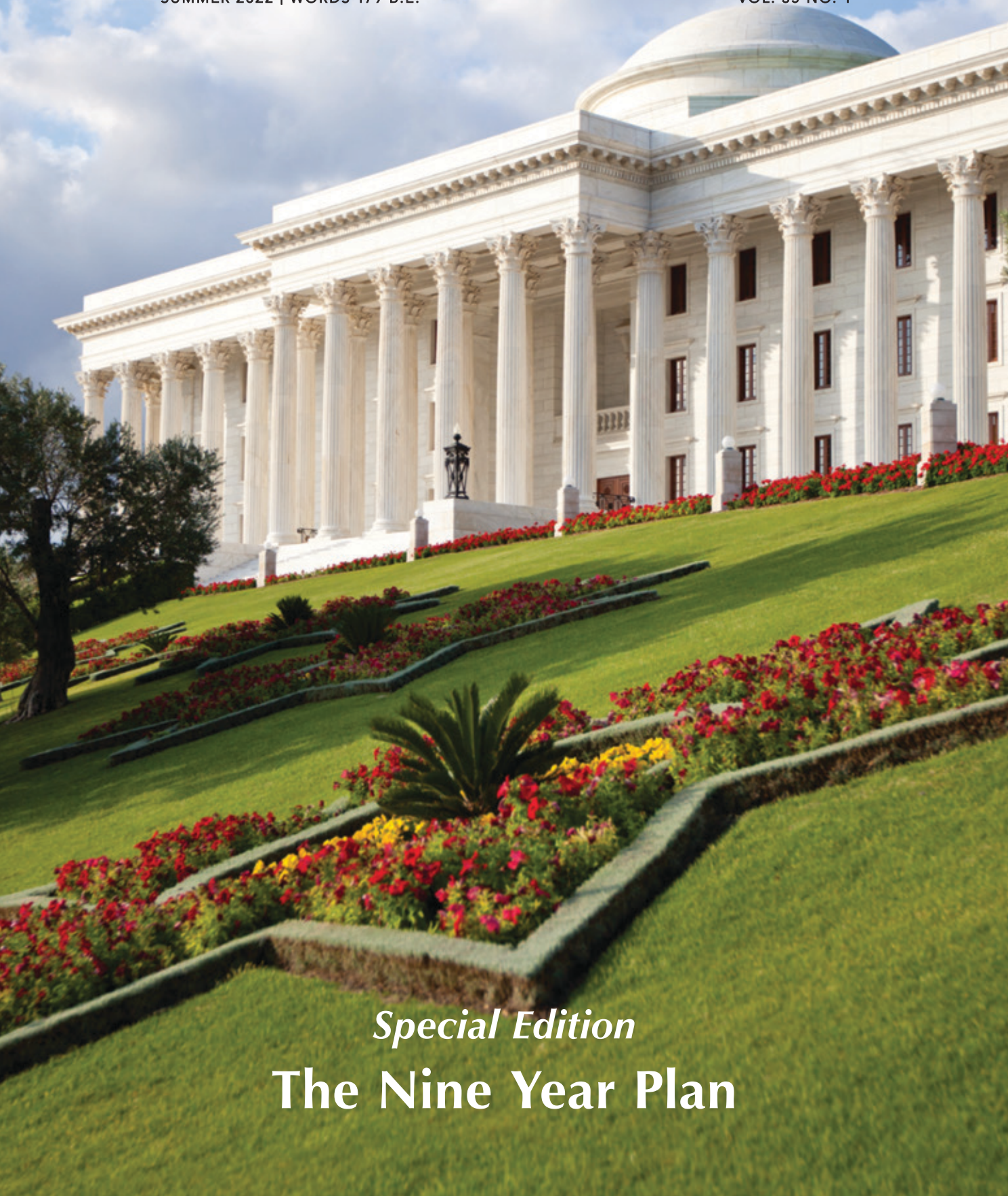


# BAHÁ'Í CANADA

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*Special Edition*  
**The Nine Year Plan**

