

# Messages from the Universal House of Justice

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# To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

*Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, providing the details of the Five Year Plan, 29 December 2015:*

Dearly loved Friends,

The Plan upon which the Bahá'í world embarked nearly five years ago is in its closing stages; the final tally of its accomplishments grows still, but will soon be sealed. The collective effort it inspired has called for wholehearted reliance on those powers with which a benevolent Lord has endowed His loved ones. Gathered with you at this moment of reflection, we are conscious of a determination among the friends to bring the current Plan to a fitting conclusion, and of an eagerness to advance further along the path that experience has marked out.

The considerable distance already travelled along that path is evident from the present Plan's most striking outcomes. The ambitious goal of raising to 5,000 the number of clusters where a programme of growth, at whatever level of intensity, is under way looks set to be achieved in the months that remain before Ridván 2016. In many scores of clusters, there are over a thousand inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—taking part in a well-established pattern of activity that embraces ever-larger numbers, raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Worldwide, half a million individuals have now been enabled to complete at least the first book in the sequence of courses, an extraordinary feat that has laid a sure foundation for the system of human resource development. A generation of youth is being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world. Marvelling at what they have seen, leaders of society in certain places are pressing the Bahá'ís to make their programmes for educating the young widely available. Faced with increasing complexity, Bahá'í institutions and their agencies are finding ways to organize the activities of rising numbers of friends by promoting collaboration and mutual support. And the capacity for learning, which represented such a priceless legacy of previous Plans, is being extended beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass other

areas of Bahá'í endeavour, notably social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. We see a community fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unremitting effort focused on a common aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

That this process must go much further, there can be no doubt; nevertheless, developments demonstrate that a significant advance has already occurred. It has prepared the friends of God for a more exacting test of their capabilities, one that will also make great demands of your institution as you rally them to meet its requirements. In this coming Plan, which will conclude at the threshold of the second century of the Formative Age of the Faith, we will call the believers everywhere to the immense exertion necessary to bring to fruition the seeds that have been so lovingly and assiduously sown and watered in the five Plans that preceded it.

## *The emergence of a programme of growth*

The unfoldment of the process of growth in a cluster, while naturally possessing unique features in every instance shaped by the receptivity of those who are exposed to the divine teachings, conforms to certain shared characteristics. Many of these were discussed in our message to your 2010 conference, in which reference was made to a series of milestones that mark progress along a path of development. A collective understanding of what is required for the friends in a cluster to pass the first of the milestones we described, and then the second, has grown over this period.

In the Five Year Plan now ending, the task facing the believers has been to apply all that had been learned from previous Plans to the work of extending the process of growth to thousands of new clusters. What this has shown is that much depends on the ability of the institutions to draw on help from friends in other clusters, reinforcing

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the actions of an existing Bahá'í community by, for example, arranging the support of visiting teaching teams or tutors. In many places, the institute process begins with the assistance of believers from stronger neighbouring communities who find creative ways of reaching out to the local population, youth in particular, and supporting them as they start to engage in service. Efforts to stimulate activity in a cluster, especially one that has not yet been opened to the Faith, are greatly enhanced if one or more individuals settle there as homefront pioneers, concentrating their attention on part of a village or even a single street where there is heightened receptivity. Well over 4,500 believers have already arisen to serve in this way during the present Plan, an astonishing accomplishment.

Whatever the combination of strategies used, the chief aim is to initiate a process for building capacity within the cluster through which its inhabitants, prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, are enabled to begin offering acts of service. Once this fundamental requirement is met, a programme of growth has emerged. Essential, of course, is the support of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, whose close involvement from the first stirrings of activity helps the friends to maintain a clear and united vision of what is needed.

### *Strengthening the pattern of action*

Before long, there forms a nucleus of friends in a cluster who are working and consulting together and arranging activities. For the process of growth to advance further, the number of people sharing this commitment must rise, and their capacity for undertaking systematic action within the framework of the Plan must correspondingly increase. And similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place.

Foremost among these conditions is an institute process gaining in strength, given its centrality to fostering the movement of populations. The friends who have begun studying institute materials, and are also investing their energies in organizing children's classes, junior youth groups, gatherings for collective worship, or other related activities, are being assisted to proceed further through the sequence of courses, while the number of those starting their study

continues to rise. With the flow of participants through institute courses and into the field of action being maintained, the company of those who are sustaining the growth process expands. Progress relies to a large extent on the quality of the efforts of those serving as tutors. At this early stage, most of them might still be drawn from other clusters, but at the same time, a few local friends are being raised up who, as their capacity for action increases, begin to help others study the materials of the institute. Efforts to usher in the first cadre of tutors from the cluster should steer a path between two undesirable outcomes. If individuals proceed through the courses of the institute too hastily, the capacity to serve is not sufficiently developed; conversely, if study is overly prolonged, the process is robbed of the dynamism essential to its advancement. In differing circumstances, creative solutions have been used to achieve the necessary balance, ensuring that, within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors.

Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with some experience increases consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time. Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path.

Where the institute is concerned, the flow of participants through its courses creates a growing need for them to be systematically supported as they begin serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors. Opportunities naturally arise for those among the core of believers who have already gained a measure of experience in the educational activities to assist those who are newer to them. An individual's readiness to help others move forward in their efforts to serve might lead to specific responsibilities

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being assigned to him or her. In this manner, coordinators of each of the three stages of the educational process gradually emerge as needs demand. Their actions are always motivated by a desire to see capacity develop in others and to foster friendships founded on cooperation and reciprocity.

Clearly, the institute process raises capacity for a broad range of undertakings; from the earliest courses, participants are encouraged to visit their friends at their homes and study a prayer together or share with them a theme from the Bahá'í teachings. Arrangements for supporting the friends in these endeavours, which may have been largely informal, eventually prove inadequate, signalling the need for an Area Teaching Committee to appear. Its principal focus is the mobilization of individuals, often through the formation of teams, for the continued spread of the pattern of activity in a cluster. Its members come to see everyone as a potential collaborator in a collective enterprise, and they appreciate their own part in nurturing a spirit of common purpose in the community. With a Committee in place, the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for worship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably. You will need to encourage National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, as much as training institutes, to remain alert to when conditions in a cluster call for organizational arrangements to assume a definite shape—neither acting prematurely nor unduly delaying the appearance of formal structures.

