



The Five Year Plan

2006-2011

Messages
of the
Universal
House
of Justice

3rd edition

The Five Year Plan

2006-2011

Messages of the Universal House of Justice

The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá' u'lláh's Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.

—The Universal House of Justice



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Palabra Publications
7369 Westport Place
West Palm Beach, Florida 33413
U.S.A.
1-561-697-9823
1-561-697-9815 (fax)
books@palabrapublications.info
www.palabrapublications.com

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Preface to the Third Edition

In order to provide convenient access to the major messages of the Five Year Plan 2006-2011, the third edition has combined in chronological order the documents introducing the Plan and the Riḍván messages for the years 2006-2010. Also included is the October 20, 2008 message announcing the convocation of 41 regional conferences.

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Preface to the First Edition

In the new Five Year Plan which will stretch from 2006 to 2011, the Bahá'ís of the world will enter the midpoint of that series of Plans, beginning in 1996 and continuing for a quarter century until the year 2021, which all focus on a single aim—advancing the process of entry by troops. Much has been learned in the previous decade. Much remains to be achieved in the coming decade and a half.

The process of entry by troops began in Africa and the Pacific region during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi and gradually spread to most parts of the world. Receptive peoples in country after country embraced the Faith by the hundreds, the thousands, and even by the tens of thousands. For some forty years, however, the community struggled to balance the process of expansion with an equally strong process of consolidation. Large-scale enrollments would be achieved, but there was no way to deepen so many new believers, no way to educate their children, no way to build communities or to strengthen fledgling institutions. Chapter 9 of *Century of Light* analyzes the challenge of growth during that period:

The burst of enrolments brought with it, however, equally great problems. At the immediate level, the resources of Bahá'í communities engaged in the work were soon overwhelmed by the task of providing the sustained deepening the masses of new believers needed and the consolidation of the resulting communities and Spiritual Assemblies.

In the previous Five Year Plan covering the period from 2001 to 2006, the Bahá'í world learned how to bring together the various elements needed to successfully maintain intensive programs of growth at the cluster level. In clusters where receptivity was high, as many as one thousand believers were brought into the Faith in a single year, while, at the same time, the pattern of community life was established and a sufficient percentage of the new believers were helped through the institute process to become active servants of the Cause who could, in turn, teach and consolidate others. Significant growth, therefore, could not only be initiated, but sustained. Even in clusters where the populations were considered less receptive, new patterns of action gave rise to rejuvenated communities, increased the participation of individuals from the wider society in community life, and raised the tempo of teaching, resulting in a fresh infusion of new believers—in some clusters, as many as 30 to 50 in a single year. From Thiruvannamalai, India, to Broward County, Florida, in the United States, from Mulanje in Malawi to London in the United Kingdom, from Karkar, Papua New Guinea, to Norte de Cauca in Colombia, cluster after cluster experienced a change. “So consistent has been the experience with intensive programmes of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in divers clusters,” the Universal House of Justice explains, “that no cause for equivocation remains.”

The learning that occurred over the past five years to effect this change is summarized in the 27 December 2005 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, which also lays out the features of the next Plan. Among the main challenges of the coming five years are to extend the “edifying influence” of the training institute to hundreds of thousands more souls

and to accelerate the movement of clusters so that no less than 1,500 become the focus of intensive programs of growth. Only if the hard-earned lessons of the past ten years are applied through the persistent, sacrificial, and universal participation of the believers in all parts of the world will these pressing objectives be met.

By compiling in this small volume the messages of the Universal House of Justice relevant to the next Plan, we hope to make them more readily accessible to the friends everywhere.

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27 December 2005

To the Conference of the
Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the close of the present Five Year Plan will mark a decisive moment in the unfoldment of the historical enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited. 1.1

Our 26 December 1995 message, which focused the Bahá'í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith, described in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead. As a first step, Bahá'í communities were urged to systematize their efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes. While every national community took measures to create institutional capacity to perform this essential function, it was not until the outset of the Five Year Plan that the significance of a well-conceived programme of training became widely appreciated. The introduction of the concept of the cluster made it possible for the friends to think about the accelerated growth of the community 1.2

on a manageable scale and to conceive of it in terms of two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next. This image helped the believers to analyse the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate their findings. Never before have the means for establishing a pattern of activity that places equal emphasis on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation been better understood. Indeed, so consistent has been the experience with intensive programmes of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in diverse clusters, that no cause for equivocation remains. The way forward is clear, and at Riḍván 2006 we will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.

- 1.3 In presenting to you the features of the coming Five Year Plan, the subject of your deliberations in this conference, we will review the record of recent accomplishments of the Bahá'í world and indicate how current approaches, methods and instruments should be carried to this next stage. What the analysis will make evident is that the wholehearted response of the individual believer, the community and the institutions to the guidance they received five years ago has raised their capacity to new levels. The continued development of this capacity will remain essential to the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops—the focus of the Bahá'í world through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age.

The Individual

There is little need to describe in detail the achievements of the individual believer, for we have already noted these in our message of 17 January 2003 to the Bahá'ís of the world. In that message we highlighted the growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness, as well as the courage and audacity, that have come to characterize believers everywhere. Qualities such as consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity attest to the enhanced vitality of their faith. We have also acknowledged the role played by the training institute in evoking the spirit of enterprise underlying the rise in activity observed around the world—the concrete expression of that vitality. 1.4

Developments since then have served only to demonstrate further the efficacy of a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the application of the spiritual insights gained through profound study of the Writings. Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service. Discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of a study circle, raise the level of consciousness about one's duties to the Cause and create an awareness of the joy one derives from teaching the Faith and serving its interests. The spiritual context in which specific deeds are addressed endows them with significance. Confidence is patiently built as the friends engage in progressively more complex and demanding acts of service. Yet, above all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavours. How abundant the accounts of believers who enter the teaching field with trepidation only to find themselves bolstered by confirmations 1.5

on all sides. Seeing the possibilities and opportunities before them with new eyes, they witness first hand the power of Divine assistance, as they strive to put into practice what they are learning and achieve results far exceeding their expectations. That the spirit of faith born out of intimate contact with the Word of God has such an effect on souls is by no means a new phenomenon. What is heartening is that the institute process is helping such large numbers experience the transforming potency of the Faith. To extend this edifying influence to hundreds of thousands more should be the object of intense effort over the next five years.

1.6 A discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative—initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops. Endeavours are pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan. As a result, activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided. Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.

1.7 Nowhere has the rise in individual initiative been more clearly demonstrated than in the field of teaching. Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase. Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes

of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's message. From among all those they encounter—parents of neighbourhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances—they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker's needs, employing direct teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.

Most noteworthy in this regard is the spirit of initiative shown by believers who extend the range of their endeavours to assist others also striving to tread a path of service. Having acquired the capacity to serve as tutors of institute courses, they take up the challenge of accompanying participants in their initial attempts to perform acts of service until they, too, are ready to start their own study circles and help others do the same, widening in this way the scope of the institute's influence and bringing eager souls into contact with the Word of God. This particular aspect of the institute process, which serves to multiply the number of active supporters of the Faith in a self-perpetuating manner, holds much promise, and we hope that its potential will be realized in the coming Plan. "Let him not be content", are the words of the Guardian referring to every teacher of the Cause, "until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly adopted Faith." 1.8

The Community

- 1.9 The enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the individual believer is equally evident in Bahá'í community life. The degree to which this vitality manifests itself depends, of course, on the stage of development of the cluster. A cluster in an advanced stage of growth offers far greater insight into what can be achieved than one in an earlier stage, where the friends are still struggling to translate the provisions of the Plan into action. It is to these more advanced clusters, then, that we must look in analysing the accomplishments of the community, convinced that their experience will be emulated by others as they continue to progress.
- 1.10 On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavours gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enrol in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favourable for launching an intensive programme of growth.
- 1.11 What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by

devotional meetings begins to permeate the community's collective endeavours. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, "home visits" are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.