# From the Writings

Say: O ye lovers of the One true God! Strive, that ye may truly recognize and know Him, and observe befittingly His precepts. This is a Revelation, under which, if a man shed for its sake one drop of blood, myriads of oceans will be his recompense. Take heed, O friends, that ye forfeit not so inestimable a benefit, or disregard its transcendent station. Consider the multitude of lives that have been, and are still being, sacrificed in a world deluded by a mere phantom which the vain imaginations of its peoples have conceived. Render thanks unto God, inasmuch as ye have attained unto your heart's Desire, and been united to Him Who is the Promise of all nations. Guard ye, with the aid of the one true God—exalted be His glory—the integrity of the station which ye have attained, and cleave to that which shall promote His Cause. He, verily, enjoineeth on you what is right and conducive to the exaltation of man's station. Glorified be the All-Merciful, the Revealer of this wondrous Tablet.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 5-6.

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 213.

O My servants! My holy, My divinely ordained Revelation may be likened unto an ocean in whose depths are concealed innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster. It is the duty of every seeker to bestir himself and strive to attain the shores of this ocean, so that he may, in proportion to the eagerness of his search and the efforts he hath exerted, partake of such benefits as have been pre-ordained in God's irrevocable and hidden Tablets.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 326.

O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. This is the straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure. — Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.112.

O ye the embodiments of justice and equity and the manifestations of uprightness and of heavenly bounties! In tears and lamenting, this Wronged One calleth aloud and saith: O God, my God! Adorn the heads of Thy loved ones with the crown of detachment and attire their temples with the raiment of righteousness.

It behoveth the people of Bahá to render the Lord victorious through the power of their utterance and to admonish the people by their goodly deeds and character, inasmuch as deeds exert greater influence than words.

O Haydar-'Alí! Upon thee be the praise of God and His glory. Say: Honesty, virtue, wisdom and a saintly character redound to the exaltation of man, while dishonesty, imposture, ignorance and hypocrisy lead to his abasement. By My life! Man's distinction lieth not in ornaments or wealth, but rather in virtuous behaviour and true understanding.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 57.

Now is the time, O ye beloved of the Lord, for ardent endeavour. Struggle ye, and strive. And since the Ancient Beauty was exposed by day and night on the field of martyrdom, let us in our turn labour hard, and hear and ponder the counsels of God; let us fling away our lives, and renounce our brief and numbered days. Let us turn our eyes away from empty fantasies of this world's divergent forms, and serve instead this pre-eminent purpose, this grand design.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 263.

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ON THE COVER Seat of the Universal House of Justice and surrounding gardens.

Photo: Bahá'í International Community

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# About this issue

This is a special issue of *Bahá'í Canada*, containing a wealth of guidance from the Universal House of Justice and National Spiritual Assembly over the last year, meant to serve the friends as they enter the Nine Year Plan, part of a series of Plans dedicated to “releasing the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures.”<sup>1</sup> This is guidance that will be referred to time and again as individuals, institutions, and communities embark on this “sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance...”<sup>2</sup>

This issue also contains an article entitled “In the throes of learning,” prepared at the request of the National Spiritual Assembly and offered here as a gift. It offers an historical narrative of the progress of the Faith in Canada over the 25-year series of global Plans from 1996-2021, highlighting significant achievements. The piece focuses on the field of expansion and consolidation, as our national community raised up the training institute in this land. Reflecting on how far we have come brings to mind the House of Justice’s statement that by

the end of the next 25-year series of Plans, “the Bahá'í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present.”<sup>3</sup>

The Bahá'í Canada website <bahaicanada.bahai.ca> contains many recently-published articles including reports and photographs from the 72<sup>nd</sup> National Convention, as well as articles about youth and adults who offered a period of service during the One Year Plan, “a year for profound reflection on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre.”<sup>4</sup>

The website also contains stories from the wave of global conferences called by the Universal House of Justice as well as transcripts of the closing remarks the Counsellors gave at the National Convention.

We hope that these talks will be helpful to the friends in furthering their understanding of the implications of the Nine Year Plan and the needs of the Cause in Canada.

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1 From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 25 November 2020.