Just like individuals, the agencies emerging in a cluster need assistance as they take up their duties. The help that Auxiliary Board members provide in this regard is essential, but it is also an important responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils or, where no Council exists, of the National Spiritual Assembly itself, and it is a pressing concern for training institutes as well. The capacity to serve ably at the cluster level increases when spaces are created in which the believers involved can study guidance, reflect on their actions in its light and draw insights therefrom, and also become connected with the wider body of knowledge being generated in surrounding clusters and further afield. Instead of formulating plans in the abstract, consultations conducted in such spaces often aim at capturing the reality of the cluster at that particular moment and identifying the

immediate next steps to facilitate progress. Those serving at the regional or national level may do much to advise the friends and expand their vision of what can be accomplished, but they would not seek to impose their own expectations on the planning process; rather, they are helping the believers who are labouring in a cluster to gradually enhance their ability to devise and implement a course of action informed by the experience accumulating at the grassroots of the community and familiarity with actual conditions. In order to develop the capacity of cluster agencies to learn and to act systematically, regional and national institutions need to be conscientious and methodical in their own efforts to assist them. Your auxiliaries' support for this work will ensure that each element of the growth process attains the requisite characteristics and that the integrity and coherence of all the endeavours are maintained.

The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated.

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated

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discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. What is clear, then, is that as the institute process in a cluster gains momentum, the act of teaching comes to assume greater prominence in the lives of the friends.

As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes. The actions undertaken during this phase allow abilities developed through studying the relevant institute materials to be exercised and refined. As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause. The approach of working in teams allows the friends to serve together, offer mutual support, and build confidence—but even when carrying out actions individually, they are coordinating their efforts to greater effect. Their focus and investment of time endow this short but decisive phase of the cycle with the intensity it demands.

This spirit of high resolve serves to multiply the community's powers, and in each cycle the friends learn to depend more and more on the potent confirmations from the divine realm that their actions attract.

Five years ago, most of the clusters where an intensive programme of growth had been established were those where a reasonable number of Bahá'ís already lived, often geographically spread out. Efforts on the part of those believers to advance the work by inviting the participation of friends, co-workers, extended family, and acquaintances did much to raise the level of activity throughout the cluster. Indeed, widening the circle of participation in this way has become a familiar aspect of Bahá'í life and remains essential. At the same time, experience indicates that, for growth to accelerate through a steady flow of new participants entering the institute process, more is required. The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible.

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit

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them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. Over time, the cluster as a whole and its centres of intense activity will infuse one another with the heightened understanding that comes from efforts to apply the teachings in different contexts.

As the friends in a cluster continue to reinforce and expand the community-building activities taking shape around them, it becomes evident that distinctive progress has been made. All the elements of a system necessary for growth to be sustained are now in place. Reaching the second milestone along the continuum of development, which we described to you five years ago, is accompanied by advances qualitative, but also quantitative—such as a rise in the number of those involved in conversations that enable receptivity to be discovered and nurtured, in how many homes are being visited, in core activities and participation, in how many individuals are beginning the sequence of courses or supporting others as they gain the confidence to serve. Attendance at gatherings to mark the Nineteen Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Days is being fostered by Local Spiritual Assemblies. Such advances are the more visible signs of a much finer development: the gradual spread, within a population, of a pattern of community life based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And, naturally, the number of believers grows.

In the last five years, the path that leads to the emergence of an intensive programme of growth has become more readily discernible. It must be earnestly pursued. In the Plan that will commence this Riḍván, we are calling for growth to be accelerated in all clusters where it has begun. Notwithstanding the natural ebb and flow characteristic of an organic process, there should appear a clear arc of progress over the course of twenty cycles. This combined effort should seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Riḍván 2021.

We set this objective before the Bahá'í world conscious that it is truly formidable; that a herculean labour will be required; that many sacrifices will have to be made. But faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá'u'lláh's elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers. God willing, their exertions will prove worthy to crown a hundred years of toil and set the stage for exploits as yet unimagined that must adorn the second century of the Formative Age.

In the coming months, you will be initiating consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies to assess with them the implications that this global goal holds for their respective communities, a process of consultation which has to be quickly extended until it reaches the grassroots. Action must then ensue. We anticipate that progress will be more swiftly achieved in regions where one or more intensive programmes of growth have been sustained for some time, as these offer a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources as efforts are made to strengthen surrounding areas. Pursuit of this goal will also result in the emergence of new programmes of growth, often in unopened clusters that neighbour those where a significant advance has occurred. Such a flow of assistance finds its origin in the imperatives laid out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

### *Embracing large numbers and managing complexity*

Whereas, when a programme of growth is nascent in a cluster, there might be a handful of individuals who are involved in its promotion and those who are participating might come from only several households, by the time a programme has become intensive, these figures, as one would expect, have grown: perhaps tens of individuals active in the work of expansion and consolidation, while those participating might well surpass a hundred. But being able to reach out to large numbers—mobilizing a hundred people or more, whose service connects them with many hundreds or even thousands—requires the capacity to adapt to a substantial increase in complexity.

As the growth process continues to gain intensity, the friends' efforts to engage in

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meaningful conversations bring them into many social spaces, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the teachings and consider seriously the contribution they can make to the betterment of society. In addition, more and more homes are provided as venues for community-building activities, making each a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance. The institute process comes to be supported by a growing number of friends serving capably as tutors who, cycle after cycle, offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity. Thus, human resource development proceeds with minimal interruption and generates a constantly expanding pool of workers. While it continues to draw on a diverse range of the cluster's inhabitants, those taking its courses in the greatest numbers are often the youth. The transformative effect of studying the Word of God is experienced by the many whose lives are touched in some way by the community's activities. And as the flow of people beginning a path of service swells, considerable progress is made in all aspects of the community-building efforts of the friends. Animators of junior youth groups and teachers of children's classes multiply in number, fuelling an expansion of these two vital programmes. Children are enabled to move from one grade of the classes to another, while groups of junior youth progress from year to year and ground their learning in service to society. Cluster agencies, bolstered by the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies, encourage and foster the natural passage of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next. An educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers, is now firmly rooted within the cluster.

This kind of progress requires the concerted efforts of the friends wherever in the cluster they reside. Nevertheless, experience in the present Plan demonstrates that a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages—places where the convergence of spiritual forces is effecting rapid change within a body of people—to the point where they can sustain intense activity. A core of individuals from within each is assuming responsibility for the process of building capacity in its inhabitants. A broader cross section of the population is

being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. The friends in such locations help the cluster agencies extend the growth process to different parts of the cluster, for they are eager to introduce others to the vision of transformation they have themselves already glimpsed.