As the spiritual foundations of the community are fortified in this way, the level of collective discourse is raised, social relations among the friends take on new meaning, and a sense of common purpose inspires their interactions. Little wonder, then, that a study carried out by the International Teaching Centre shows that, in some fifty advanced clusters surveyed, the quality of the Nineteen Day Feast has improved. Other reports indicate that contributions to the Fund have increased as consciousness of its spiritual significance expands and the need for material means is better understood. Reflection meetings at the cluster level are becoming a forum for the discussion of needs and plans, creating a collective identity and strengthening the collective will. Where such advanced clusters are flourishing, the influence they exert begins to spread beyond their own borders to enrich regional events, such as summer and winter schools. 1.12

- 1.13 As in the case of the individual, learning is the hallmark of this phase of the development of the community. You and your auxiliaries are urged to exert every effort in the coming years to ensure that, in cluster after cluster, learning is woven into the fabric of decision-making.
- 1.14 One of your primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize.
- 1.15 By the same token, desire and willingness to open certain aspects of community life to the wider public should be integrated into a pattern of behaviour that attracts souls and confirms them. Much has been achieved in this respect as the friends have adopted new ways of thinking and acting at a collective level. In welcoming large numbers into its embrace, the community is learning to see more readily the latent potentiality in people and to avoid setting artificial barriers for them based on preconceived notions. A nurturing environment is being cultivated in which each individual is encouraged to progress at his or her own pace without the pressure of unreasonable expectations. At the heart of such developments is a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity.

Most gratifying are the endeavours being made to reach receptive populations with the teachings of the Faith. As unrelenting social and political forces continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents, an uncompromising appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds and for the strength it confers on the whole will prove crucial to the expansion and consolidation of the community.

Perhaps the task that will occupy the attention of you and your auxiliaries above all others is to assist the community in its effort to maintain focus. This ability, slowly acquired through successive Plans, represents one of its most valuable assets, hard won through discipline, commitment and foresight as the friends and their institutions have learned to pursue the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. On the one hand, you will find it necessary to discourage the tendency to confuse focus with uniformity or exclusivity. To maintain focus does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others. Clearly, there are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed. On the other hand, you will want to take every opportunity to reinforce the disposition to prioritize—one which recognizes that not all activities have the same importance at a given stage of growth, that some must necessarily take precedence over others, that even the most well-intentioned proposals can cause distraction, dissipate energy or impede progress. What should be plainly acknowledged is that the time available for the friends to serve the Faith in every community is not without limits. It is only natural to expect that the preponderating share of this limited resource would be expended in meeting the provisions of the Plan. 1.16

The Institutions

- 1.17 None of the accomplishments of the individual or the community could be sustained without the guidance, encouragement and support of the third participant in the Plan—the institutions of the Faith. It is heartening to see to what extent the institutions are promoting individual initiative, channelling energies into the teaching field, underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment. In helping the community to remain focused on the aim of the Plan, they are learning in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavours and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set. These priorities include, of course, areas of activity that require the specialized skills of individuals. Worthy of particular mention in this category are the work of external affairs, which National Spiritual Assemblies are following diligently, and ventures of social and economic development, as, for example, undertaken by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. While tending to needs of this kind, the institutions find themselves increasingly capable of directing the thrust of the effort exerted by the generality of the believers towards the prosecution of the central tasks of the Plan.
- 1.18 Encouraging, too, are the determined steps being taken by National Spiritual Assemblies, in collaboration with the Counsellors, to respond to the administrative challenges brought by large-scale growth at the cluster level. Schemes that are emerging tend to call for one or more individuals named by the training institute to coordinate the delivery of courses in the main sequence, as well as programmes for children and junior youth. An Area Teaching Committee appointed

by the Regional Council, or by the National Assembly itself, is also required to administer other aspects of systematic effort to achieve accelerated expansion and consolidation. Auxiliary Board members work on both fronts to ensure that the two movements which have come to characterize the process of growth proceed unhampered. While these various components are being established in cluster after cluster, there is still much to be learned about the functions each is to perform and about the relationships among them. What is important is that the current degree of flexibility, which allows for the creation of new instruments as needed, not be compromised so that the scheme of coordination represents a response to the demands of growth itself. We count on you and National Assemblies to guide this learning process.

Throughout the Plan, we have watched with the keenest interest the effects of these developments on the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies. It gives us pleasure to note that two types of progress are being made in this respect. In those clusters where most of the Local Assemblies have been extremely weak, a growing number are gradually assuming their responsibilities as they learn to guide specific activities of the Plan in the areas under their jurisdiction. At the same time, long-standing Local Spiritual Assemblies are exhibiting signs of added strength as they have come to embrace a vision of systematic growth—this, often following a period of adjustment in which some struggled to understand the new realities being created at the cluster level. 1.19

What has brought us particular joy is to see that the process of growth unfolding around the world is gathering momentum in urban centres as well as rural areas. An important step taken in many large cities early in the current Plan was to divide them into sectors. This 1.20

proved crucial to planning for sustained growth. As communities expand, however, it is not unreasonable to expect that cities will need to be divided into smaller areas—perhaps ultimately into neighbourhoods—in each of which the Nineteen Day Feast is conducted. Maintaining a vision of the potential size of future communities is essential for the further development of Local Assemblies. To administer the affairs of communities whose membership will swell into the thousands, and to fulfil their purpose as the “trusted ones of the Merciful among men”, those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead. We intend to monitor the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies closely during the coming Plan and, as the size of the Bahá’í population and other circumstances in a locality demand, authorize a two-stage electoral process on a case-by-case basis, following the pattern developed in Tíhrán during the ministry of the Guardian.

Intensive Programmes of Growth

- 1.21 Sustained endeavour on the part of the individual, the community and the institutions to accelerate the institute process in a cluster, while contributing to its movement from one stage of development to another through well-proven means, culminates in the launching of an intensive programme of growth. Indeed, the most significant advances in learning during the present Plan resulted from efforts in some two hundred clusters to implement such programmes. We are convinced that this learning can now be systematically propagated in every continent, and at Riḍván 2006 we will call upon Bahá’ís worldwide to establish, during the next Plan, intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters.

As currently conceived, an intensive programme of growth is straightforward, simple and effective, but implies a level of exertion that tests the resolve of the friends. Conforming well to the vision we presented five years ago, it employs a few measures that have proven to be indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation. It consists of cycles of activity, in general of three months' duration each, which proceed according to distinct phases of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning. 1.22

The expansion phase, often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them. Although this phase might include some element of proclamation, it should not be seen as a time to hold a few events for this purpose or to undertake a set of activities that merely convey information. Experience suggests that the more closely teaching approaches and methods are aligned with the capacity acquired from the study of the institute courses the more rewarding the results. 1.23

Plans being devised for this phase invariably involve the implementation of carefully designed teaching projects and campaigns of home visits and firesides, often through the mobilization of teaching teams. The pattern of expansion that unfolds, however, varies from cluster to cluster. Where the population has traditionally shown a high degree of receptivity to the Faith, a rapid influx of new believers is to be expected. In one cluster of this kind, for example, the goal of enrolling fifty souls over a three-week period in a locality was surpassed by the second day, and the team wisely decided to end the expansion phase in anticipation of activities related to consolidation. One of the primary objectives of this next phase is to bring a percentage of the new believers 1.24

into the institute process so that an adequate pool of human resources will be available in future cycles to sustain growth. Those not participating in study circles are nurtured through a series of home visits, and all are invited to devotional meetings, to the celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast and to Holy Day observances and are gradually introduced to the patterns of community life. Not infrequently, the consolidation phase gives rise to further enrolments as the family members and friends of new declarants accept the Faith.

1.25 In other clusters, enrolments during the expansion phase may not be high, especially in the first few cycles, and the goal is to augment the number of those willing to participate in core activities. This, then, defines the nature of the consolidation phase, which largely involves nurturing the interest of seekers and accompanying them in their spiritual search until they are confirmed in their faith. To the extent that these measures are vigorously followed, this phase can generate a considerable number of enrolments. It should be noted, however, that as learning advances and experience is gained, the ability not only to teach responsive souls, but also to identify segments of the general population with heightened receptivity, develops, and the totality of new believers increases from cycle to cycle.

