

# THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2021

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The final words in a most memorable chapter in the history of the Cause have now been written, and the page turns. This Riḍván marks the conclusion of an extraordinary year, of a Five Year Plan, and of an entire series of Plans that began in 1996. A new series of Plans beckons, with what promises to be a momentous twelve months serving as a prelude to a nine-year effort due to commence next Riḍván. We see before us a community that has rapidly gained strength and is ready to take great strides forward. But there must be no illusions about how much striving was required to reach this point and how hard-won were the insights acquired along the way: the lessons learned will shape the community's future, and the account of how they were learned sheds light on what is to come.

The decades leading up to 1996, rich with advances and insights of their own, had left no doubt that large numbers of people in many societies would be ready to enter under the banner of the Faith. Yet, as encouraging as instances of large-scale enrolment were, they did not equate to a sustainable process of growth that could be cultivated in diverse settings. Profound questions faced the community which, at that time, it had insufficient experience to answer adequately. How could efforts aimed at its expansion proceed hand in hand with the process of consolidation and resolve the long-standing, seemingly intractable challenge of sustaining growth? How could individuals, institutions and communities be raised up that would be capable of translating Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action? And how could those who were attracted to the teachings become protagonists in a global spiritual enterprise?

So it was that, a quarter of a century ago, a Bahá'í community that could still count three Hands of the Cause of God in its front ranks embarked on a Four Year Plan, distinguished from those that came before it by its focus on a single aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This aim came to define the series of Plans that followed. The community had already come to understand that this process was not just the entry into the Faith of sizeable groups, nor would it emerge spontaneously; it implied purposeful, systematic, accelerated expansion and consolidation. This work would require the informed participation of a great many souls, and in 1996, the Bahá'í world was summoned to take up the vast educational challenge this entailed. It was called to establish a network of training institutes focused on generating an increasing flow of individuals endowed with the necessary capacities to sustain the process of growth.

The friends set about this task aware that, notwithstanding their previous victories in the teaching field, plainly they had much to learn about which capacities to acquire and, crucially, how to acquire them. In many ways, the community would learn by doing, and the lessons it learned, once they had been distilled and refined by being applied in diverse settings over time,

would eventually be incorporated into educational materials. It was recognized that certain activities were a natural response to the spiritual needs of a population. Study circles, children's classes, devotional meetings, and later junior youth groups stood out as being of central importance in this regard, and when woven together with related activities, the dynamics generated could give rise to a vibrant pattern of community life. And as the numbers participating in these core activities grew, a new dimension was added to their original purpose. They came to serve as portals through which youth, adults and whole families from the wider society could come into an encounter with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. It was also becoming apparent how practical it was to consider strategies for the work of community building within the context of the "cluster": a geographic area of manageable size with distinct social and economic features. A capacity for preparing simple plans at the level of the cluster began to be cultivated, and out of such plans, programmes for the growth of the Faith arose, organized into what would become three-month cycles of activity. An important point of clarity emerged early on: the movement of individuals through a sequence of courses gives impetus to, and is perpetuated by, the movement of clusters along a continuum of development. This complementary relationship helped the friends everywhere to assess the dynamics of growth in their own surroundings and chart a path towards increased strength. As time went on, it proved fruitful to view what was occurring in a cluster both from the perspective of three educational imperatives—serving children, junior youth, and youth and adults—as well as from the perspective of the cycles of activity essential to the rhythm of growth. Part-way into a twenty-five-year endeavour, many of the most recognizable features of the growth process we see today were becoming well established.

As the efforts of the friends intensified, various principles, concepts and strategies of universal relevance to the growth process began to crystallize into a framework for action that could evolve to accommodate new elements. This framework proved fundamental to the release of tremendous vitality. It assisted the friends to channel their energies in ways that, experience had shown, were conducive to the growth of healthy communities. But a framework is not a formula. By taking into account the various elements of the framework when assessing the reality of a cluster, a locality, or simply a neighbourhood, a pattern of activity could be developed that drew on what the rest of the Bahá'í world was learning while still being a response to the particulars of that place. A dichotomy between rigid requirements on the one hand and limitless personal preferences on the other gave way to a more nuanced understanding of the variety of means by which individuals could support a process that, at its heart, was coherent and continually being refined as experience accumulated. Let there be no doubt about the advance represented by the emergence of this framework: the implications for harmonizing and unifying the endeavours of the entire Bahá'í world and propelling its onward march were of great consequence.