In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics involved when a population of this kind embraces the Faith and is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

As growth in the cluster advances further, greater demands are being placed on the organizational scheme of the training institute. Additional coordinators are now required, some of whom might focus their efforts on a particular part of the cluster. However, this need not result in another layer of administration. Much can be achieved through collaboration, as coordinators start to work together in teams,



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sometimes drawing on the help of other capable individuals. The ongoing interactions and exchange of experience within these teams constantly enriches understanding and increases the efficacy of their service. The coordinators are also discovering that their efforts can be much enhanced if the friends serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors who live in close proximity to one another are able to meet in small groups, in the settings where they serve, and assist each other.

Meanwhile, the Area Teaching Committee is rising to a new level of functioning. It is engaged in a more thorough reading of circumstances in the whole cluster: on the one hand, accurately assessing the capacities of the community and the effects being produced by sustained growth, and on the other, understanding the implications of various social realities for community building in the long term. In the plans it makes each cycle, the Committee relies heavily on those shouldering the greatest share of the work of expansion and consolidation, but given that the number of those connected in some way with the pattern of activity is now large, a variety of questions become more pressing: how to mobilize the entire company of believers in support of teaching goals; how to organize systematic home visits to the friends who would benefit from deepening and discussions that connect them with the community; how to strengthen spiritual bonds with the parents of children and junior youth; how to build on the interest of those who have shown goodwill towards the Faith but have yet to take part in its activities. Promoting the widespread holding of devotional meetings is another concern, so that hundreds of people, eventually thousands, are engaged in worship in the company of their households and their neighbours. Ultimately, of course, the Committee looks to continually extend the reach of the community's endeavours so that more and more souls become acquainted with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analysing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members. These complexities also require increasingly close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is

enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality. The Assembly is also attentive to the need for new believers to be nurtured sensitively, considering when and how various dimensions of community life are to be introduced to them. By encouraging their involvement in institute courses, it aims to ensure that from the very beginning they regard themselves as protagonists in a noble endeavour to build the world anew. It sees to it that gatherings for the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day commemorations, and Bahá'í elections become opportunities to reinforce the high ideals of the community, strengthen its shared sense of commitment, and fortify its spiritual character. As numbers in the community grow larger, the Assembly gives thought to when it could be beneficial to decentralize such meetings so as to facilitate ever-greater participation on these important occasions.

A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity. The cluster-wide reflection meeting, at which so much of this learning is presented, is often complemented by meetings for smaller areas, which generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending. This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent from cycle to cycle—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their spiritual development over generations to come. And as they do so, the support they receive from regional and national Bahá'í institutions and their agencies is experienced as an unceasing flow of love.

A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of

the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

For the movement of a population to have come this far demonstrates that the process which brought it about is strong enough to achieve and sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed. This is another milestone for the friends to pass, the third in succession since the process of growth in a cluster was begun. It denotes the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation. This has already come about in around two hundred clusters, covering a range of socio-economic circumstances, and we anticipate that, by the conclusion of the coming Plan, it will be observable in several

hundred more. It is a future to which the friends labouring in thousands of clusters elsewhere can aspire.

In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived. Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

We recognize that developments like these are yet a distant prospect for many, even in clusters where the pattern of activity embraces large numbers. But in some places, this is the work of the moment. In such clusters, while the friends continue to be occupied with sustaining the process of growth, other dimensions of Bahá'í endeavour claim an increasing share of their attention. They are seeking to understand how a flourishing local population can transform the society of which it is an integral part. This will be a new frontier of learning for the foreseeable future, where insights will be generated that will ultimately benefit the whole Bahá'í world.

### *Releasing the potential of the youth*

The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan. If any proof were needed of the extraordinary potential that the youth possess, it has been incontrovertibly delivered. In the wake

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of the youth conferences convened in 2013, the surge of energy which was imparted to the work being carried out in clusters demonstrates clearly how the community of the Greatest Name is able to give shape to the highest aspirations of young people. How pleased we are to see that, following the participation of more than 80,000 youth in these conferences, an additional cohort of over 100,000 have joined them in taking part in numerous encounters held since then. Measures to encourage the full engagement of these growing contingents in the activities of the community must constitute a major component of the new Plan.

The enthusiastic participation of the youth also highlighted the fact that they represent a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out. What has been learned in this regard is how to help young people become aware of the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society. As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way. Conversations along these lines kindle interest in how the physical and spiritual powers available to them at this time of life can be channelled towards providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations. Special gatherings for youth, now occurring more frequently at the level of the cluster and even the neighbourhood or village, have proved to be ideal occasions for bringing an intensity to this ongoing conversation, and they are an increasingly common feature of cycles of activity in many clusters.

Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of “doing”, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of “being”, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life. And so it is that, having been introduced to the vision of the Faith for humanity and the exalted character of its mission, the youth naturally feel a desire to be of service, a desire to which training institutes swiftly respond. Indeed, releasing the capacity of the youth is, for each training institute, a sacred charge. Yet fostering that capacity as it

develops is a responsibility of every institution of the Cause. The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another’s efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

As youth advance along the path of service, their endeavours are integrated seamlessly into the activities of the cluster, and as a consequence, the entire community thrives as a cohesive whole. Reaching out to the families of young people is a natural way of strengthening community building. Institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth. With a greater awareness of this age group’s circumstances and dynamics, they are able to plan accordingly—for instance, providing opportunities for youth to study courses intensively, perhaps immediately upon the conclusion of a youth gathering. The infusion of energy from a vibrant band of youth allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.

While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on

their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá'u'lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother’s milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus. We rely on you and your auxiliaries to ensure that the spiritual and material prospects of the youth are given due weight in the deliberations of families, communities, agencies, and institutions.

### *Enhancing institutional capacity*

The demands of the present Plan—establishing thousands of new programmes of growth and fortifying existing ones—required from national and regional institutions, as well as yourselves, a feat of strength and coordination. Meeting them was made possible through a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan’s three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions. This spirit was the prerequisite for every important undertaking, including special initiatives to settle pioneers in selected countries and, of course, the organization of 114

youth conferences. A prevalent attitude of joyful service, flexibility, and detachment from personal preferences lent even routine administrative activities a sacred quality. The fresh demands of the coming Plan will, undoubtedly, test the capacity of Bahá'í institutions further still, but no matter what, they will surely preserve this unified spirit among all who work together.