1.26 Whatever the nature of the cluster, it is imperative to pay close attention to children and junior youth everywhere. Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it. What has become especially apparent during the current Five Year Plan is the efficacy of educational programmes aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. When accompanied for three years through a programme that

enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of fifteen, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. So impressed are we by the results already achieved, and so compelling is the need, that we will urge all National Assemblies to consider the junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

Key to the progress of an intensive programme of growth is the phase dedicated to reflection, in which the lessons learned in action are articulated and incorporated into plans for the next cycle of activity. Its principal feature is the reflection meeting—as much a time of joyous celebration as it is of serious consultation. Careful analysis of experience, through participatory discussions rather than overly complex and elaborate presentations, serves to maintain unity of vision, sharpen clarity of thought and heighten enthusiasm. Central to such an analysis is the review of vital statistics that suggest the next set of goals to be adopted. Plans are made that take into account increased capacity in terms of the human resources available at the end of the cycle to perform various tasks, on the one hand, and accumulated knowledge about the receptivity of the population and the dynamics of teaching, on the other. When human resources increase in a manner proportionate to the rise in the overall Bahá'í population from cycle to cycle, it is possible not only to sustain but to accelerate growth. 1.27

To meet the ambitious goal of establishing 1,500 such intensive programmes, the Bahá'í world will have to draw fully upon the experience gained and capacity 1.28

built over the past ten years. Following your departure from the Holy Land, you will need to enter into thorough consultation with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils and together carefully assess conditions in each national community in order to identify the clusters that will receive focused attention and to map out strategic plans.

1.29 Implementation of these plans should begin as soon as possible after Riḍvân 2006. Experience in advancing the movement of clusters from one stage to the next is now so widespread that the methods and instruments are well understood. The institute process must be strengthened so that a sizeable number of friends proceed through the main sequence of courses. Intensive institute campaigns that pay adequate attention to the practice component will be essential in this respect. The number of core activities should be steadily multiplied, and outreach to the wider community systematically extended. Meetings of reflection will have to be held periodically in order to monitor progress, maintain unity of thought and mobilize the energies of the friends. And schemes for administering the growth process should gradually be put in place, as circumstances demand. While capacity at the level of the cluster to sustain growth will remain the most compelling concern in the coming years, the ongoing development of regional and national structures to facilitate the flow of information and resources to and from the field of action cannot be neglected.

1.30 Equally important will be the support lent to a cluster through an influx of pioneers. The desire to pioneer arises naturally from deep within the heart of the individual believer as a response to the Divine summons. Whosoever forsakes his or her home for the purpose of teaching the Cause joins the ranks of those noble souls

whose achievements down the decades have illumined the annals of Bahá'í pioneering. We cherish the hope that many will be moved to render this meritorious service during the next Plan, whether on the home front or in the international field—an act that, in itself, attracts untold blessings. The institutions, in turn, will have to exercise sound judgement to ensure that such friends are strategically placed. Priority should be given to settling short-term and long-term pioneers in those clusters that are the focus of systematic attention, whether as a means of reinforcing endeavours to lay the groundwork for accelerated growth or stabilizing cycles of activity under way. It is not unreasonable to assume that a concerted effort to build on strength will result in the eventual outflow of pioneers from such clusters to areas destined to become the theatre of future conquests.

Dear Friends: In the weeks and months ahead and over the course of the Plan, you and your auxiliaries will be a constant source of encouragement to the believers as they rise to the challenge being presented to them. We ask that you take every opportunity to convey to them our confidence in their capacity to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably appear in their path. They should not fail to recognize the scope of what they have achieved through the sustaining grace of Bahá'u'lláh over the past decade. In the course of the first four years, they created the institutional capacity throughout the planet to impart spiritual education to growing contingents of believers. Building on this accomplishment, they engaged in a rigorous process of learning that opened before their eyes vistas of great yet attainable possibilities. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in multiplying the number of devotional meetings sixfold over the past five years, that classes for children and junior youth have increased more than threefold during

1.31

the same period, that the number of study circles worldwide has surpassed eleven thousand—these provide a measure of the extraordinary strength the believers can draw upon in shouldering the responsibility entrusted to them.

- 1.32 Above all, the friends need to remain ever conscious of the magnitude of the spiritual forces that are at their disposition. They are members of a community “whose world-embracing, continually consolidating activities constitute the one integrating process in a world whose institutions, secular as well as religious, are for the most part dissolving”. Of all the peoples of the world, “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. They alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity whose fabric they themselves are weaving.” It is their institutions that “will come to be regarded as the hallmark and glory of the age” they have been called upon to establish. The “building process,” to which they are consecrated, is “the one hope of a stricken society.” For, it is “actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.” And remind them that they are the illumined souls envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His prayer: “Heroes are they, O my Lord, lead them to the field of battle. Guides are they, make them to speak out with arguments and proofs. Ministering servants are they, cause them to pass round the cup that brimmeth with the wine of certitude. O my God, make them to be songsters that carol in fair gardens, make them lions that couch in the thickets, whales that plunge in the vasty deep.”

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

28 December 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In the coming weeks you will be engaged in consultations on the features of the next Five Year Plan as described in our message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. We feel that these deliberations will benefit from the following comments regarding the curriculum of the training institute. 2.1

When in our message dated 26 December 1995 we underscored the need for a formal programme of training, we were aware that certain elements of a curriculum meeting the necessary requirements existed in the materials of the Ruhi Institute. It was our conviction, however, that the accumulated experience at that point did not justify our recommending a specific set of materials to be used by training institutes throughout the world. Therefore, the messages written by us and on our behalf in the early part of the Four Year Plan encouraged National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors to open the way for training institutes to follow whatever curriculum they deemed appropriate. Yet, conscious of the inherent difficulty in creating comprehensive programmes, we repeatedly expressed the view that the execution of plans should not await protracted decisions on the question of curriculum and that materials readily available should be used. The availability of such materials was limited worldwide, and National Spiritual Assemblies and institute boards 2.2

began to adopt the books of the Ruhi Institute as they became aware of them, often through the Counsellors. By the time the Four Year Plan came to a close, it was all too apparent that national communities which had vigorously set out to implement the sequence of courses designed by the Ruhi Institute were far ahead of those who had attempted to develop their own programme.

2.3 It was the Five Year Plan, however, that served to convince Counsellors, National Assemblies and boards everywhere of the merits of the Ruhi Institute curriculum. The introduction of the seventh book in the Institute's main sequence at the start of the Plan enabled many to appreciate more the intimate connection between the flow of individuals through a sequence of courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of growth to the next. Indeed, as progress was achieved in hundreds of clusters, it became clear to institutions at all levels that the content and order of the main sequence prepared the friends to carry out those acts of service required by the pattern of growth being established in a cluster. We have, in fact, described the dynamics of this relationship in our message of 27 December 2005.

2.4 We have now familiarized ourselves with the Ruhi Institute's present plans for curriculum development, which increasingly draw on experience worldwide in sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. We welcome the decision of the Institute, for example, to move the book currently occupying the fifth position in the sequence to a set of courses branching out from Book 3 for preparing Bahá'í children's class teachers and to insert in the fifth place a new book for raising up animators of junior youth groups. That the eighth book in the main sequence, initiating a series concerned with the institutional aspects of service to the Cause, will address the all-important question of the Covenant

is noted with equal pleasure. With these thoughts in mind, we have reached the conclusion that the books of the Ruhi Institute should constitute the main sequence of courses for institutes everywhere, at least through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age when the Bahá'í community will be focused on advancing the process of entry by troops within the framework for action set forth in our 27 December message.