As one Plan succeeded another, and engagement with the work of community building became more broadly based, advances at the level of culture became more pronounced. For instance, the importance of educating the younger generations became more widely appreciated, as did the extraordinary potential represented by junior youth in particular. Souls assisting and accompanying one another along a shared path, constantly widening the circle of mutual support, became the pattern to which all efforts aimed at developing capacity for service aspired. Even the interactions of the friends among themselves and with those around them underwent a change, as awareness was raised of the power of meaningful conversations to kindle and fan spiritual susceptibilities. And significantly, Bahá'í communities adopted an

increasingly outward-looking orientation. Any soul responsive to the vision of the Faith could become an active participant—even a promoter and facilitator—of educational activities, meetings for worship and other elements of the community-building work; from among such souls, many would also declare their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Thus, a conception of the process of entry by troops emerged that relied less on theories and assumptions and more on actual experience of how large numbers of people could find the Faith, become familiar with it, identify with its aims, join in its activities and deliberations, and in many cases embrace it. Indeed, as the institute process was strengthened in region after region, the number of individuals taking a share in the work of the Plan, extending even to those recently acquainted with the Faith, grew by leaps and bounds. But this was not being driven by a mere concern for numbers. A vision of personal and collective transformation occurring simultaneously, founded on study of the Word of God and an appreciation of each person's capacity to become a protagonist in a profound spiritual drama, had given rise to a sense of common endeavour.

One of the most striking and inspiring features of this twenty-five-year period has been the service rendered by Bahá'í youth, who with faith and valour have assumed their rightful place in the forefront of the community's efforts. As teachers of the Cause and educators of the young, as mobile tutors and homefront pioneers, as cluster coordinators and members of Bahá'í agencies, youth on five continents have arisen to serve their communities with devotion and sacrifice. The maturity they have demonstrated, in the discharge of duties upon which depends the advancement of the Divine Plan, is expressive of their spiritual vitality and their commitment to safeguarding humanity's future. In recognition of this increasingly evident maturity, we have decided that, immediately following this Riḍván, while the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly shall remain twenty-one, the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections shall be lowered to eighteen. We have no doubt that Bahá'í youth everywhere who are of age will vindicate our confidence in their ability to fulfil “conscientiously and diligently” the “sacred duty” to which every Bahá'í elector is called.

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We are conscious that, naturally, the realities of communities differ greatly. Different national communities, and different places within those communities, began this series of Plans at different points of development; since then, they have also developed at different speeds and have attained different levels of progress. This, in itself, is nothing new. It has always been the case that conditions in places vary, as does the degree of receptivity found there. But we perceive, too, a swelling tide, whereby the capacity, confidence and accumulated experience of most communities are rising, buoyed by the success of their sister communities near and far. As an example, while souls who arose to open a new locality in 1996 lacked nothing for courage, faith and devotion, today their counterparts everywhere combine those same qualities with knowledge, insights and skills that are the accumulation of twenty-five years of effort by the entire Bahá'í world to systematize and refine the work of expansion and consolidation.

Regardless of a community's starting point, it has advanced the process of growth when it has combined qualities of faith, perseverance and commitment with a readiness to learn. In fact, a cherished legacy of this series of Plans is the widespread recognition that any effort to advance begins with an orientation towards learning. The simplicity of this precept belies the significance of the implications that follow from it. We do not doubt that every cluster, given time, will progress along the continuum of development; the communities that have advanced

most quickly, relative to those whose circumstances and possibilities were similar, have shown an ability to foster unity of thought and to learn about effective action. And they did so without hesitating to act.

A commitment to learning also meant being prepared to make mistakes—and sometimes, of course, mistakes brought discomfort. Unsurprisingly, new methods and approaches were handled inexpertly at first because of a lack of experience; on occasion, a newly acquired capacity of one kind was lost as a community became absorbed in developing another. Having the best of intentions is no guarantee against making missteps, and moving past them requires both humility and detachment. When a community has remained determined to show forbearance and learn from mistakes that naturally occur, progress has never been out of reach.