As indicated earlier, the movement of clusters along a continuum depends on there being a commitment from the institutions to guide and support cluster agencies and provide resources as necessary. This work is a critical responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils and regional training institutes. The number of Councils in the world rose from 170 to 203 in the last five years, reflecting the growing need and the rising capacity for work to be undertaken at this level, and in some countries where Councils are yet to be formed, specific steps were taken to build experience in anticipation of their emergence, such as the appointment of regional teams. In some regions that stretch across a large territory, Councils have made arrangements for nurturing the development of groups of adjoining clusters. Meanwhile, in smaller countries that do not require the establishment of Regional Councils, National Assemblies are increasingly giving thought to ways of helping clusters advance, in some instances by forming a working group charged with this task; you are encouraged to stimulate learning in this area, with the aim that, in due course, formal structures can be defined that would assume this responsibility in much the same way that Councils do in other countries. And, as is the case with Councils, we envisage that any such structure which emerges at the national level will benefit from interaction with the institution of the Counsellors.

To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee. Timely access to information about the movement of clusters and the work of the institute in their jurisdictions is required for institutions to support their agencies and take the many decisions that concern, for instance, the deployment of pioneers, the allocation of funds, the creation and promotion of Bahá'í literature, and the planning of institutional meetings; it allows them to accurately read the reality of their communities and act on the basis

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of clearly understood needs when marshalling the energies of the friends towards meeting the exigencies of the hour. At various intervals a National Assembly, in consultation with you, may find it advisable to formally adopt and disseminate certain aspects of the lessons that have been learned, especially in relation to organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

Of course, a National Spiritual Assembly ultimately has responsibility for fostering all aspects of a Bahá'í community's development. Although it pursues various lines of action itself, in many cases it fulfils this responsibility by ensuring that Regional Councils or specialized agencies are able to take steps to advance areas of endeavour entrusted to them. As the capacity of the friends increases and the size of a community grows, the work of a National Assembly in its manifold dimensions becomes commensurately more complex. Therefore, and in view of the magnitude of the task before the institutions in the coming Plan, National Assemblies—as well as Councils—will benefit from periodically considering, in collaboration with you, whether their administrative operations, and indeed elements of their own functioning, could be adjusted or enhanced in ways that would better support the growth process.

Attaining a higher level of functioning is similarly a pressing concern of training institutes. The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising. While it is important that institutes attend to day-to-day operational matters, the scale of what must be accomplished requires that they also become

occupied with considerations of strategy. Training institute boards need to maintain an ongoing consultation with national or regional coordinators, as well as with Auxiliary Board members, about how an activity in a cluster gains strength, how it can be adequately resourced, what approaches prove effective in different settings, and how experience can be shared. We have in mind a systematic and concentrated effort by this collaborative group to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Addressing other dimensions of the institute's work—such as schemes of coordination at the cluster level, enhancing the capacity of coordinators, and the management of statistics and finances—will be essential too. In your work with training institutes, you will no doubt wish to arrange that they draw on the experience of other institutes in the same part of the world. Sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme also offer a rich source of insight for the institutes of nearby countries or regions.

As institutions and agencies seek to accelerate the processes of expansion and consolidation in every land, the question of financial resources will surely claim increased attention. Indeed, an important aspect of enhancing institutional capacity over the coming years will be the ongoing development of local and national Funds. For this to occur, the generality of the friends must be invited to consider afresh the responsibility of all believers to support the work of the Faith through their own means and, further, to manage their financial affairs in the light of the teachings.

The future civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh is a prosperous one, in which the vast resources of the world will be directed towards humanity's elevation and regeneration, not its debasement and destruction. The act of contributing to the Fund, then, is imbued with profound meaning: it is a practical way of hastening the advent of that civilization, and a necessary one, for as Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained, "He Who is the Eternal Truth—exalted be His glory—hath made the fulfilment of every undertaking on earth dependent on material means." Bahá'ís conduct their lives in the midst of a society acutely disordered in its material affairs. The process of community building they are

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advancing in their clusters cultivates a set of attitudes towards wealth and possessions very different from those holding sway in the world. The habit of regularly giving to the Funds of the Faith—including in-kind contributions particularly in certain places—arises from and reinforces a sense of personal concern for the welfare of the community and the progress of the Cause. The duty to contribute, just like the duty to teach, is a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í identity which strengthens faith. The sacrificial and generous contributions of the individual believer, the collective consciousness promoted by the community of the needs of the Fund, and the careful stewardship of financial resources exercised by the institutions of the Faith can be regarded as expressions of the love that binds these three actors more closely together. And ultimately, voluntary giving fosters an awareness that managing one's financial affairs in accordance with spiritual principles is an indispensable dimension of a life lived coherently. It is a matter of conscience, a way in which commitment to the betterment of the world is translated into practice.

We direct these statements to you in recognition of the unique responsibility that you, your deputies, and their assistants shoulder in helping the friends to advance their understanding in numerous areas, not least, of course, with respect to the dynamics of growth. As we have previously indicated, in the institution of the Counsellors the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part. As a progressively deeper understanding of the Five Year Plan emerges among the believers over time, insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared. In this regard, an immense debt of gratitude is owed by the community of the Greatest Name to the International Teaching Centre, which has done so much in recent years, and with such diligence, to lovingly nurture and energetically promulgate a mode of learning that has now become well established.

The essential elements of the coming Plan, like those that came before it, are straightforward. Nevertheless, a profound understanding of its various facets requires an appreciation of the sophisticated set of operations through which

a cluster develops. We rely on your institution being so familiar with the relevant guidance that the friends in general, and institutions and their agencies in particular, can depend on you to illuminate their deliberations by calling attention to pertinent considerations. Clearly, however, the need to assist the friends in at least 5,000 clusters where the pattern of action is being intensified will be a considerable challenge, one with implications for your own mode of functioning—but more especially for that of Auxiliary Board members. Clusters that are in the front ranks of the growth process in their areas will inevitably claim a large share of their time; also, administrative arrangements at the regional level will more frequently require their support. They are concerned with much of what occurs in the community; attentive both to the development of each stage of the educational process and to the strengthening of the cycles of activity, they promote coherence among the lines of action being advanced in a cluster and fan into flame a passion for teaching. In the exercise of their responsibility to foster learning and to help the friends enter the arena of service, they draw heavily on the training institute, aspects of whose work align closely with theirs. But their other duties are equally demanding. As such, they will need to consider how, in order to fulfil those wide-ranging responsibilities, they can draw on the help of their assistants more extensively and more creatively. Assistants, of course, may be assigned any task—simple or complex, general or highly specific—and this versatility constitutes a distinctive strength. While some assistants might be occupied with the development of a local community, others might be given tasks that relate to an entire cluster. By properly orienting them, guiding them as capacity expands, and gradually increasing their duties, Auxiliary Board members will be able to better exploit the possibilities that exist. Much is sure to be learned as a result, and you are encouraged to derive insights from the experience of your auxiliaries.