To select one curriculum to be used by training institutes worldwide for a certain period of time is not to ignore the variety of needs and interests of the friends as they endeavour to better equip themselves to understand and apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Nor does it in any way diminish the value of the efforts made to develop courses and materials to respond to these needs. It is not intended to suggest, either, that one curriculum should necessarily appeal to everyone. What this decision does imply, however, is that the present demands of the growth of the Faith are such that, for some years to come, training institutes should not attempt to meet all of the needs and interests of the friends. 2.5

The institutions of the Faith will continue to respect the wishes of those who, for whatever reason, do not feel inclined to participate in the study of the books of the Ruhi Institute. Those not so disposed should recognize that there are many avenues of service open to them, including, above all, individual teaching which is the paramount duty of every Bahá'í. Local deepening classes and summer and winter schools, which remain an important feature of Bahá'í community life, will provide ample opportunities for them to deepen their knowledge of the teachings. What we ask of such friends, as we have in the past, is that they not allow their personal preferences to hamper in any way the unfoldment of an educational process that has shown 2.6

the potential to embrace millions of souls from diverse backgrounds. Regarding the materials that have been developed in other contexts over the years, and which will continue to emerge, these surely have their proper place in the Bahá'í community. Some, for example, form the basis for deepening classes at the grassroots, while others, with the necessary modifications, can be situated along one of the branches of courses stemming out from the Ruhi Institute's main sequence.

- 2.7 In this connection, we feel that the subject of branch courses deserves a few words of explanation. In our message dated 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we indicated that the main sequence could be likened to the trunk of a tree, which supports other courses branching out from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. A set of health materials being developed in Africa offers a good illustration of a few features of such courses. Following years of training community health workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several Bahá'í agencies decided to elaborate a series of modules aimed at preparing individuals to deal with progressively more complex health issues at the local level. By the time the first module began to be used in its initial form, the institute process had gained in strength, and it became evident that those who had studied Books 1 and 2 of the Ruhi Institute were better prepared to visit members of their extended families and friends and speak on health-related subjects. The design of the modules was modified so that they could constitute a branch after Book 2, which participants study while they continue along in the main sequence. Efforts in this direction have met with definite success. This example illustrates that branch courses are not a disconnected collection of materials randomly placed at various points. Rather, they must emerge out of actual experience and adhere

to a certain logic, both internally and in the context of the overall institute programme, if they are to be pedagogically sound. Further, the very concept of a branch course suggests that it provides training for an area of service which will interest only some of those who are studying the books of the main sequence. We hope that the development of such courses to address specific needs, defined by action on the ground, will be a natural consequence of the endeavours of burgeoning communities which are avidly striving to translate into reality the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to use training materials as a means of systematizing their experience and sharing with increasing numbers the insights they gain.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

31 December 2005

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

As the gathering of the Continental Counsellors in the Holy Land draws to a close, we are moved to share with you the feelings of joy, triumph and confidence which have characterized several days of focused deliberation on the present Five Year Plan and on the global enterprise that will succeed it. 3.1

The Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá opened the conference with a stirring appeal for resolute action, infusing the proceedings with a spirit of unwavering determination. Stories poured forth of the inspiring activities of the friends and the longing and responsiveness of the peoples of the world, conveying assurances that the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is blossoming more abundantly in all parts of the globe. Persistent questions of how to sustain the process of growth, of how to achieve a balance between expansion and consolidation, that have engaged the Bahá'í community for nearly half a century found clear answers in the experiences shared from diverse clusters on all continents. Accounts of obstacles surmounted, fresh learning acquired, and creative insights discovered made it evident that the Army of Light is prepared to advance towards new horizons. 3.2

There can be no doubt that the Plan soon to end marks an upturn in the fortunes of the Faith. We look to the next decade and a half, the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, with great expectations 3.3

of what will be accomplished. From this vantage point, the Bahá'í world can readily appreciate the significant extent to which the International Teaching Centre provided the impetus so indispensable to blazing the course set over these past few years and can, as well, discern the rich possibilities that its consecrated endeavours portend for the future.

- 3.4 Our message of 27 December addressed to the conference, which has already been transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies, summarizes the learning about growth to date and delineates the priorities for the next Plan. Careful study of the message by all believers and institutions will be an essential requisite for the upcoming consultations that will take place at every level of the community upon the return home of the Counsellors.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Riḍván 2006 is a moment charged with a spirit of triumph and anticipation. The followers of Bahá'u'lláh everywhere can take rightful pride in the magnitude of their accomplishments during the Five Year Plan now drawing to a close. And towards the future they can look with a confidence that is conferred only on those whose resolve is steeled through experience. The entire Bahá'í world is stirred at contemplating the scope of the five-year enterprise that lies ahead, the depth of consecration it will demand, and the results it is destined to achieve. Our prayers join yours as you turn in gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the privilege of witnessing the unfoldment of His purpose for humanity. 4.1

In our message of 27 December 2005 to the Counsellors gathered in the Holy Land, transmitted on that same day to all National Spiritual Assemblies, we delineated the features of the Five Year Plan that will stretch from 2006 to 2011. The friends and their institutions were urged to study the message thoroughly, and its content is no doubt well familiar to you. We now call upon each and every one of you to bend your energies towards ensuring that the goal of establishing over the next five years intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide is successfully met. That in the months following the Counsellors' departure from the World Centre the groundwork for the Plan's launch was laid so rapidly and systematically in 4.2

country after country is an indication of the eagerness with which the Bahá'í community is taking up the challenge presented to it. While there is no need for us to elaborate further on the requirements of the Plan here, we feel compelled to offer for your reflection a few comments on the global context in which your individual and collective efforts will be pursued.

4.3 More than seventy years ago Shoghi Effendi penned his World Order letters in which he provided a penetrating analysis of the forces operating in the world. With an eloquence that was his alone, he described two great processes that have been set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, one destructive and the other integrative, both of which are propelling humanity towards the World Order He conceived. We were cautioned by the Guardian not to be "misled by the painful slowness characterizing the unfoldment of the civilization" being laboriously established or to be "deluded by the ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity which at times appear to be capable of checking the disruptive influence of the chronic ills afflicting the institutions of a decaying age." No review of the course of events in recent decades can fail to acknowledge the gathering momentum of the processes he analysed then with such precision.

4.4 One need only consider the deepening moral crisis engulfing humanity to appreciate the extent to which the forces of disintegration have rent the fabric of society. Have not the evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear and of fraud, which the Guardian perceived with such clarity, become so widespread as to be readily apparent to even the casual observer? Does not the threat of terrorism of which he spoke loom so large on the international scene as to preoccupy the minds of young and old alike in every corner of the globe? Have

not the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches and pleasures so consolidated their power and influence as to assume authority over such human values as happiness, fidelity and love? Have not the weakening of family solidarity and the irresponsible attitude towards marriage reached such proportions as to endanger the existence of this fundamental unit of society? "The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions," about which Shoghi Effendi forewarned, are sadly revealing themselves "in their worst and most revolting aspects."

The Guardian lays the greatest share of the blame for humanity's moral downfall on the decline of religion as a social force. "Should the lamp of religion be obscured," he draws our attention to the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine." The decades that followed the writing of his letters have seen not only a continued deterioration in the ability of religion to exercise moral influence, but also the betrayal of the masses through the unseemly conduct of religious institutions. Attempts at reinvigorating it have only given rise to a fanaticism that, if left unchecked, could destroy the foundation of civilized relationships among people. The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, recently intensified, is ample evidence alone of the determination of the forces of darkness to quench the flame of faith wherever it burns brightly. Though confident in the ultimate triumph of the Cause, we dare not forget the warning of the Guardian that the Faith will have to contend with enemies more powerful and more insidious than those who have afflicted it in the past. 4.5

There is no need to comment extensively on the impotence of statesmanship, another theme treated so 4.6

masterfully by the Guardian in his World Order letters. The widening economic divide between the rich and the poor, the persistence of age-old animosities among nations, the swelling numbers of the displaced, the extraordinary rise in organized crime and violence, the pervasive sense of insecurity, the breakdown of basic services in so many regions, the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources—these are but a few of the signs of the inability of world leaders to devise viable schemes to alleviate humanity’s ills. This is not to say that sincere efforts have not been exerted, in fact, have not multiplied decade after decade. Yet these efforts, no matter how ingenious, fall well short of removing “the root cause of the evil that has so rudely upset the equilibrium of present-day society.” “Not even,” the Guardian asserted, “would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world ... provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigour of organized peoples and nations.” “What else,” he confidently affirmed, “but the unreserved acceptance of the Divine Programme” enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh, “embodying in its essentials God’s divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age, coupled with an indomitable conviction in the unfailing efficacy of each and all of its provisions, is eventually capable of withstanding the forces of internal disintegration which, if unchecked, must needs continue to eat into the vitals of a despairing society.”