## Submitting stories to *Bahá'í Canada*

The *Bahá'í Canada* magazine and website are spaces where we can continue to gain insight into the profound communication taking place between diverse individuals, communities and institutions. We invite people from across the country – from large cities to small towns – to submit stories and reflections about the efforts being made to translate the Writings of the Faith into action, the insights these actions are generating and the myriad questions that are arising. Send news, photos, insights, reflections and more to [bahaicanada@bahai.ca](mailto:bahaicanada@bahai.ca).

# Marking the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

From the Universal House of Justice to the friends gathered in the Holy Land to Mark the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 25 November 2021.

Our hearts are filled with wonder as we contemplate the significance of this momentous occasion: the close of one hundred years since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one hundred years since the inception of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation, and one hundred years since the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh was entrusted to His Administrative Order, whose institutions you here represent. How marvellous is His Covenant, through which “this unique, this wondrous System” has been established in your nations and its processes made to operate. We bow our heads in gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh that, despite the numerous and severe obstacles of a world in turmoil, He has opened the doors and facilitated the means for you—including, for the first time, representatives of Regional Bahá'í Councils—to be here during these soul-stirring days.

A period of special potency which began in 2016 with the centenary of the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan and included the bicentennial anniversaries of the Birth of the Twin Manifestations of God is now, a hundred years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, drawing to a close. The advancements the Bahá'í community has made during this time have been nothing less than extraordinary. These have prepared the believers everywhere to meet the demands and fulfil the requirements of the next stage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, which is to commence just months from now and will last nine years. The accelerating decline of the current social order, and the growing need for constructive processes that will lead to the emergence of a new world society, are daily more evident. A century after the Master bequeathed to the followers of the

Greatest Name a document which contains priceless elements for building a divine civilization, we are reminded of the words of the beloved Guardian: “The champion builders of Bahá'u'lláh's rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension and distress.”

Beloved friends, on this Day of the Covenant we all look to its Centre and recall the life and Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a Figure Whose very being was the embodiment of the Covenant, that pivotal centre of unity for all humankind, binding together the multitudinous peoples of the earth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that Mystery of God, “a sign of His greatness”, and “the most perfect bounty”, Who is treasured in the pure hearts of countless children, youth, and adults, is surely watching over and aiding His loved ones, ever casting His eye of protection over them. In these uncertain times, the friends turn with hope and longing to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that “shelter for all mankind”, “a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth”, beseeching His assistance from the realms above as they endeavour to follow His example in the path of service. During the coming days, when the thoughts of the believers all around the world are focused on “this sacred and glorious Being”, you have the blessing and privilege of paying homage to Him on behalf of your communities in those very spots where He laboured day and night for the promotion of the Cause of God and for the betterment of humankind.

Tomorrow night, on the eve of the centenary of His passing, we will hold His loved ones throughout the world in our hearts as we pray in the sacred room where the final moments of His earthly life were spent. We will ardently supplicate that the healing message for which 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived and sacrificed His all may, before long, find a home in the hearts and souls of all humanity and that the efforts of the friends of God to this end may be acceptable in His sight.