### *A period of special potency*

The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by

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side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. By convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is evoked in any locality. The enhancement of the devotional character of a community also has an effect on the Nineteen Day Feast and can be felt at other times when the friends come together.

Holy Day commemorations hold a special position in this regard. The Tablets recited, and the prayers, stories, songs, and sentiments voiced—all of them expressions of love for those sacred Figures Whose lives and missions are being remembered—stir the heart and fill the soul with awe and wonder. During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá'ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation, a Manifestation of God, was born to the world. Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá'í identity.

Over the coming years, the community will, in fact, encounter a series of anniversaries, concluding with the Centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in November 2021, which will close the first century of the Formative Age. Next year the Bahá'í world will mark one hundred years since the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan flowed from the pen of the Master. In these fourteen Tablets, revealed during one

of humanity's darkest hours, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching work that defined its theatre of action as the entire planet. Held in abeyance until 1937, when the first in a succession of Plans launched at the instigation of the Guardian was assigned to the Bahá'ís of North America, the Divine Plan has continued to unfold over the decades since as the collective capacity of Bahá'u'lláh's followers has grown, enabling them to take on ever-greater challenges. How wondrous the vision of the Plan's Author! Placing before the friends the prospect of a day when the light of His Father's Revelation would illuminate every corner of the world. He set out not only strategies for achieving this feat but guiding principles and unchanging spiritual requisites. Every effort made by the friends to systematically propagate the divine teachings traces its origins to the forces set in motion in the Divine Plan.

The coming global endeavour to which the friends will be summoned calls for the application of proven strategies, systematic action, informed analysis, and keen insight. Yet above all, it is a spiritual enterprise, and its true character should never be obscured. The urgency to act is impelled by the world's desperate condition. All that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have learned in the last twenty years must culminate in the accomplishments of the next five. The scale of what is being asked of them brings to mind one of His Tablets in which He describes, in striking terms, the challenge entailed in spreading His Cause:

How many the lands that remained untilled and uncultivated; and how many the lands that were tilled and cultivated, and yet remained without water; and how many the lands which, when the harvest time arrived, no harvester came forth to reap! However, through the wonders of God's favour and the revelations of His loving-kindness. We cherish the hope that souls may appear who are the embodiments of heavenly virtue and who will occupy themselves with teaching the Cause of God and training all that dwell on earth.

The systematic efforts of His loved ones throughout the world aim at the fulfilment of the hope thus expressed by the Blessed Perfection. May He Himself reinforce them at every turn.

The Universal House of Justice

# To the Bahá'ís of the World

*Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World regarding the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 2 January 2016:*

Dearly loved Friends,

We address you these words from the gathering where, for five successive days, the Continental Counsellors have earnestly considered the implications of the next global Plan. Their insightful consultations drew on the impressive body of knowledge about the process of capacity building that is being generated in thousands of clusters worldwide. The numerous accounts that were shared in the course of the Conference attested the creativity, tenacity, and burgeoning abilities of the community of the Greatest Name and, above all, its reliance on the confirmations of the Almighty. There is a growing appreciation among people in all parts of the world of the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's remedy for healing the maladies of society.

Before the first century of the Formative Age concludes, there lies a span of time that stretches between two anniversaries associated with documents of measureless significance. It begins with the centenary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, just as the friends are embarking on a new stage in the unfoldment of that Plan. It ends at the lapse of one hundred years since the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was followed by the opening of the Master's Will and Testament. With these thoughts in mind, and in preparation for their deliberations, the Continental Counsellors, led by the members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre, visited the House of the Master—the place where three of the Tablets of the Divine Plan had been revealed and where, a few weeks after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, His Will and Testament had been read aloud to believers from four continents. In that sacred House, on the eve of the present Conference, passages were recited from those two Charters which, Shoghi Effendi explained, set in motion processes for the propagation of the Faith and the establishment of its Administrative Order. This was a fitting prologue to five days of consultation focused on diffusing more widely the light of Bahá'u'lláh and strengthening the ability of His institutions to act as channels through which His promised blessings may flow to humankind.

The provisions of the coming Five Year Plan are contained in the message that we addressed to the Conference on its opening day and which was at the same time distributed to all National Spiritual Assemblies. The colossal effort that will be asked from the loved ones of the Lord was clearly recognized by the Counsellors, but they also voiced their confidence in the capacity of the Bahá'í world to face this challenge. At no earlier time could such an undertaking have been seriously contemplated, but given what is being achieved in the present Plan, the realms of possibility are wider than ever before. Our hearts were moved by the reports that began to arrive, within hours of our message to the Conference being released, of the friends eagerly coming together in settings of all kinds to help one another become familiar with its contents. We hope that study of the message will spread rapidly throughout the community. Meanwhile, the institutions will be putting in place whatever administrative and organizational arrangements are necessary to ensure the most auspicious start to the Plan at Riḍván.

In the few months that remain before then, the work of the current Plan, establishing new programmes of growth in particular, will continue to be pursued. Every step taken in that direction will increase the readiness of the worldwide community to begin the next five-year enterprise. Each moment is precious. We long to see every believer choose the path of consecrated service and high endeavour to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly summoned the friends in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. In our supplications on your behalf, we will beseech the Author of that Plan to intercede before the throne of His Father that He might guide you in your service as long as there are souls in need of the bread of heaven.

The Universal House of Justice



# To the Bahá'ís of the world acting under the Mandate of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

*Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World regarding the centenary of the revelation of the first of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, 26 March 2016:*

Dearly loved Friends,

Today at dawn, on your behalf, the members of the Universal House of Justice gathered with the members of the International Teaching Centre in the Master's room at the house in Bahjí to commemorate that pivotal moment when the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Prayers from those wondrous Tablets were offered in thanksgiving for the glorious achievements of the past. Divine assistance was sought in support of the labours required in the forthcoming stage of the Plan's unfoldment. And heavenly bounties were implored to ensure still greater victories in meeting the challenges of future stages, one after another, reaching as far as the fringes of the Golden Age.

The Divine Plan, that sublime series of letters addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Bahá'ís of North America between 26 March 1916 and 8 March 1917, constitutes one of the mighty Charters of His Father's Faith. Set forth in those fourteen Tablets, Shoghi Effendi explains, is “the mightiest Plan ever generated through the creative power of the Most Great Name.” It is “impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise” and “claims as the theatre for its operation territories spread over five continents and the islands of the seven seas.” Within it are held “the seeds of the world's spiritual revival and ultimate redemption.”