- 4.7 Penetrating, indeed, is Shoghi Effendi’s depiction of the process of disintegration accelerating in the world. Equally striking is the accuracy with which he analysed the forces associated with the process of integration. He spoke of a “gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society” as an indirect manifestation

of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind. This spirit of solidarity has continued to spread over the decades, and today its effect is apparent in a range of developments, from the rejection of deeply ingrained racial prejudices to the dawning consciousness of world citizenship, from heightened environmental awareness to collaborative efforts in the promotion of public health, from the concern for human rights to the systematic pursuit of universal education, from the establishment of interfaith activities to the efflorescence of hundreds of thousands of local, national and international organizations engaged in some form of social action.

Yet for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh the most significant developments in the process of integration are those directly related to the Faith, many of which were nurtured by the Guardian himself and which have advanced tremendously since their modest beginnings. From the small nucleus of believers to whom he imparted his first teaching plans has grown a worldwide community with a presence in thousands of localities, each following a well-established pattern of activity that embodies the Faith's principles and aspirations. Upon the foundation of the Administrative Order he so painstakingly laid during the early decades of his ministry has been raised a large, closely knit network of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies diligently administering the affairs of the Cause in more than one hundred and eighty countries. From the first contingents of Auxiliary Board members for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith brought into being by him has arisen a legion of nearly one thousand stalwart workers serving in the field under the direction of eighty-one Counsellors ably guided by the International Teaching Centre. The evolution of the World Administrative Centre of the Faith, within the precincts of its World Spiritual Centre,

a process to which the Guardian consecrated so much energy, has crossed a crucial threshold with the occupation by the Universal House of Justice of its Seat on Mount Carmel and the subsequent completion of the International Teaching Centre Building and the Centre for the Study of the Texts. The Institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh has steadily progressed under the stewardship of the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, appointed Trustee by Shoghi Effendi fifty years ago, culminating in the establishment in 2005 of an international board designed to promote the continued widespread application of this mighty law, a source of inestimable blessings for all humanity. The efforts of the Guardian to raise the profile of the Faith in international circles have developed into an extensive external affairs system, capable of both defending the interests of the Faith and proclaiming its universal message. The respect the Faith enjoys in international fora, whenever its representatives speak, is a most noteworthy accomplishment. The loyalty and devotion that the members of a community reflecting the diversity of the entire human race evince towards the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh constitute a storehouse of strength the like of which no other organized group can claim.

- 4.9 The Guardian foresaw that, in succeeding epochs of the Formative Age, the Universal House of Justice would launch a series of worldwide enterprises which would “symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities” of National Spiritual Assemblies. Over the course of three successive epochs now, the Bahá'í community has laboured assiduously within the framework of the global Plans issued by the House of Justice and has succeeded in establishing a pattern of Bahá'í life that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards the spiritual revival of society. It has acquired

the capacity to reach large numbers of receptive souls with the message, to confirm them, and to deepen their understanding of the essentials of the Faith they have embraced. It has learned to translate the principle of consultation enunciated by its Founder into an effective tool for collective decision-making and to educate its members in its use. It has devised programmes for the spiritual and moral education of its younger members and has extended them not only to its own children and junior youth but also to those of the wider community. With the pool of talent at its disposition, it has created a rich body of literature which includes volumes in scores of languages that address both its own needs and the interest of the general public. It has become increasingly involved in the affairs of society at large, undertaking a host of projects of social and economic development. Particularly since the opening of the fifth epoch in 2001, it has made significant strides in multiplying its human resources through a programme of training that reaches the grassroots of the community and has discovered methods and instruments for establishing a sustainable pattern of growth.

It is in the context of the interplay of the forces described here that the imperative of advancing the process of entry by troops must be viewed. The Five Year Plan now opening requires that you concentrate your energies on this process and ensure that the two complementary movements at its heart are accelerated. This should be your dominant concern. As your efforts bear fruit and the dynamics of growth reach a new level of complexity, there will be challenges and opportunities for the World Centre itself to address in the coming five years in fields such as external affairs, social and economic development, administration, and the application of Bahá'í law. The growth of the community has already necessitated that new arrangements

be put in place to double the number of pilgrims to four hundred in each group beginning in October 2007. There are several other projects that will also have to be pursued. Among these are the further development of the gardens surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as the Riḍvan Garden and Mazra'ih; the restoration of the International Archives Building; structural repairs to the Shrine of the Báb, the full extent of which are not yet clear; and the construction of the House of Worship in Chile as envisioned by the Guardian, the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. As these endeavours advance, we will call on you from time to time for assistance, both in the form of financial support and specialized talents, mindful that the resources of the Faith should, to the greatest measure possible, be channelled to the requirements of the Plan.

- 4.11 Dear friends: That the forces of disintegration are gaining in range and power cannot be ignored. It is equally clear that the community of the Greatest Name has been guided from strength to strength by the Hand of Providence and must now increase in size and augment its resources. The course set by the Five Year Plan is straightforward. How can those of us aware of the plight of humanity, and conscious of the direction in which history is unfolding, not arise to the fullest of our capacity and dedicate ourselves to its aim? Do not the words of the Guardian that "the stage is set" hold as true for us today as they did when he wrote them during the first Seven Year Plan? Let his words ring in your ears: "There is no time to lose." "There is no room left for vacillation." "Such an opportunity is irreplaceable." "To try, to persevere, is to insure ultimate and complete victory." Be assured of our continued prayers at the Sacred Threshold for your guidance and protection.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The first year of the Five Year Plan bears eloquent testimony to the spirit of devotion with which Bahá'u'lláh's followers have embraced the framework for action presented in our message of 27 December 2005 and their commitment to advancing the process of entry by troops. Where this framework has been applied coherently in all its dimensions in a cluster, steady progress is being achieved, both in terms of the participation of the believers and their friends in community life and in terms of numerical growth, with some clusters reporting enrolments in the hundreds every few months and others in scores. Vital to this development has been a heightened awareness of the spiritual nature of the enterprise, together with an increased understanding of those decision-making instruments that are defined by the principal features of the Plan. 5.1

Prior to our launching the current series of global Plans focused on the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, the Bahá'í community had passed through a stage of rapid, large-scale expansion in many parts of the world—an expansion which ultimately was impossible to sustain. The challenge, then, lay not so much in swelling the ranks of the Cause with new adherents, at least from populations of proven receptivity, but in incorporating them into the life of the community and raising up 5.2

from among them adequate numbers dedicated to its further expansion. So crucial was it for the Bahá'í world to address this challenge that we made it a central feature of the Four Year Plan and called upon National Spiritual Assemblies to spend the greater part of their energies creating institutional capacity, in the form of the training institute, to develop human resources. Ever-increasing contingents of believers, we indicated, would need to benefit from a formal programme of training designed to endow them with the knowledge and spiritual insights, with the skills and abilities, required to carry out the acts of service that would sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation.

5.3 Today as we observe the workings of those clusters which are in a robust state of growth, we note that in every one of them the friends have continued to strengthen the institute process, while learning to mobilize their expanding nucleus of active supporters of the Faith, to establish an efficient scheme for the coordination of their efforts, to weave their individual initiatives and collective endeavours into an effective pattern of unified action, and to draw on the analysis of pertinent information in planning the cycles of their activities. That they have found the means for carrying forward the work of expansion and consolidation hand in hand—the key to sustained growth—is demonstrable. Such evidence will surely inspire every devoted believer to remain resolute on the path of systematic learning that has been set.