– The Universal House of Justice

# A Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

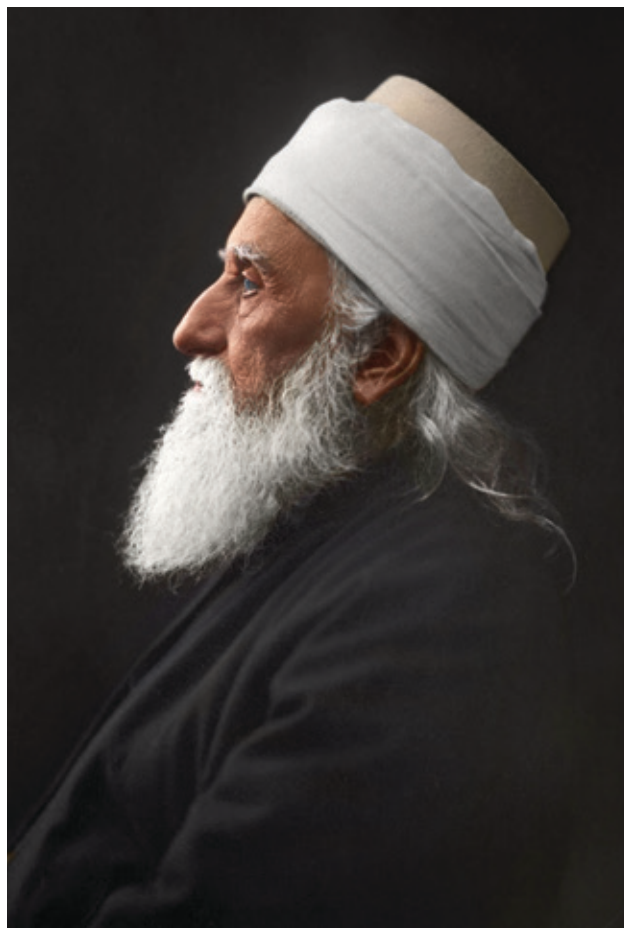
On the occasion of the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 27 November 2021.

A century has now elapsed since the noble spirit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ascended to its eternal home. His birth had coincided with the dawn of the Faith’s Heroic Age, and His passing signalled the setting of the sun upon its final epoch. No clearer demonstration could be imagined of how He embodied the forces of unity than the sight of His funeral, at which a vast crowd of mourners from every creed in this land came together to grieve their common loss. In His day, so many of the friends who embraced the Faith absorbed the spirit of the divine teachings simply by observing Him; still today, if we wish to align our lives with that same spirit, we look to the example set by the Master, Whose word and deed reflected the brilliance of the light that shone from Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

In every respect, His example is central to Bahá’í identity. Every Bahá’í may turn to Him to understand better how to diffuse the light of the Faith and for a model to follow as we seek to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in those we encounter. His own counsel, that the teacher must be “fully enkindled” so that his utterance may “exert influence”, and yet be “totally self-effaced and evanescent” so that “he may teach with the melody of the Concourse on high”, is vividly realized in the unnumbered accounts of souls transformed by being in the company of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Countless are the lessons to be learned from how He presented the divine precepts to every kind of person, constantly widening the circle of unity, without regard for any outward dissimilarities of appearance, language, custom, or belief. The universality of His love produced a community that, even at that time, could justly claim to be a cross-section of society. His love revived, nurtured, inspired; it banished estrangement and welcomed all to the banquet table of the Lord. Every community-building endeavour undertaken today, every educational activity and every outreach, carries with it the hope of communicating, through our own efforts, a token of the same love He showered upon every soul. Such efforts are the best tribute that can be rendered to Him, at this centenary and every day that follows.

We offer thanks to Bahá’u’lláh for having given the world not only, in His teachings, a standard of purity, devotion, and integrity to which souls may forever aspire, but also, in the Figure of the Master, a flawless example of how life



A newly-colourized portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris, France, October 1911. Photo: Bahá’í International Community

can be lived to that standard. As humanity is beset by crisis after crisis, the community of the Greatest Name, which cannot avoid exposure to such upheavals, is privileged to have before it the model of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Neither peril nor obstacle would prevent Him from discharging His mission, whether by attending to the needs of the hour or preparing for the future; neither hostility nor events of the world would divert Him from His course. Serene, confident, and resolute, He was unperturbed by setbacks, welcoming hardship and adversity in the path of God. How relentless were the attacks upon Him! How deplorable the burdens He had to bear! We recall the testimony of His distinguished sister, the Greatest Holy Leaf, that “in the dark of the night, out of the depths of His bosom, could be heard His burning sighs, and when the day broke, the wondrous music of His prayers would rise up to the denizens of the realm on high.”

The passage of time has not diminished the awe with which we regard “the rôle and character of One Who, not only in the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh but in the entire

field of religious history, fulfils a unique function.” And as Shoghi Effendi has further affirmed of Him:

He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Centre and Pivot of Bahá’u’lláh’s peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá’í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá’í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being “round Whom all names revolve”, the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation—styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the “Mystery of God”—an expression by which Bahá’u’lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.