In the Tablets of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only provided the broad vision necessary to carry out the responsibilities entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to His loved ones, but He also outlined spiritual concepts and practical strategies necessary for success. In His exhortations to teach and to travel to teach; to arise personally or deputize others; to move to all parts of the world and open countries and territories, each meticulously named; to learn the relevant languages and translate and disseminate the Sacred Texts; to train the teachers of the Faith and especially youth; to teach the masses and, particularly, indigenous peoples; to be firm in the Covenant

and protect the Faith; and to sow seeds and cultivate them in a process of organic growth, we find hallmarks of the entire series of Plans—each a specific stage of the Divine Plan shaped by the Head of the Faith—that will continue to unfold throughout the Formative Age.

The initial response to the Tablets of the Divine Plan was limited to the noble exploits of a few who, like the immortal Martha Root, arose independently. It was Shoghi Effendi who assisted the Bahá'ís of the world to gradually grasp the significance of this Charter and learn to approach its requirements in a systematic manner. The Plan was held in abeyance for nearly twenty years while the Administrative Order took shape, after which communities were patiently guided to conduct national plans, including the two Seven Year Plans in North America that constituted the first stages of the Divine Plan, until finally, in 1953, all could unite in the first global Plan, the Ten Year Crusade. Shoghi Effendi looked beyond that crucial decade to “the launching of worldwide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in future epochs” of the Formative Age, “by the Universal House of Justice, that will symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies.” The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet. Let every Bahá'í appreciate, more deeply than ever before, that the provisions of the next stage of the Divine Plan set forth in our recent message to the Counsellors' Conference comprise the challenging requirements of the present hour—requirements both urgent and sacred, which, when sacrificially and persistently addressed, may hasten “the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace and the unfoldment of that world civilization which is the offspring and primary purpose of that Peace.”

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How is it possible to adequately convey our feelings of irrepressible love and unbounded admiration as we reflect on the exploits of the members of your communities, past and present, in pursuit of your sacred mission? The vision that unfolds before our eyes is of a grassroots stirring, an organic flowering, a resistless movement that has grown imperceptibly at times and at others in great surges to eventually embrace the entire world: God-intoxicated lovers exceeding their personal capacities, embryonic institutions learning to exercise their powers for the well-being of humanity, communities emerging as shelters and schools in which human potential is nourished. We pay homage to the humblest ministrations and ceaseless endeavours of the Faith's devoted rank and file, as well as to the extraordinary accomplishments of its heroes, knights, and martyrs. On vast continents and scattered islands, from arctic regions to desert climes, atop mountain plateaus and across lowland plains, in crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths, you and your spiritual forebears brought the message of the Blessed Beauty to peoples and nations. You sacrificed rest and comfort and left your homes to journey to unfamiliar lands or homefront outposts. You set aside your own interests for the common good. Whatever your means, you sacrificially contributed your share of resources. You taught the Faith to multitudes, to groups

in various settings, and to individuals in your homes. You quickened souls and helped them on their own paths of service, disseminated widely the Bahá'í writings and participated in deep study of the teachings, strove for excellence in all fields, engaged diverse peoples of all strata in conversations pertaining to the search for solutions to humanity's ills, and initiated efforts for economic and social development. Though misunderstandings and problems sometimes arose, you forgave one another and marched together in serried lines. You raised the framework of the Administrative Order and clung steadfastly to the Covenant, protecting the Faith from every blow directed against it. In your ardour for the Beloved, you endured prejudice and estrangement, privation and loneliness, persecution and imprisonment. You welcomed and nurtured generations of children and youth upon whom the vitality of the Faith and future of humanity depend, and as tested veterans, you heeded the Master's admonition to serve until your last breath. You have written the story of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan on the scroll of its first century. Before you, beloved friends, lies stretched out the blank scroll of the future on which you and your spiritual descendants will inscribe fresh and lasting deeds of renunciation and heroism for the betterment of the world.

The Universal House of Justice

# To the chosen recipients of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets of the Divine Plan

*Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the United States and of Canada regarding the Tablets of the Divine Plan, 26 March 2016:*

Dearly loved Friends,

**W**e cannot allow this historic moment to pass without adding—to our message to the believers worldwide—a word to those whom the Author of the Divine Plan singled out for a sacred responsibility and whose triumphs and travails shaped much of the past century in accordance with His high expectations.

Soon after the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá determined that one of the principal objectives of His ministry would be to establish a community in North America under the banner of His Father’s Cause. He dispatched teachers, illumined pilgrims, embarked upon an unparalleled visit in His declining years, laid the cornerstone of your House of Worship, carved in fourteen Tablets addressed to you a divine mission, and “out of the abundance of His heart chose to bestow on His favored disciples, to the very last day of His life, the tokens of His unflinching solicitude.” Later, at a time when the believers in the Cradle of the Faith were hamstrung by persecution, when the light of the Faith in Europe was eclipsed by the growing spectre of another war, when the most vibrant center in central Asia was dismantled, and even the world center of the Faith itself was disrupted by a conflagration in the Holy Land, the “one chief remaining citadel,” the “mighty arm” that still raised aloft “the standard of an unconquerable Faith,” was, Shoghi Effendi observed, “none other than the blessed community of the followers of the Most Great Name in the North American continent.” He placed you—the Plan’s chief executors and its co-executors—among the vanguard of Bahá’u’lláh’s resistless legions.

It is impossible here to recount the range of your illustrious achievements during the past century. You have already accomplished that which is worthy of the gratitude and admiration of the entire Bahá’í world, but your mission is far from

complete. After a century of resolute action, you should, more than ever before, be able to discern the straight path traced by heavenly inspiration across the many stages of the Divine Plan since its systematic execution began in 1937, and thus grasp the full implications of the latest stage about to open. The tasks confronting you are not identical with those of an earlier age. With the international spread of the Faith largely concluded, demands on you are now most pressing on the homefront. The process of entry by troops that emerged so tenuously in the Ten Year Crusade, and was fostered in the decades that followed, is now being extended through a sound process of community building in center after center in all those countries and territories that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá marked out so long ago. Your sister communities, so many of which you helped to establish, are now mature, and you stand with them ready to take on the sterner challenges that lie ahead. The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.