5.4 The accomplishments of these years of prodigious effort have not been confined to those clusters where the work of large-scale expansion and consolidation is being thus revitalized. The approach taken during the Four Year Plan, followed by the Twelve Month Plan and the previous Five Year Plan, proved instrumental

in creating conditions for the believers to extend their endeavours to a wide circle of people, engaging them in various aspects of community life. The benefits of the decade-long process of capacity building in the three participants of the global Plans are now broadly apparent. Everywhere there was a need to gain an understanding of the dynamics of human resource development. Everywhere the friends had to learn the requirements of steady growth—to promote systematic action and to avoid distractions, to bring certain elements of collective decision-making close to the grassroots and to create communities with a sense of mission, to encourage universal participation and to accommodate different segments of society in their activities, particularly children and junior youth, the future champions of the Cause of God and builders of His civilization.

With so firm a foundation in place, the foremost 5.5 thought in the mind of each and every believer should be teaching. Whether in their personal efforts they teach their friends in firesides and then involve them in the core activities or use these activities as their primary instrument for teaching, whether as a community they make their work with children and junior youth the initial thrust in a cluster or focus first on the older generations, whether in their collective endeavours they visit families in teams as part of an intensive campaign or call on seekers in their homes periodically over time—these are decisions that can only be made according to the circumstances and possibilities of the friends and the nature of the populations with whom they interact. What all must acknowledge, irrespective of circumstance, are both the crying need of a humanity that, bereft of spiritual sustenance, is sinking deeper into despair and the urgency of the responsibility to teach

with which we each have been entrusted as members of the community of the Greatest Name.

- 5.6 Bahá'u'lláh has commanded His followers to teach the Cause. Already thousands upon thousands are energetically applying the provisions of the Plan to open up avenues for them to guide souls to the Ocean of His Revelation. We look with expectant eyes to the day when teaching is the dominating passion in the life of every believer and when the unity of the community is so strong as to enable this state of enkindlement to express itself in unremitting action in the field of service. This, then, is our ardent hope for you and the object of our most fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. As they call on one another in their homes and pay visits to families, friends and acquaintances, they enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import, deepen their knowledge of the Faith, share Bahá'u'lláh's message, and welcome increasing numbers to join them in a mighty spiritual enterprise. Aware of the aspirations of the children of the world and their need for spiritual education, they extend their efforts widely to involve ever-growing contingents of participants in classes that become centres of attraction for the young and strengthen the roots of the Faith in society. They assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. And with the advantage of a greater abundance of human resources, an increasing number of them are able to express their faith through 6.1

a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions. Such is the panorama before us as we pause this Riḍván to observe the progress of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

- 6.2 On several occasions we have indicated that the aim of the series of global Plans that will carry the Bahá'í world to the celebration of the centenary of the Faith's Formative Age in 2021 will be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the community. At this, the midway point of what will be a quarter of a century of consistent, focused exertion, the evidences of increased capacity are everywhere apparent. Of particular significance is the widening impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between the three participants in the Plan. Institutions, from the national to the local level, see with ever greater clarity how to create conditions conducive to the expression of the spiritual energies of a growing number of believers in pursuit of a common goal. The community is serving more and more as that environment in which individual effort and collective action, mediated by the institute, can complement each other in order to achieve progress. The vibrancy it manifests and the unity of purpose that animates its endeavours are drawing into its swelling ranks those from every walk of life eager to dedicate their time and energies to the welfare of humanity. That the doors of the community are more widely open for any receptive soul to enter and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is clear. No greater testament is there to the efficacy of the interactions among the Plan's three participants than the dramatic acceleration in the tempo of teaching that was witnessed this past year. The advance made in the process of entry by troops was significant indeed.

Within the sphere of these enhanced interactions, individual initiative is becoming increasingly effective. In previous messages we have referred to the impetus that the institute process imparts to the exercise of initiative by the individual believer. The friends in every continent are engaged in study of the Writings for the explicit purpose of learning to apply the teachings to the growth of the Faith. Remarkable numbers are now shouldering responsibility for the spiritual vitality of their communities; energetically, they are carrying out those acts of service befitting a healthy pattern of growth. As they have persevered in the field of service to the Cause, maintaining a humble posture of learning, their courage and wisdom, zeal and acuity, fervour and circumspection, determination and trust in God have combined all the more to reinforce one another. In their presentation of the message of Bahá'u'lláh and the exposition of its verities, they have taken to heart the words of Shoghi Effendi that they must neither "hesitate" nor "falter", neither "overstress" nor "whittle down" the truth which they champion. Neither are they "fanatical" nor "excessively liberal". Through their constancy in teaching, they have increased their ability to determine whether the receptivity of their listener requires them to be "wary" or "bold", to "act swiftly" or to "mark time", to be "direct" or "indirect" in the methods they employ. 6.3

What we continue to find encouraging is how well disciplined is this individual initiative. Communities everywhere are gradually internalizing the lessons being learned from systematization, and the framework defined by the current series of Plans lends consistency and flexibility to the endeavours of the friends. Far from restricting them, this framework enables them to seize opportunities, to build relationships, and to translate 6.4

into reality a vision of systematic growth. In a word, it gives shape to their collective powers.

6.5 As we survey what has been accomplished around the world, our hearts are filled with particular admiration for the believers in Iran, who, under the most arduous conditions, have arisen boldly to serve their country and are bending their energies toward its revitalization, though the avenues open to them are limited. And given the restrictions placed on the administration of the Faith, they have set out on an individual basis to acquaint their fellow citizens with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, directly engaging them in conversations about His redeeming message. Not only have they received unprecedented support from enlightened souls as they have begun to do so, but they have encountered a receptivity far beyond anything they would have imagined possible.

6.6 Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh conscious of the forces of integration and disintegration operating in society today sees the relationship between the rise in receptivity to the Faith in all parts of the globe and the failings of the world's systems. That such receptivity will increase as the agonies of humanity deepen is certain. Let there be no mistake: The capacity building that has been set in motion to respond to mounting receptivity is still in its earliest stages. The magnitude of the demands of a world in disarray will test this capacity to its limits in the years ahead. Humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism. Bahá'ís are able to discern the causes of this affliction. "What 'oppression' is more grievous", Bahá'u'lláh asks, "than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" There is

no time to lose. Continued progress must be achieved in the activity and development of the three participants in the Plan.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has extolled “two calls” to “success and prosperity” that can be heard from the “heights of the happiness of mankind”. One is the call of “civilization”, of “progress of the material world”. It comprises the “laws”, “regulations”, “arts and sciences” through which humanity develops. The other is the “soul-stirring call of God”, on which depends the eternal happiness of humanity. “This second call”, the Master has explained, “is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God.” As you continue to labour in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way. 6.7

Sustaining growth in cluster after cluster will depend on the qualities that distinguish your service to the peoples of the world. So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural—that even the stranger sees in you loving friends. So high must be your standard of excellence and so pure and chaste your lives that the moral influence you exert penetrates the consciousness of the wider community. Only if you demonstrate the rectitude of conduct to which the 6.8

writings of the Faith call every soul will you be able to struggle against the myriad forms of corruption, overt and subtle, eating at the vitals of society. Only if you perceive honour and nobility in every human being—this independent of wealth or poverty—will you be able to champion the cause of justice. And to the extent that administrative processes of your institutions are governed by the principles of Bahá'í consultation will the great masses of humanity be able to take refuge in the Bahá'í community.

- 6.9 As you press ahead, be confident that the Concourse on high is marshalling its forces and stands ready to come to your aid. Our continued prayers will surround you.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

20 October 2008

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Today, the anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, marks 7.1
the midway point of the five-year enterprise that will
engage the Bahá'í world until Ridván 2011. We bow
our heads in humble gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the
favours and confirmations He has vouchsafed unto
those labouring so diligently and sacrificially in the
forefront of the teaching work. Since the conclusion of
the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention a few months
ago, there has been a rise in awareness of the efficacy
of the framework governing the operation of the Five
Year Plan as insights gained by the delegates have been
widely diffused throughout the Bahá'í community.
Scores of clusters around the globe are being primed
for systematic expansion, and we expect to see a wave
of intensive programmes of growth launched in the
months leading up to Ridván next year.