Dearest co-workers: We summoned you here not only to honour the memory of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and to recall His trials and triumphs, but also, with us, to rededicate yourselves and the communities you represent to earnestly serving the Cause to which He devoted His very existence. In fulfilment of the sacred charge laid upon Him by the Blessed Beauty, He gave the Bahá’í world custody of two Charters that have guided its progress and development ever since. One was His Tablets of the Divine Plan, through which the Word of God has come to be promulgated in every land; the other was His Will and Testament, which set in motion a process for the establishment of the Administrative Order. Now, at the close of the first century of the Formative Age, and at the outset of a new series of global Plans, the accelerating progress of the Master’s Divine Plan is plain to see. And the organic unfoldment of the Administrative Order over the last hundred years is demonstrated by the existence of the vast array of institutions and agencies, from the international level to the local, that channel the spirit of the Faith and guide and support the efforts of the worldwide Bahá’í community. The Covenant of which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the Centre remains an impregnable stronghold. We

rejoice at how the Covenant orients each believer towards a common mission, maintaining a dynamic unity that cultivates a constantly growing community of the faithful.

Contemplating the Person of the Master, we find ourselves wonderstruck by the all-compassing authority that accompanied His inexhaustible patience and understanding, by the keenness of His wisdom in every setting, by the infinite tenderness of His being, and by His limitless love that can be felt by every unshuttered soul. But every prompting to pay homage to His matchless qualities is restrained by the recollection that never did He seek praise or worldly recognition. And so we feel compelled to testify: Beloved of all our hearts, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Your all was servitude—a servitude “complete, pure and real, firmly established, enduring, obvious, explicitly revealed and subject to no interpretation whatever”. We reserve what words remain for a pledge of fidelity to You, for our vow to uphold the Covenant that You “proclaimed, championed and vindicated”, for our wholehearted expression of loyalty to Your timeless guidance and expositions, to Your fervent entreaties and exhortations. This same pledge is manifested in the steadfast, strenuous exertions of the Bahá’í world to fulfil the mission entrusted to it at this time. Seeing this community striving to live by Your example summons up for us these words of Yours:

O friends! Praise be to God that the banner of Divine Unity hath been hoisted in every land, and the melody of the Abhá Kingdom hath been raised on every side. The holy Seraph of the Concourse on high is raising the cry of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá!” in the midmost heart of the world, and the power of the Word

of God is breathing true life into the body of existence.

Wherefore, O ye faithful friends, it behoveth you all to join ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in self-sacrifice and in service to the Cause of God and thralldom to His divine Threshold. If ye be aided to attain unto such a supreme bounty, the whole world shall ere long be made the recipient of the effulgent splendours of God, and the longed-for oneness of humanity shall be revealed in the utmost beauty and charm in the midmost heart of the world. This is the dearest wish of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá! This is the greatest yearning of them that are faithful! The Glory of Glories rest upon you.

– The Universal House of Justice

*Contemplating the  
Person of the Master,  
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patience and  
understanding . . .*

# Following the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1 December 2021.

Dearly loved Friends,

**A**s we reflect on the events which a few days ago marked the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land, we feel impelled to express to you our sense of wonderment at the exalted character of what transpired. We offer praise and gratitude to the Blessed Beauty that, despite current circumstances in the world and the many restrictions on travel, nearly six hundred representatives of the vast majority of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá’í Councils were able to be present at the Bahá’í World Centre for this historic occasion. The days of this remarkable gathering were spent in profound contemplation on the life and

example of the beloved Master, on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Centre of the Covenant, on His Will and Testament and the unfoldment of the Administrative Order over the last century, and on the extraordinary distance the Bahá’í world has travelled through the implementation of His Divine Plan. A spirit of consecration permeated the air as those present prayed in the vicinity of His resting place on the anniversary of the holy night of His Ascension. The love of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew the souls to the Mountain of the Lord, and they return to their homes carrying the love of the Universal House of Justice to the institutions they represent and to all the friends of God.