Midway through the series of Plans, the community's involvement in the life of society began to become the focus of more direct attention. The believers were encouraged to think of this in terms of two interconnected areas of endeavour—social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. These, of course, were not alternatives to the work of expansion and consolidation, much less distractions from it: they were inherent within it. The greater the human resources a community could call on, the greater became its capacity to bring the wisdom contained in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to bear upon the challenges of the day—to translate His teachings into reality. And the troubled affairs of humankind over this period seemed to underline how desperate was its need for the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician. Implied in all this was a conception of religion very different from those holding sway in the world at large: a conception which recognized religion as the potent force propelling an ever-advancing civilization. It was understood that such a civilization would also not appear spontaneously, of its own accord—it was the mission of Bahá'u'lláh's followers to labour for its emergence. Such a mission demanded applying the same process of systematic learning to the work of social action and engagement in public discourse.

Viewed from the perspective of the last two and a half decades, the capacity for undertaking social action has risen markedly, leading to an extraordinary efflorescence of activity. Compared with 1996, when some 250 social and economic development projects were being sustained from year to year, there are now 1,500, and the number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations has quadrupled to surpass 160. More than 70,000 grassroots social action initiatives of short duration are being undertaken each year, a fifty-fold increase. We look forward to a continued rise in all these endeavours resulting from the dedicated support and stimulus now provided by the Bahá'í International Development Organization. Meanwhile, Bahá'í participation in the prevalent discourses of society has also grown immensely. Besides the many occasions when the friends find they can offer a Bahá'í perspective in conversations that occur in a work or personal context, more formal participation in discourses has significantly advanced. We have in mind not only the much-expanded efforts and increasingly sophisticated contributions of the Bahá'í International Community—which in this period added Offices in Africa, Asia and Europe—but also the work of a vastly augmented, greatly fortified network of national Offices of External Affairs, for whom this area of endeavour became the principal focus; in addition, there were insightful and notable contributions made by individual believers to specific fields. All this goes some way towards explaining the esteem, appreciation and admiration which leaders of thought and other prominent figures at all levels of society have again and again expressed for the Faith, its followers and their activities.

In reviewing the entire twenty-five-year period, we are awed by the many kinds of progress the Bahá'í world has made concurrently. Its intellectual life has thrived, as demonstrated not only by its advances in all the areas of endeavour already discussed, but also by the volume of high-quality literature published by Bahá'í authors, by the development of spaces for the exploration of certain disciplines in the light of the teachings, and by the impact of the undergraduate and graduate seminars systematically offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, which, in collaboration with the institutions of the Cause, now serves Bahá'í youth from well over 100 countries. Efforts to raise up Houses of Worship have very visibly accelerated. The last Mother Temple was erected in Santiago, Chile, and projects to build two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs were initiated; the Houses of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia, and Norte del Cauca, Colombia, have already opened their doors. Bahá'í Temples, whether newly dedicated or long established, are increasingly occupying a position at the heart of community life. The material support offered by the rank and file of the believers for the myriad endeavours undertaken by the friends of God has been unstinting. Simply viewed as a measure of collective spiritual vitality, the generosity and sacrifice with which, at a time of considerable economic upheaval, the critical flow of funds has been maintained—nay, invigorated—is most telling. In the realm of Bahá'í administration, the capacity of National Spiritual Assemblies to manage the affairs of their communities in all their growing complexity has been considerably enhanced. They have benefited in particular from new heights of collaboration with the Counsellors, who have been instrumental in systematizing the gathering of insights from the grassroots across the world and ensuring they are widely disseminated. This was also the period in which the Regional Bahá'í Council emerged as a fully fledged institution of the Cause, and in 230 regions now, Councils and those training institutes they oversee have proved themselves indispensable for advancing the process of growth. To extend into the future the functions of the Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh was established in 2005; today it coordinates the efforts of no less than 33 National and Regional Boards of Trustees that now compass the globe, which in turn guide the work of over 1,000 Representatives. The developments which occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during this same period are many: witness the completion of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb and two buildings on the Arc and the commencement of the construction of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not to mention a host of projects to strengthen and preserve the precious Holy Places of the Faith. The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Shrine of the Báb were recognized as World Heritage sites, places of inestimable significance for humanity. The public flocked to these sacred locations in their hundreds of thousands, approaching one and a half million in some years, and the World Centre regularly welcomed hundreds of pilgrims at once, sometimes more than 5,000 in a year, along with a similar number of Bahá'í visitors; we are delighted as much by the raised numbers as by the scores of different peoples and nations represented among those who partake of the bounty of pilgrimage. The translation, publication and dissemination of the Sacred Texts has also been greatly accelerated, in parallel with the development of the Bahá'í Reference Library, one of the most notable members of the growing family of websites associated with Bahai.org, which itself is now available in ten languages. A variety of offices and agencies have been established, situated at the World Centre and elsewhere, charged with supporting the process of learning unfolding across multiple areas of endeavour throughout the Bahá'í world. All this, our sisters and brothers in faith, is but a fraction of the tale we could recount of what your devotion to Him Who was the Wronged One of the World has brought forth. We can but echo the poignant words once voiced by the beloved Master when, overcome with emotion, He cried out: “O Bahá'u'lláh! What hast Thou done?”