The challenge facing the friends in these and all 7.2
clusters continues to be twofold in character. While
learning to identify receptive segments of society and
share with responsive souls the message of the Faith—
an aspiration generally not difficult to fulfil—they are
striving to understand in practice how the diverse ele-
ments of a healthy pattern of growth, particularly the
development of human resources, are to be integrated
into a cohesive whole. How heartening it is to see that
the moment the friends in a cluster begin to meet this
dual challenge, immediate progress is achieved; the

goal of launching an intensive programme of growth becomes imminently attainable.

7.3 That the continued strengthening of the community should be matched by a further decline in the old world order comes as no surprise. Indeed, the friends should be on their guard, lest the development of capacity in the community not keep pace with the rise in receptivity of a disillusioned humanity. Behold how even in the short span of time since we raised this warning in our Ridván message, financial structures once thought to be impregnable have tottered and world leaders have shown their inability to devise more than temporary solutions, a failing to which they increasingly confess. Whatever expedient measures are adopted, confidence has been shaken and a sense of security lost. Surely such developments have caused the believers in every land to reflect on the lamentable condition of the present order and have reinforced in them the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together.

7.4 It is with these thoughts in mind that we turn our hearts in frequent prayer to Bahá'u'lláh and beseech Him to strengthen His followers through His unfailing grace. In such moments, we implore Him to illumine their souls with the light of knowledge and faith. Let them not underestimate the power inherent in the system they are putting in place for the propagation of His Faith, nor mistake the true purpose of the global enterprise on which they have embarked. Let them not deviate from the path of learning on which they are set, nor be distracted by the ephemeral pursuits of a bewildered society. Let them not fail to appreciate the value of the culture now taken root in the community that promotes the systematic study of the Creative Word in small groups in order to build capacity for service. Let

them never forget the imperative to tend to the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. Let them come to realize the full significance of their efforts to help young people form a strong moral identity in their early adolescent years and empower them to contribute to the well-being of their communities. And let them rejoice at having learned through consistent, systematic action how to establish a rhythm of growth that pays due attention to the essential elements of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning. May they one and all be endowed with constancy and fidelity and be granted the courage to make whatever sacrifices are needed to ensure the resounding success of the Plan. By the rectitude of their conduct, the sincerity of their love for their fellow human beings, and the ardour of their desire to serve the peoples of the world, may they vindicate the truth proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh that humanity is one. May they be diligent in their efforts to establish ties of friendship that show no regard for prevalent social barriers and ceaselessly endeavour to bind hearts together in the love of God. That they may recognize the profound implications of their mission is our fervent hope. That they may not falter in accomplishing their ambitious goals, no matter how severe the crises engulfing the world around them, is our most heartfelt prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

To provide the opportunity for the friends to gather 7.5 together, as much to celebrate the feats already achieved during the Plan as to deliberate on its current exigencies, we announce the convocation of a series of regional conferences, forty-one in number, to be held in the following cities between November and March: Abidjan, Accra, Almaty, Antofagasta, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Battambang, Bologna, Bukavu,

Chicago, Dallas, Frankfurt, Guadalajara, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Kiev, Kolkata, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Lae, London, Los Angeles, Lubumbashi, Lusaka, Madrid, Managua, Manila, Nakuru, New Delhi, Portland, Quito, São Paulo, Stamford, Sydney, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Yaoundé. To each of these conferences, two members of the International Teaching Centre will be sent as our representatives. National Spiritual Assemblies in hosting countries will have further details available regarding participation. We urge the believers, both those fully engaged in executing the provisions of the Plan and those whose circumstances have prevented them from fulfilling their desire to do so until now, to avail themselves of this opportunity and attend the conference to be held in their area.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2009

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A mere three years ago we set before the Bahá'í 8.1 world the challenge of exploiting the framework for action that had emerged with such clarity at the conclusion of the last global Plan. The response, as we had hoped, was immediate. With great vigour the friends everywhere began to pursue the goal of establishing intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide, and the number of such programmes soon started to climb. But no one could have imagined then how profoundly the Lord of Hosts, in His inscrutable wisdom, intended to transform His community in so short a span of time. What a purposeful and confident community it was that celebrated its accomplishments at the midway point of the current Plan in forty-one regional conferences across the globe! What an extraordinary contrast did its coherence and energy provide to the bewilderment and confusion of a world caught in a spiral of crisis! This, indeed, was the community of the blissful to which the Guardian had referred. This was a community aware of the vast potentialities with which it has been endowed and conscious of the role it is destined to play in rebuilding a broken world. This was a community in the ascendant, subject to severe repression in one part of the globe, yet rising up undeterred and undismayed as a united whole and strengthening its capacity to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression. And in

the nearly eighty-thousand participants who attended the conferences we saw the emergence on the historical scene of an individual believer supremely confident in the efficacy of the Plan's methods and instruments and remarkably deft at wielding them. Each and every soul of this mighty sea stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith. Each and every one was evidence of Bahá'u'lláh's promise to assist all those who arise with detachment and sincerity to serve Him. Each and every one offered a glimpse of that race of beings, consecrated and courageous, pure and sanctified, destined to evolve over generations under the direct influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In them we saw the first signs of the fulfilment of our hope expressed at the outset of the Plan that the edifying influence of the Faith would be extended to hundreds of thousands through the institute process. There is every indication that, by the end of the Riḍván period, the number of intensive programmes of growth around the world will have crossed the 1,000 mark. What more can we do at the opening of this most joyous Festival than to bow our heads in humility before God and offer Him thanksgiving for His unbounded generosity to the community of the Greatest Name.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With hearts filled with admiration for the follow- 9.1
ers of Bahá'u'lláh, we are pleased to announce that, as
this most joyous Riḍván season opens, there is in every
continent of the globe a fresh complement of intensive
programmes of growth under way, raising the total
number worldwide over the 1,500 mark and securing
the goal of the Five Year Plan, one year in advance of
its conclusion. We bow our heads in gratitude to God
for this astounding achievement, this signal victory.
All who have laboured in the field will appreciate the
bounty He has bestowed on His community in granting
it a full year to strengthen the pattern of expansion and
consolidation now everywhere established, in prepara-
tion for the tasks it will be called upon to undertake in
its next global enterprise—a plan of five years' dura-
tion, the fifth in a series with the explicit aim of advanc-
ing the process of entry by troops.

We feel moved, as we take pause on this festive 9.2
occasion, to make clear that what evokes such a deep
sense of pride and gratitude in our hearts is not so
much the numerical feat you have achieved, remarkable
as it is, but a combination of developments at the more
profound level of culture, to which this accomplishment
attests. Chief among them is the rise we have observed
in the capacity of the friends to converse with others
on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the
Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have

understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving.

9.3 In recent messages we have expressed joy at witnessing the steady increase in the tempo of teaching across the globe. The discharge of this fundamental spiritual obligation by the individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. What the establishment of 1,500 intensive programmes of growth has made evident is how courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside. Even the most modest estimates suggest that there are now tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.

9.4 In their efforts to present the essentials of the Faith plainly and unequivocally, the believers have benefited greatly from the illustrative example in Book 6 of the Ruhi Institute. Where the logic underlying that presentation is appreciated, and the urge to convert it into a formula overcome, it gives rise to a conversation between two souls—a conversation distinguished by the depth of understanding achieved and the nature of the relationship established. To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation. Whether the first contact with such newly found friends elicits an invitation for them to enrol in the Bahá'í community or to participate in one of its activities is not an overwhelming

concern. More important is that every soul feel welcome to join the community in contributing to the betterment of society, commencing a path of service to humanity on which, at the outset or further along, formal enrolment can occur.

The significance of this development should not be underestimated. In every cluster, once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should become a centre of intense activity. In an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose. Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as “door-to-door”, even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage—meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives—may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of

these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighbourhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. A rhythm of community life should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order.