We are confident that the spiritual forces generated by this gathering will be diffused throughout your communities and will inspire the friends as they prepare themselves for the upcoming series of worldwide conferences, which will launch the Bahá’í world into the next stage of the Divine Plan. To this end, we will offer our ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.

– The Universal House of Justice

# Regarding the upcoming Nine Year Plan of the worldwide Bahá’í community

From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

Dearly loved Friends,

**A**t Riḍván this year we described how, over the course of a quarter century, the Bahá’í world underwent a transformation that endowed it with an undreamed-of capacity to learn, to grow, and to serve humanity. But, however bright were the achievements of this period, they must be eclipsed by what is to come. By the conclusion of the new series of Plans recently begun, the Bahá’í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present. In your deliberations over the coming days, you will be

occupied with exploring what is required to bring into being such a fortified community.

Bahá’u’lláh states that “the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.” He has revealed teachings that make this possible. Building a society that consciously pursues this collective purpose is the work of not only this generation, but of many generations to come, and Bahá’u’lláh’s followers welcome all who labour alongside them in this undertaking. It means learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities; it means those communities learning how to bring about spiritual and material progress; it means learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress. These areas of endeavour are, naturally, familiar ones. Seen from one perspective, they are quite distinct, each having its own characteristics and imperatives. Yet they all represent



*The series of global Plans that began at Ridván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Ridván 2046. During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures.*

ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society. Together, they are means of releasing what the Guardian described as “the society-building power” of the Faith. This inherent power possessed by the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is visible even in the fledgling efforts of a Bahá'í community learning to serve humanity and promote the Word of God. And though the world society foreshadowed in His Revelation is of course far distant, communities that are earnestly learning to apply His teachings to their social reality abound. How immensely blessed are those souls who, alive to the greatness of this Day and the significance of their actions, strive for the emergence of a society shaped by the divine teachings.

The series of global Plans that began at Ridván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Ridván 2046. During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the

more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity”; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.

The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan are seeking to gain an ever more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—“the sovereign remedy for every disease”—and to apply them to the needs of their society. They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. In places where growing numbers are helping to build communities of this character, the power of the Cause to transform people's social existence, as well as their inner lives, is becoming increasingly visible. Earnest pursuit of the Plan's central aim will, we are sure, cause many, many such communities to emerge.

### **The movement of clusters**

A greater expression of the society-building power of the Faith requires, first and foremost, still further advances in the process of entry by troops in every part of the world. The essentially spiritual undertakings of diffusing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ever more widely and extending the roots of His Faith ever more deeply into the soil of society have measurable outcomes: the number of

clusters where a programme of growth has been initiated and the degree of intensity that each has reached. The means now exist for a swift advance in relation to both measures. The goal that the community of the Greatest Name must aspire to fulfil during the current series of global Plans is to establish intensive programmes of growth in all the clusters in the world. This formidable objective implies a broadening and intensification of activity on a scale never witnessed. Rapid progress towards this goal must be achieved in the course of the Nine Year Plan.

As a preliminary step, we ask that you assist National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils to determine whether their schemes for dividing their territories into clusters would benefit from any adjustments. As you know, a cluster defines an area where the activities of the Plan can be stimulated in a manageable and sustainable way. Over the last twenty-one years, much has been learned about the size of cluster that is "manageable" in different contexts and in different parts of the world; in some countries, modifications have already begun to be considered, occasioned by the effects of growth. In many instances this reassessment will not lead to any change, but in some it will result in a cluster being divided or reduced in size, and occasionally a cluster might become larger. Areas that are sparsely populated owing to the natural terrain may be excluded from the clustering scheme. Of course, any believers who reside in such places would adopt as many elements of the framework for action as are applicable to their circumstances.