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From the panorama of a pivotal quarter century, we now direct our focus to the most recent Five Year Plan, a Plan quite unlike any that has gone before in a variety of ways. In this Plan we urged the Bahá'ís of the world to draw on all that they had learned in the previous twenty years and put it to full effect. We are delighted that our hopes in this regard were more than met, but while we would naturally expect great things from the followers of the Blessed Beauty, the character of what was achieved through their herculean efforts was truly breathtaking. It was the capstone to an accomplishment twenty-five years in the making.

The Plan was especially memorable for being trisected by two sacred bicentenaries, each of which galvanized local communities the world over. The company of the faithful demonstrated, on a scale never previously witnessed and with relative ease, a capacity to engage people from all sections of society in honouring the life of a Manifestation of God. It was a powerful indicator of something broader: the ability to channel the release of tremendous spiritual energies for the advancement of the Cause. So magnificent was the response that in many places the Faith was propelled out of obscurity at the national level. In settings where it was unexpected, perhaps unlooked for, marked receptivity to the Faith became apparent. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands were transported by their encounter with a devotional spirit that is today characteristic of Bahá'í communities everywhere. The vision of what is made possible by observing a Bahá'í Holy Day was immeasurably expanded.

The achievements of the Plan, simply in numerical terms, quickly eclipsed those of all the Plans that had preceded it since 1996. At the start of this Plan, the capacity existed for conducting just over 100,000 core activities at a given time, a capacity that was the fruit of twenty years of common endeavour. Now, 300,000 core activities are being sustained at once. Participation in those activities has risen above two million, which is also close to a threefold increase. There are 329 national and regional training institutes in operation, and their capacity is evidenced by the fact that three-quarters of a million people have been enabled to complete at least one book of the sequence; overall, the number of courses completed by individuals is now also two million—a rise of well over a third in five years.

The increased intensity with which programmes of growth around the world are being pursued tells an impressive story of its own. In this five-year span, we had called for growth to be accelerated in every one of the 5,000 clusters where it had begun. This imperative became the impetus for earnest endeavour throughout the world. As a result, the number of intensive programmes of growth more than doubled and now stands at approximately 4,000. Difficulties involved in opening up new villages and neighbourhoods to the Faith in the midst of a global health crisis, or expanding activities that were at an early stage when the pandemic began, prevented an even higher total from being reached during the Plan's final year. However, there is more to tell than this. At the outset of the Plan, we had expressed the hope that the number of clusters where the friends had passed the third milestone along a continuum of growth, as a consequence of learning how to welcome large numbers into the embrace of their activities, would grow by hundreds more. That total then stood at around 200, spread across some 40 countries. Five years on, this number has risen to an astonishing 1,000 in nearly 100 countries—a quarter of all the intensive programmes of growth in the world and an achievement far surpassing our expectations. And yet even these figures do not reveal the loftiest heights to which the community has soared. There are over 30 clusters where the number of core activities being sustained exceeds 1,000; in places, the total is several thousand,

involving the participation of more than 20,000 people in a single cluster. A growing number of Local Spiritual Assemblies now oversee the unfoldment of educational programmes that cater to practically all the children and junior youth in a village; the same reality is beginning to emerge within a few urban neighbourhoods. Engagement with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has, in notable instances, transcended individuals, families and extended kinships—what is being witnessed is the movement of populations towards a common centre. At times, age-old hostilities between opposing groups are being left behind, and certain social structures and dynamics are being transformed in the light of the divine teachings.

We cannot but be overjoyed at advances so impressive. The society-building power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is being manifested with ever more clarity, and this is a firm foundation upon which the coming Nine Year Plan will build. Clusters of marked strength, as had been hoped, have proven to be reservoirs of knowledge and resources for their neighbours. And regions where more than one such cluster exist have more easily developed the means to accelerate growth in cluster after cluster. We feel compelled to stress again, however, that progress has been near universal; the difference in progress between one place and another is of degree. The community's collective understanding of the process of entry by troops and its confidence in being able to stimulate this process under any set of circumstances have risen to levels that were unimaginable in decades past. The profound questions that had loomed for so long, and which were brought into sharp focus in 1996, have been convincingly answered by the Bahá'í world. There is a generation of believers whose entire lives bear the imprint of the community's progress. But the sheer scale of what has occurred in those many clusters where the frontiers of learning are being extended has turned a significant advance in the process of entry by troops into a momentous one of historic proportions.

Many will be familiar with how the Guardian divided the Ages of the Faith into consecutive epochs; the fifth epoch of the Formative Age began in 2001. Less well known is that the Guardian also made specific reference to there being epochs of the Divine Plan, and stages within those epochs. Held in abeyance for two decades while local and national organs of the Administrative Order were being raised up and strengthened, the Divine Plan conceived by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was formally inaugurated in 1937 with the commencement of the first stage of its first epoch: the Seven Year Plan assigned by the Guardian to the North American Bahá'í community. This first epoch closed after the conclusion of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963, which had resulted in the banner of the Faith being planted across the world. The opening stage of the second epoch was the first Nine Year Plan, and no less than ten Plans have followed in its wake, Plans that have ranged in duration from twelve months to seven years. At the dawn of this second epoch, the Bahá'í world was already witnessing the earliest beginnings of that entry into the Faith by troops that had been foreseen by the Author of the Divine Plan; in the succeeding decades, generations of devoted believers within the community of the Greatest Name have laboured in the Divine Vineyard to cultivate the conditions required for sustained, large-scale growth. And at this glorious season of Riḍván, how abundant are the fruits of those labours! The phenomenon of sizeable numbers swelling the activities of the community, catching the spark of faith and swiftly arising to serve at the leading edge of the Plan has moved from being a forecast sustained by faith to a recurring reality. Such a pronounced and demonstrable advance demands to be marked in the annals of the Cause. With elated hearts, we announce that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan has begun. Stage by stage, epoch after epoch shall His Plan unfold, until the light of the Kingdom illumines every heart.

Beloved friends, no review of the five-year enterprise that concluded the second epoch of the Divine Plan would be complete without special reference to the upheavals that accompanied its final year and which persist still. The restrictions on personal interaction that waxed and waned in most countries over this period could have dealt the community's collective efforts a severe blow, recovery from which might have taken years, but there are two reasons why this was not the case. One was the widespread consciousness of the duty of Bahá'ís to serve humanity, never more so than in times of peril and adversity. The other was the extraordinary rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world to give expression to that consciousness. Accustomed over many years to adopting patterns of systematic action, the friends brought their creativity and sense of purpose to bear on an unforeseen crisis, while ensuring that the new approaches they developed were coherent with the framework they had laboured in successive Plans to perfect. This is not to overlook the serious hardships being endured by Bahá'ís, like their compatriots in every land; yet throughout severe difficulties, the believers have remained focused. Resources have been channelled to communities in need, elections went ahead wherever possible, and in all circumstances the institutions of the Cause have continued to discharge their duties. There have even been bold steps forward. The National Spiritual Assembly of São Tomé and Príncipe will be re-established this Riḍván, and two new pillars of the Universal House of Justice will be raised up: the National Spiritual Assembly of Croatia, with its seat in Zagreb, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Timor-Leste, with its seat in Dili.

And so the One Year Plan begins. Its purpose and requirements have already been set out in our message sent on the Day of the Covenant; this Plan, though brief, will suffice to prepare the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan that is to follow. A period of special potency, which opened one hundred years after the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, will soon close with the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, marking the conclusion of the first century of the Formative Age and the start of the second. The company of the faithful enter this new Plan at a time when humanity, chastened by the exposure of its vulnerability, seems more conscious of the need for collaboration to address global challenges. Yet, lingering habits of contest, self-interest, prejudice and closed-mindedness continue to hinder the movement towards unity, despite growing numbers in society who are showing in words and deeds how they, too, yearn for greater acceptance of humanity's inherent oneness. We pray that the family of nations may succeed in putting aside its differences in the interests of the common good. Notwithstanding the uncertainties that shroud the months ahead, we entreat Bahá'u'lláh to make the confirmations that have sustained His followers for so long more abundant still, that you may be carried forward in your mission, your composure undisturbed by the turbulence of a world whose need for His healing message is ever more acute.

The Divine Plan enters a new epoch and a new stage. The page is turned.

*The Universal House of Justice*