9.6 Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive programme of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

9.7 To meet this challenge, the believers and the institutions that serve them will have to strengthen the institute process in the cluster, increasing significantly within its borders the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles; for it should be recognized that the opportunity now open to the friends to foster a vibrant community life in neighbourhoods and villages, characterized by such a keen sense of purpose, was only made possible by crucial developments that

occurred over the past decade in that aspect of Bahá'í culture which pertains to deepening.

When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá'í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation. 9.8

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain 9.9

an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

- 9.10 Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly over the next year so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated. 9.11

If the work of the tutor is to reach higher and higher degrees of excellence, it must be remembered that primary responsibility for the development of human resources in a region or country rests with the training institute. While striving to increase the number of its participants, the institute as a structure—from the board, to the coordinators at different levels, to the tutors at the grassroots—must lay equal stress on the effectiveness of the system in its entirety, for, in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress. At the level of the cluster, the coordinator must bring both practical experience and dynamism to his or her efforts to accompany those who serve as tutors. He or she should arrange periodic gatherings for them to reflect on their endeavours. Events organized to repeat the study of segments selected from the institute material may occasionally prove helpful, provided they do not inculcate a need for perpetual training. The capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans, through study of the 9.12

sequence of courses and implementation of their practical component. And as men and women of various ages move along the sequence and complete their study of each course with the help of tutors, others must stand ready to accompany them in acts of service undertaken according to their strengths and interests—particularly the coordinators responsible for children’s classes, for junior youth groups and for study circles, acts of service crucial to the perpetuation of the system itself. To ensure that the proper measure of vitality is pulsating through this system should continue to be the object of intense learning in every country over the course of the next twelve months.

- 9.13 Concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá’í community, a concern that resulted in two, coexisting realities. One, emulating the achievements of the Bahá’ís of Iran, was characterized by the capacity to offer systematic classes, from grade to grade, to children from Bahá’í families, generally with the aim of imparting basic knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith to rising generations. In most parts of the world, the number who benefited from such classes has been relatively small. The other reality emerged in areas where large-scale enrolments took place, both rural and urban. A more inclusive attitude dominated that experience. Yet while children from households of all kinds were at once eager and welcome to attend Bahá’í classes, various factors prevented lessons from being conducted with the required degree of regularity, year after year. How pleased we are to see this duality, a consequence of historical circumstances, begin to fall away as friends trained by institutes everywhere strive to offer classes, open to all, on a systematic basis.

Such promising beginnings have now to be vigorously pursued. In every cluster with an intensive programme of growth in operation, efforts need to be made to systematize further the provision of spiritual education to increasing numbers of children, from families of many backgrounds—a requisite of the community-building process gathering momentum in neighbourhoods and villages. This will be a demanding task, one that calls for patience and cooperation on the part of parents and institutions alike. The Ruhi Institute has already been requested to expedite plans to complete its courses for training children's class teachers at different levels including the corresponding lessons, starting with youngsters aged 5 or 6 and proceeding to those aged 10 or 11, in order to close the present gap between existing lessons and its textbooks for junior youth, such as *Spirit of Faith* and the forthcoming *Power of the Holy Spirit*, which provide a distinctly Bahá'í component to the programme for that age group. As these additional courses and lessons become available, institutes in every country will be able to prepare the teachers and the coordinators required to put in place, grade by grade, the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements can be organized. Meanwhile, institutes should do their best to provide teachers with suitable materials, from among others currently in existence, for use in their classes with children of various ages, as necessary. 9.14

The International Teaching Centre has earned our abiding gratitude for the vital impetus it lent to the efforts to secure the early attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan. To see the degree of energy it brought to this worldwide enterprise, following so tenaciously the progress in every continent and collaborating so closely with the Continental Counsellors, was to catch a glimpse of the tremendous power inherent in the 9.15

Administrative Order. As the Teaching Centre now turns its attention with equal vigour to questions related to the efficacy of activities at the cluster level, it will no doubt give special consideration to the implementation of Bahá'í children's classes. We are confident that its analysis of the experience gained in a few selected clusters this coming year, representative of diverse social realities, will shed light on practical issues which will make possible the establishment of regular classes, for children of every age, in neighbourhoods and villages.

- 9.16 The rapid spread of the programme for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is yet another expression of cultural advance in the Bahá'í community. While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community—in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts—is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Account after account, in which junior youth in countries all over the planet give voice to their thoughts as participants in the programme, testifies to the validity of this vision. There is every indication that the programme engages their expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyse the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives. At an age when burgeoning intellectual, spiritual and physical powers become accessible to them, they are being given the tools needed to combat the forces that would rob them

of their true identity as noble beings and to work for the common good.

That the major component of the programme 9.17 explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the programme enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the Holy Land. Already the accumulating body of knowledge and experience has given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the programme. To help others advance swiftly in this direction, the Office is establishing a network of sites in all continents, with the assistance of a corps of believers, that can be used to provide training to coordinators from scores upon scores of clusters. These resource persons continue to support coordinators upon their return to their respective clusters, enabling them to create a spiritually charged environment in which the junior youth programme can take root.

Further knowledge is sure to accrue in this area 9.18 of endeavour, although a pattern of action is already clear. Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the programme by schools and civic groups. Within the clusters that today are the focus of an intensive programme of growth, there is a wide array of circumstances, from those with a few sporadic junior youth groups to those maintaining a number sufficient to require the services of a dedicated coordinator, who could receive ongoing

support from a site for the dissemination of learning. To ensure that this capacity increases across the entire spectrum of these clusters, we are calling for 32 learning sites, each serving some twenty clusters with full-time coordinators, to be in operation by the end of the current Plan. In all other such clusters, priority should be given to creating the capacity over the coming year to offer the programme, multiplying the number of groups systematically.

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9.19 The developments we have mentioned thus far—the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life, the efflorescence of an approach to study of the writings that is wedded to action, the renewal of commitment to provide spiritual education to the young in neighbourhoods and villages on a regular basis, and the spread in influence of a programme that instils in junior youth the sense of a twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society—are all reinforced, in no small measure, by yet another advance at the level of culture, the implications of which are far-reaching indeed. This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith.

Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.

In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labour together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their thoughts are centred at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe, propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side. 9.20

Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community's mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus 9.21

on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

- 9.22 That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community

that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfil these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

The development that we are sure to witness in 9.23
Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyse the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical, fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.

9.24 Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programmes of growth.

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9.25 Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale,

one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of 9.26

civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.

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

9.28 Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse

through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. That the world civilization now on humanity's horizon must achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life is central to the Bahá'í teachings. Clearly this ideal has profound implications for the nature of any social action pursued by Bahá'ís, whatever its scope and range of influence. Though conditions will vary from country to country, and perhaps from cluster to cluster, eliciting from the friends a variety of endeavours, there are certain fundamental

concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings—seeing in their fellow human beings gems of inestimable value and recognizing the effects of the dual process of integration and disintegration on both hearts and minds, as well as on social structures.

- 9.30 Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of

the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances. 9.31

In describing for you these new opportunities now opening at the level of the cluster, we are not asking you to alter in any way your current course. Nor should it be imagined that such opportunities represent an alternative arena of service, competing with the expansion and consolidation work for the community's limited resources and energies. Over the coming year, the institute process and the pattern of activity that it engenders should continue to be strengthened, 9.32

and teaching should remain uppermost in the mind of every believer. Further involvement in the life of society should not be sought prematurely. It will proceed naturally as the friends in every cluster persevere in applying the provisions of the Plan through a process of action, reflection, consultation and study, and learn as a result. Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning.

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9.33 Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of

suffering out of His love for humanity? Look within your own ranks, at your dear Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. Do they not exemplify fortitude born of the love of God and the desire to serve Him? Does not their capacity to transcend the cruelest and most bitter persecution bespeak the capacity of millions upon millions of oppressed people of the world to arise and take a decisive part in building the Kingdom of God on earth? Undeterred by divisive social constructs, press on and bring Bahá'u'lláh's message to waiting souls in every urban neighbourhood, in every rural hamlet, in every corner of the globe, drawing them to His community, the community of the Greatest Name. Never do you leave our thoughts and prayers, and we will continue to implore the Almighty to reinforce you with His wondrous grace.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE