotion among the believers. As "Trustees of the Merciful" the Spiritual Assembly must be selfless and impartial, considerate of the rights of the individual, but firm and steadfast in upholding the vital truths of the Revelation and obedience to its institutions.

In dealing with local disturbances and complaints, the Assembly is to discriminate between situations which are transient and trivial and those which threaten to disrupt the community. A distinction is therefore to be made between personalities who cause disturbances because of their own emotional instability or immaturity, those who create difficulty because they lack grounding in the basic attitudes of the Bahá'í life, and those who deliberately cause trouble because in their hearts they do not accept the principle of authority as vested in the Manifestation, or in the institutions of the Bahá'í world community.

The Assembly is responsible for dealing with all local problems but can call upon the National Spiritual Assembly for advice if necessary.

1. Cooperation with National and Area Committees

The national and area committees appointed annually by the National Spiritual Assembly offer services which can strongly reinforce the local community in its efforts to promote the Faith. None of these committees exercise authority within the area of jurisdiction of the local Assembly, but they must be recognized as arms of the National Spiritual Assembly, authorized to maintain specific activities necessary to the growth and development of the American Bahá'í community and the main-

tenance of American commitments in other lands during the World Crusade.

The local Assembly alert to the advantages offered by national and area committees will study their functions as defined in the annual Bahá'í Directory and make every possible use of their materials and services.

Particular emphasis at this time must be laid upon the obligation of every local Assembly to adopt and carry out, in consultation with the Area Teaching Committee, a plan for active and continuous extension teaching in near-by towns and villages. This service to the Faith on the homefront is not only a challenge to each Assembly but also to each individual member of the community.

2. Membership in Non-Bahá'í Organizations

The Guardian has given us the following explanation:-

Formal affiliation with and acceptance of membership in organizations whose programs or policies are not wholly reconcilable with the Teachings is of course out of the question... To merely address such gatherings on one or two occasions on a subject which is in harmony with the spirit of the Teachings does not constitute acceptance by the Bahá'í speaker of the entire program... We should welcome and seize every opportunity that presents itself, however modest it may be, to give a wider publicity to the Cause, to demonstrate its all-inclusiveness and liberal attitude, its independence and purity, without committing ourselves, whether by word or deed, to programs or policies that are not in strict conformity with the tenets of the Faith.

Concerning membership in non-Bahá'í religious associations, the Guardian wishes to re-emphasize the general principle already laid down in his communications to your Assembly and also to the individual believers that no Bahá'í who wishes to be a whole-hearted and sincere upholder of the distinguishing principles of the Cause can accept full membership in any non-Bahá'í ecclesiastical organization... For it is only too obvious that in most of

its fundamental assumptions the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is completely at variance with outworn creeds, ceremonies and institutions... During the days of the Master the Cause was still in a stage that made such an open and sharp dissociation between it and other religious organizations, and particularly the Muslim Faith, not only inadvisable but practically impossible to establish. But since His passing events throughout the Bahá'í world, and particularly in Egypt where the Muslim religious courts have formally testified to the independent character of the Faith, have developed to a point that have made such an assertion of the independence of the Cause not only highly desirable but absolutely essential. There should be no confusion between the terms affiliation and association. While affiliation with ecclesiastical organizations is not permissible, association with them should not only be tolerated but even encouraged. There is no better way to demonstrate the universality of the Cause than this. Bahá'u'lláh, indeed, urges His followers to consort with all religions and nations with utmost friendliness and love. This constitutes the very spirit of His message to mankind. (15)

3. Non-Political Character of the Faith

These are the Guardian's words:-

The Guardian... feels under the responsibility of stating that the attitude taken by the Master (i. e., that American citizens are in duty bound to vote in public elections) implies certain reservations. He, therefore, lays it upon the individual conscience to see that in following the Master's instructions no Bahá'í vote for an officer nor Bahá'í participation in the affairs of the Republic shall involve acceptance by that individual of a program or policy that contravenes any vital principle, spiritual or social, of the Faith... I feel it incumbent upon me to clarify the above statement, written in my behalf, by stating that no vote cast, or office undertaken, by a Bahá'í should necessarily constitute acceptance, by the voter or office holder, of the entire program of any political party. No Bahá'í can be regarded as either a Republican or Democrat, as such. He is above all else, the supporter of the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh,

with which, I am firmly convinced, the program of no political party is completely harmonious... (16)

4. Appeals from Decisions of the Local Assembly

At this crucial stage in the history of our Faith it seems advisable to emphasize to each local Assembly an important principle of administration which has been too frequently overlooked.

This principle establishes the National Assembly as the court of appeal from decisions of local Assemblies when protested by one or more members of the community as unjust or as not conforming to the actual facts.

A court of appeal is not responsible for determining the facts but only for reviewing the local decision based upon the facts assembled by the local Assembly itself. On receiving an appeal the National Spiritual Assembly will send a copy of it to the local Assembly and request its opinion. When this is received the case will be studied in the light of the facts presented to the N.S.A. and a final decision made. This decision, whether approving or disapproving the original decision of the local Assembly, will be communicated both to the local Assembly and to the person or persons who made the appeal, and the decision of the National Assembly is final.

This procedure is set forth in both the National and local By-Laws.

Any complaint received by the N.S.A. from a member or members of a local community who have not first submitted their complaint to the local Assembly will be returned to those making the protest, with copy of the letter being sent to the local Assembly for its information. In such a case the local Assembly is to call the person or persons in for consultation and act upon the complaint.

Too many letters are received by the National Spiritual Assembly which imply distrust of the local Assembly, mostly because matters entrusted to it

confidentially are spread abroad. We must all remember that Assembly members are "trustees of the Merciful."

The National Assembly, however, in any case involving two or more local communities, acts directly and deals with the problems as the court of original jurisdiction, since no local Assembly has authority outside its own civil area.

While these matters may seem entirely technical, they have vital importance in establishing an orderly process and eliminating confusion among the believers. This process is therefore given special emphasis at the present time when the believers and all the institutions of the Faith must become mature in order to concentrate effectively upon the remaining goals of the World Crusade.

5. Bahá'í Marriage

In the United States, marriage must be conducted in accordance with the requirements of the civil code of the particular State. The State codes confer legal authority upon certain designated civil and church officials. In most instances the codes also recognize the conduct of a legal marriage service by religious communities which have no professional clergy.

Each incorporated Assembly not having legal authority to conduct marriage is expected to apply to the Marriage License Bureau for such authority, and to become thoroughly familiar with the requirements laid down by its State.

Forms are provided by the Bureau or County Clerk which the Assembly officers are to fill out and file as directed. The National Spiritual Assembly on application provides a Bahá'í Marriage Certificate which the local Assembly certifies and presents to the bride and groom. This constitutes for them a legal Marriage Certificate.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has revealed the following Tablet concerning Bahá'í marriage:-

Will have to send to National for a Bahai marriage certificate.

"The Bahá'í betrothal is the perfect agreement and entire consent of both parties. They must show forth the utmost attention and become informed of one another's character. The firm covenant between them must become an eternal binding, and their intentions must be ever-lasting affinity, friendship, unity and life.

"The bridegroom must, before the bridesman and a few others say: 'Verily we are content with the Will of God,' and the bride must rejoin: 'Verily we are satisfied with the Desire of God.'" (The Guardian has approved a new translation of this passage. The bridegroom and the bride both say: "We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.")

"The marriage of Bahá'ís means that the man and woman must become spiritually and physically united, so that they may have eternal unity throughout all the divine worlds, and improve the spiritual life of each other. This is Bahá'í matrimony."

--Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol II, page 325, cited in "Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era," pages 215, 216.

From time to time in recent years the Guardian has made clear explanations which enable both the local Assembly and the betrothed parties to understand the nature and conduct of a Bahá'í marriage service.

"In regard to your question concerning the nature and character of Bahá'í marriage. As you have rightly stated, such a marriage is conditional upon the full approval of all four parents. Also your statement to the effect that the principle of the oneness of mankind prevents any true Bahá'í from regarding race itself as a bar to union is in complete accord with the Teachings of the Faith on this point. For both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá never disapproved of the idea of interracial marriage, nor discouraged it. The Bahá'í Teachings, indeed, by their very nature transcend all limitations imposed by race, and as such can and never should be identified with any particular school of racial philosophy."

"Regarding the question whether it is necessary to ob-

tain the consent of the parents of a non-Bahá'í participant in a marriage with a Bahá'í; as Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the consent of the parents of both parties is required in order to promote unity and avoid friction, and as the Aqdas does not specify any exceptions to this rule, the Guardian feels that under all circumstances the consent of the parents of both parties is required.

"There is no objection to performing a Bahá'í marriage for two non-Bahá'ís, if they desire to have our simple ceremony. This, on the contrary, is yet another way of demonstrating our liberality."

"Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years, or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator. We Bahá'ís must realize that in present-day society the exact opposite process is taking place: young people care less and less for their parents' wishes, divorce is considered a natural right, and obtained on the flimsiest and most unwarrantable and shabby pretexts. People separated from each other, especially if one of them has had full custody of the children, are only too willing to belittle the importance of the partner in marriage also responsible as a parent for bringing those children into this world. The Bahá'í must through rigid adherence to the Bahá'í laws and teachings, combat those corrosive forces which are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tearing down the moral structure of society."

"He would certainly approve that all incorporated local Assemblies make...representations to their respective civil Marriage Bureaus for the legal recognition of Bahá'í marriage ceremonies. In the performance of a Bahá'í marriage, the chairman and secretary of the local Assembly should act as its representatives. The ceremony itself must be very simple,"

"Regarding the question raised in your letter about the Bahá'í marriage, as you know there is no ritual, according to the Aqdas, and the Guardian is very anxious that none should be introduced at present and no general form accepted. He believes the ceremony should be as simple as possible, the parties using the words ordained by Bahá'u'lláh and excerpts from the writings and prayers being read, if desired. There should be no commingling of the old forms with the new and simple one by Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'ís should not be married in the church or any other acknowledged place of worship of the followers of other Faiths."

Article III of the By-Laws of a local Spiritual Assembly states: "It (i. e., the Assembly) shall have exclusive authority to conduct Bahá'í marriage ceremonies and issue Bahá'í marriage certificates within the area of its jurisdiction."

"The general principle in regard to the marriage of a Bahá'í to a non-Bahá'í is as follows: If a Bahá'í marries a non-Bahá'í who wishes to have the religious ceremony of his own sect carried out, it must be quite clear that, first, the Bahá'í partner is understood to be a Bahá'í by religion, and not to accept the religion of the other partner to the marriage through having his or her religious ceremony; and second, the ceremony must be of a nature which does not commit the Bahá'í to any declaration of faith in a religion other than his own.

"Under the circumstances, the Bahá'í can partake of the religious ceremony of his non-Bahá'í partner. The Bahá'í should insist on having the Baha'i ceremony carried out before or after the non-Bahá'í one, on the same day."

6. Divorce

In a Tablet to the Bahá'ís of America 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "The friends (Bahá'ís) must strictly refrain from divorce unless something arises which compels them to separate because of their aversion to each other; in that case, with the knowledge of the Spiritual Assembly, they

may decide to separate. They must be patient and wait one complete year. If during this year harmony is not re-established between them, then their divorce may be realized... The foundation of the Kingdom of God is union, not upon differences, especially between husband and wife. If one of these two become the cause of divorce, that one will unquestionably fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse." (17)

In the matter of divorce the Bahá'ís are bound not only by the Bahá'í teachings but also by the laws of the state in which they live.

When separation takes place, the believer is to report to the local Assembly the intention and date of the beginning of the year of patience as well as the outcome of the efforts at reconciliation at the end of the year.

7. Bahá'í Burial

The Guardian advised the National Spiritual Assembly that a law of the Aqdas makes it obligatory for Bahá'ís to bury their dead within one hour's journey from the place of death. In cases where the nearest relatives, or executors of the believer's estate are not Bahá'ís, the Bahá'ís are to take whatever steps are necessary in their wills, or leave written instructions that will make this act binding in the event of death. (18)

Regarding the Bahá'í funeral service, the utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed. The reading of Bahá'í prayers and other passages from the Bahá'í Sacred Writings is all that is necessary at the present time. (19)

8. Association With Orientals

By Orientals is meant particularly those coming from the Near East with Islamic background. No one is to be accepted as a Bahá'í unless he has proper credentials from his own National Spiritual Assembly or an identification card from the National Spiritual Assembly

of the United States.

Bahá'ís are not to seek out and concentrate upon teaching Orientals but rather to bring in those Americans who can, after confirmation, render service to the Faith.

Any Oriental lacking credentials who persists in association with believers is to be reported to the National Spiritual Assembly.

Orientals having permanent residence in America, if found to be sincere seekers, can be taught and enrolled. Visiting Orientals can be taught but must be enrolled by their own National Assembly after leaving America.

7. Legal Incorporation

Local Assemblies having fifteen or more active adult believers in the community are authorized to effect legal incorporation.

To do so the matter should be presented at a Nineteen Day Feast and a recommendation adopted which expresses the desire of the community that the Spiritual Assembly be legally incorporated.

The Bahá'í World volumes reproduce many local Certificates of Incorporation which supply models for consideration by the Assembly's attorney. What is incorporated is the Spiritual Assembly, not the entire community. The community is associated with the instrument through the annual election of the local Assembly and the Spiritual Assembly's authority to enroll new believers and determine the membership list.

The Articles of Incorporation are to make proper reference to the Founder, the Interpreter and the Guardian of the Faith and also to the National Spiritual Assembly. If necessary, the National Assembly on request will provide an example of how this is to be done.

Before the Incorporation papers are recorded a copy is to be sent to the National Spiritual Assembly for final

approval. After recording, three photostats of the recorded Articles are to be sent to the National Spiritual Assembly together with a photograph of the nine Assembly members.

10. Personal Wills

According to Bahá'í law every believer is to prepare a will and testament. Believers planning to provide a bequest to the National Spiritual Assembly can apply for a bulletin of information. The Bahá'í papers and correspondence owned by a believer having non-Bahá'í relatives should be carefully disposed of in the will either as a bequest to the local Assembly, to a trusted Bahá'í friend, or through the provision that such papers and correspondence are to be destroyed. Provision is also to be made for a Bahá'í funeral service.

Neither the local nor the National Assembly can be named executors of a will.

11. Inactive Believers

It is a privilege as well as a sacred obligation of the local Assembly to maintain helpful and friendly contact with all members of the community. Its representatives are to visit the sick and elderly friends, comfort the bereaved and seek out those who continue to remain absent from Nineteen Day Feasts, firesides and other community gatherings.

Perhaps the absent one is traveling, prevented by illness or other imperative reason from participating in Bahá'í activities, or has actually withdrawn from the Faith.

Depending on the reason, the Assembly is to do its utmost to remove the causes for inactivity. If, however, an inactive believer refuses to respond, the Assembly should appoint a committee to call upon the person and inquire whether he or she is no longer interested in the Faith. If not, the name of the believer is to be reported to the National Spiritual Assembly with an explanation of

the matter, and the National Assembly will determine whether the believer's decision to withdraw is fixed and final, in which case he or she is removed from the membership list, or whether the reason for apparent withdrawal is due to misunderstanding, personal feeling or other difficulty which can be overcome.

12. Correspondence with the National Spiritual Assembly

Individual members of the community having suggestions for the National Spiritual Assembly are to submit them at a Nineteen Day Feast. If approved by the community they are to be submitted to the National Assembly by the local Assembly.

Individual believers are not to make complaints directly to the National Assembly but submit them to the local Assembly in accordance with the section on Appeals From Decisions of the Local Assembly in this bulletin.

The local Assembly is requested not to apply to the National Spiritual Assembly for information which is generally available in the Sacred Writings, or in the works of Shoghi Effendi or in Bahá'í News; nor to bring up trivial matters which can and should be decided by local consultation.

Wilmette, Illinois
1958

*National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States*

References in Text

(1) BWF, 195-196; (2) BWF, 182; (3) B. Ad. 21; (4) BWF, 447-448; (5) B. Ad., 21; (6) B. Ad., 22-23; (7) B. Community, 19-22; (8) WOB, 6-7; (9) WOB, 16-17; (10) WOB, 19; (11) WOB, 194-195; (12) B. Community, 22-27; (13) B. Community, 27-32; (14) B. Ad., 80-81; (15) B. Community, 67-69; (16) B. Community, 69-70; (17) BNE, 216; (18) Bahá'í News #287; (19) B. Community, 16.

Topics and References

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