This is a time for jubilation. Take pride in the sacrifices and victories of so many devoted souls who arose in response to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call. With the same spirit of renunciation shown by your predecessors, cast away the idle fancies and distractions of a world that has lost its way that you may consecrate yourselves in the next five years to the priceless opportunities and inescapable obligations of the latest stage of a spiritual enterprise on which the fate of humanity ultimately depends.

The Universal House of Justice

# Ridván 2016

*Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2016:*

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With the advent of the King of Festivals, the period of preparation for the next global Plan is over: we now summon the friends of God to a new five-year commitment of courage, resolve, and resources.

The company of Bahá'u'lláh's faithful stands poised. Institutional gatherings convened across the world in recent months have sent out successive signals of eagerness to begin this mighty enterprise. The imperatives contained in the message addressed to the Counsellors' Conference are already being translated into decisive plans of action. Decades of heroic endeavour have shaped the community and earned it a measure of proven ability in fostering growth, steeling it for this moment. The last two decades, in particular, have markedly accelerated this longed-for rise in proficiency

During this period, the adoption of an evolving framework for action has enabled the friends to progressively nurture and refine essential capacities, giving rise to simple acts of service at first, leading to more elaborate patterns of action, which in turn demanded the development of capacities still more complex. In this way, a systematic process of human resource development and community building has been started in thousands of clusters—and, in many of them, become far advanced. The focus has not been solely on the individual believer, or the community, or the institutions of the Faith; all three inseparable participants in the evolution of the new World Order are being stimulated by the spiritual forces released through the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. The signs of their progress are more and more apparent: in the confidence that countless believers have acquired to share accounts of Bahá'u'lláh's life and discuss the implications of His Revelation and peerless Covenant; in the growing contingents of souls who, as a result, have been attracted to His Cause and are contributing to the achievement of His unifying vision; in the ability of Bahá'ís and their friends, at the very grassroots of the community, to describe in eloquent terms their experience of a process capable of

transforming character and shaping social existence; in the significantly larger numbers of those indigenous to a country who, as members of Bahá'í institutions and agencies, are now guiding the affairs of their communities; in the reliable, generous, and sacrificial giving to the Fund, so vital for sustaining the advancement of the Faith; in the unprecedented efflorescence of individual initiative and collective action in support of community-building activities; in the enthusiasm of so many selfless souls in the prime of youth who are bringing immense vigour to this work, notably by tending to the spiritual education of younger generations; in the enhancement of the devotional character of the community through regular gatherings for worship; in the rise in capacity at all levels of Bahá'í administration; in the readiness of institutions, agencies, and individuals to think in terms of process, to read their immediate reality and assess their resources in the places where they live, and to make plans on that basis; in the now familiar dynamic of study, consultation, action, and reflection that has cultivated an instinctive posture of learning; in the mounting appreciation for what it means to give effect to the Teachings through social action; in the multiplying opportunities being sought and seized to offer a Bahá'í perspective on discourses prevalent in society; in the awareness of a global community that, in all its endeavours, it is hastening the emergence of divine civilization by manifesting the society-building power inherent in the Cause; indeed, in the friends' growing consciousness that their efforts to foster inner transformation, to widen the circle of unity, to collaborate with others in the field of service, to help populations take charge of their own spiritual, social, and economic development—and, through all such efforts, to bring about the betterment of the world—express the very purpose of religion itself.

While no single measure can capture the totality of the Bahá'í community's progress, much can be inferred from the number of clusters worldwide where a programme of growth has

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been established, which, with gratitude for the bounties bestowed by the Abhá Beauty, we confirm has surpassed 5,000. So broad a foundation as this was a prerequisite for taking on the task that now confronts the Bahá'í world—strengthening the process of growth in every cluster where it has begun and extending further an enriching pattern of community life. The sustained effort required will be arduous. But the outcome has the potential to be profoundly significant, even epoch making. Small steps, if they are regular and rapid, add up to a great distance travelled. By concentrating on the advance that must be made in a cluster in an initial period—for instance, in the six cycles occurring before the first of the bicentennial anniversaries—the friends will do much to bring their goal for the full five years within reach. In each cycle are vested fleeting opportunities for a stride forward, precious possibilities that will not return.

In society at large, alas, the symptoms of an ever-deepening malaise of the soul multiply and worsen. How striking that, as the peoples of the world suffer for want of the true remedy and turn fitfully from one false hope to another, you are collectedly refining an instrument that connects hearts with the Word of God eternal. How striking that, amid the cacophony of fixed

opinions and opposing interests that grows everywhere more fierce, you are focused on drawing people together to build communities that are havens of unity. Far from disheartening you, let the world's prejudices and hostilities be reminders of how urgently souls all around you need the healing balm that you alone can present to them.

This is the last in a series of consecutive Five Year Plans. At its close, a new phase in the evolution of the Divine Plan will open, set to propel the community of Bahá'u'lláh towards the third century of the Bahá'í Era. May the friends of God in every country appreciate the promise of these few years ahead, which will be rigorous preparation for the even mightier tasks yet to come. The present Plan's broad scope enables every individual to support this work, however humble one's share. We ask you, cherished co-workers, adorers of Him Who is the Best Beloved of the worlds, to spare no effort in applying all you have learned and every God-given ability and skill you possess to advance the Divine Plan into its next essential stage. To your own ardent supplications for heavenly assistance we add ours, offered in the Holy Shrines, on behalf of all who labour for this all-encompassing Cause.

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# Bicentennial celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays

*Letter from the Department of the Secretariat, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, concerning the bicentennial celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays in 2017 and 2019, 18 May 2016:*

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In its message dated 29 December 2015 to the Counsellors' Conference, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to the two bicentenaries that are approaching, marking the elapse of two hundred years respectively since the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb. The House of Justice feels it would now be timely to explore further the manner in which these highly significant Festivals are to be celebrated so that preparations can begin to be made. As indicated in the 29 December message, these Holy Days should be viewed as special opportunities for the friends to reach out to the widest possible cross-section of society and to all those with whom they share a connection—whether through a family tie or common interest, an occupation or field of study, neighbourly relations or merely chance acquaintance—so that all may rejoice in the appearance, exactly two hundred years before, of One Who was to be the Bearer of a new Message for humankind.

The locus of activity for the bicentenaries is to be at the local level. The House of Justice anticipates that in countless places across the world, both rural settings and urban centres, the friends will find creative ways to honour the Twin Manifestations Whose lives and sacred missions will be recalled on Their anniversaries. There might also be an opportunity for initiatives at the national level, which could include a gathering to which dignitaries and prominent individuals who have a relationship with the Faith could be invited. But the most distinguishing feature of these bicentenaries will be a tremendous flourishing of activity by Bahá'ís and their friends in local communities. It should be noted that, although each anniversary is associated primarily with just one of the Manifestations, in each case the celebrations ought to encompass both of the Twin Birthdays, and events may be spread out across the full length of the two days. Naturally, these Holy Days will also be marked at the Bahá'í World Centre by those pilgrims, visitors, and staff who are in the Holy Land at the time.

At the heart of these festivities must be a concerted effort to convey a sense of what it means for humanity that these two Luminaries rose successively above the horizon of the world. Of course, this will take different forms in different contexts, extending to a myriad artistic and cultural expressions, including songs, audio-visual presentations, publications and books. Such initiatives, coupled with widespread celebrations that are both uplifting and reverent, are also sure to spark the curiosity and wonder of many who may as yet be unfamiliar with the names of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. However, the real transformative power of the Faith is likely to be perceived more readily still if people experience how worship and meaningful service are being woven into the fabric of the lives of Bahá'ís everywhere. Indeed, from the community-building activities of the Five Year Plan emerges a pattern of collective life within which anyone can discern the vivifying influence of the divine teachings brought by God's Manifestations. Each bicentenary will doubtless kindle a spirit of faithful endeavour that will permeate all the noble undertakings of the friends.

As suggested in this year's *Riḍván* message, the six cycles leading up to the first of the special anniversaries can be viewed as an initial period over which progress toward the overall goal of the Five Year Plan can be measured. The steps taken during these months, and the achievements that come as a result, will constitute an offering of ardent love, yielded collectively to Him Who is the Unifier of the world on the bicentenary of His Birth. The spiritual forces that are sure to be released on that most auspicious occasion will do much to spur the friends into action as they commence the eight cycles that lie between the two bicentenaries, during which the greatest share of the effort needed to fulfil the goal of the Plan will be required. Similarly, events surrounding the two-hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb will lend an infusion of

energy to the global spiritual enterprise as it enters its final six cycles leading up to Ridván 2021. There is, therefore, every reason to expect that the emphasis given to commemorating these Holy Days will have a considerable and cumulative impact on the work of raising vibrant communities—not least on the enrichment of devotional life.

This letter is being sent now so that there is ample time for you to impress upon your respective communities the significance of the coming Festivals and encourage preparations to begin. An important aspect of what must occur is the sense of shared experience and global

solidarity arising from so many gatherings being held in a concentrated span of time, and in an enormous variety of places, bringing together souls who have glimpsed the timeless splendour of those divine Figures Who set in motion an irresistible process of individual and social change. Arrangements will be put in place to enable communities to submit reports on their activities so that these can rapidly be made available to the widest possible audience. More information about these arrangements will be provided at a later date.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,  
Department of the Secretariat

## The movement of international and homefront pioneers

*A message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, regarding the movement of international and homefront pioneerings in this Plan, 23 May 2016:*

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

**I**n our letter dated 26 March 2016, we described the response of the Bahá'í world to the Tablets of the Divine Plan, in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged the friends to travel “toward the East and toward the West and enlighten the people with the light of the Most Great Guidance, so that they may take a portion and share of eternal life.” In the decades following the issuance of those weighty Tablets, a stream of believers settled in far-flung corners of the world and planted the banner of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh amidst divers peoples and nations. While devoted pioneers serving in the international arena initially came mainly from North America, Iran and Europe, as the Faith has advanced globally, they now hail from numerous spots across the planet. Indeed, over the course of the last Five Year Plan, some 1,500 friends from over 110 countries ventured into this field. At the same time, capacity has gradually grown in national communities to foster a systematic process of building vibrant communities, and the task of propagating the Faith has come to rest primarily on the shoulders of local inhabitants labouring on the home front, where they have the advantage of familiarity with the language and culture and can settle more readily in nearby clusters as well as remote areas. That nearly 5,000 believers arose to serve

as homefront pioneers during the last Plan bears testimony to this greatly increased capacity and is a source of immense joy to us.

Although in recent years an increasing proportion of pioneers are serving on the home front, it is our hope that the friends will continue to consider entering the international arena, whenever their circumstances allow. Opportunity is, of course, open to any believer to arise and settle where he or she can contribute to the progress of the Plan, yet in some countries the need for international pioneers is particularly pressing. In this regard, as anticipated in the last pioneer call, throughout the previous Five Year Plan we drew the attention of selected National Spiritual Assemblies to specific pioneering needs that arose in relation to ten special initiatives that were launched to support the growth and development of the Faith in certain regions with the help of friends from several countries. These devoted servants of Bahá'u'lláh, working alongside the local friends, have helped to strengthen the roots of the Cause in all the countries covered by these initiatives, bringing greater dynamism to the institute process and local community life and, in a number of instances, aiding in the emergence of institutions. Over the coming five years, the

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International Teaching Centre will continue to identify areas that would benefit from such endeavours with the expectation that, as a result, by the end of the Plan there will be at least one well-advanced intensive programme of growth in every country in the world where external conditions allow for such a development.

The deployment of homefront pioneers over the next five years will be largely guided by the requirements set out in our message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. As stated in that message, the Five Year Plan just launched aims at raising the number of clusters with an intensive programme of growth to 5,000. A continuing flow of homefront pioneers will contribute significantly to this monumental goal.

Whatever assistance they are able to provide to further the work of the Plan is, of course, most welcome; nevertheless, their efforts will have an even greater effect if, guided by the institutions, their capabilities are directed towards specific needs in clusters where the friends are labouring to intensify the growth process. While many friends who wish to serve as homefront pioneers can make commitments that span years, there are those who may only be able to offer shorter periods, sometimes as little as three months. Such friends can kindle a spirit of selfless service and transmit valuable experience from stronger

clusters to emerging ones. In time, they return to their communities much inspired and enriched, able to contribute even more effectively to the advancement of their own clusters. We hope that the friends, especially the youth who may have the time and determination to do so during their extended holidays, will take advantage of the opportunity to enter the pioneering field in this way.

It is to the two pioneering imperatives set out above—one primarily in the international field, the other on the home front—that we now call the friends, confident that their response, which with each stage of the Divine Plan grows in both quantity and quality, will be equal to the demands before the community of the Greatest Name. The friends who arise to foster, with tact, love, unity and fortitude, a pattern of community life in clusters across the globe will undoubtedly draw inspiration from the Master's heartfelt cry expressed in the Tablets of the Divine Plan: "O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of 'Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá' in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it."

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