The movement of clusters along a continuum of development will remain the basic model for the expansion and consolidation of the community. The features of the developmental path that should be followed, and in particular the first, second, and third milestones that mark progress along the way, are already well known to the friends from our previous messages and from their own experience, and we feel no need to reiterate what we have stated before. By the close of the One Year Plan we anticipate that programmes of growth will be under way in over 6,000 clusters, that in close to 5,000 of these the second milestone will have been passed, and that in 1,300 of these the believers will have advanced further. These figures must climb considerably over the coming nine years. Once any adjustments to the clustering scheme in each country have been determined, we ask that you work with National Assemblies and Regional Councils to forecast the numbers of clusters where progress could be made past the first, second, and third milestones, respectively, during the Plan. It should be borne in mind that these are only intended to be well-informed estimates; they can be refined later as necessary and need not be laboured over at length. As such, we request that the results of these assessments be sent to the Bahá'í World Centre by Naw-Rúz. At Ridván, we will then be able to set out the total collective aspirations of the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan.

We are conscious that there are some regions and countries where the Faith remains at an early point of development, and there is a pressing need to ensure that what the Bahá'í world has learned about accelerating the growth process benefits these places as well. One important lesson that has become clear is the immense value, to a region, of a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. Once the friends in a given cluster have developed the range of capacities that such progress implies, and the means to disseminate insights and share experience about community-building endeavours are in place, then a swift acceleration of the work of expansion and consolidation in surrounding clusters becomes possible. With this in mind, it is imperative that during the Nine Year Plan the process of growth reach this level of intensity in at least one cluster in every country and every region. This constitutes one of the Plan's chief objectives and it will call for the concentrated effort of many a consecrated soul. The International Teaching Centre is ready to work with you to implement several strategies to bring this about. Foremost among these will be the deployment of teams of international and homefront pioneers who are familiar with the framework for action and are prepared to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to serving the Cause over a number of years. You will need to impress upon National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils the urgency of encouraging believers who, following in the footsteps of so many heroic souls of the past, can arise to ensure that the light of the Faith shines bright in every territory. We look in particular to countries, regions, and clusters where strength and experience have accumulated to generate a flow of pioneers to places where help is needed, and also to provide support by other means. This flow of support is one more way in which the spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance, so essential for progress, manifests itself in systematic action.

The accomplishments of the previous series of Plans—particularly the last Five Year Plan—could not have occurred without a tremendous advance in the teaching work. An important dimension of this work is the capacity to engage in conversations on spiritual themes, a capacity which was explored in our message to your 2015 conference, where we described how it is developed through participation in institute courses and by gaining practical experience. It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Over time, many such souls begin to identify themselves with the Bahá'í community, especially as they gain the confidence to participate in community life through service. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely

associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

We ask you and your auxiliaries to help the believers, wherever they reside, reflect periodically on effective ways of teaching the Faith in their surroundings, and to fan within their hearts a passion for teaching that will attract the confirmations of the Divine Kingdom. Souls who have been given the blessing of faith have a natural wish to share this gift through conversations with relatives, friends, classmates, co-workers, and those previously unmet, seeking in every place and at every moment a hearing ear. Different settings and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are.

### **Learning from the most advanced clusters**

Six years ago we described for you the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone along the continuum of growth. To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building. In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live. It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus. Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong—networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind—and by accompanying others who arise to serve

alongside them. These efforts have tremendous merit. Even when a cluster contains a number of flourishing centres of intense activity, efforts being made across the rest of the cluster might still represent a large proportion of all the activity that is occurring. We also acknowledge, in this connection, the steps being taken in some clusters to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster. This can be seen as a specialized form of the community-building work, and one which continues to show great promise. As participation in the work of the Plan in all its forms increases, many opportunities emerge for the friends to learn from each other's experience and to kindle within one another the joy of teaching.

Of course, the work undertaken in receptive neighbourhoods and villages has been a special focus of attention in recent years. As the inhabitants of such locations begin to participate in Bahá'í activities in large numbers, more consideration needs to be given to coordination in order to cope with the inherent complexity involved. Within each centre of intense activity, collaborative arrangements emerge among groups of families, who organize community-building activities among themselves with a view to widening the embrace of such activities to many nearby households; an informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours under way. The character of daily life in such places is adapting to the rise of a culture in which worship and service are cherished activities involving many people at once. Uplifting, well-prepared community gatherings—extending in some cases to camps and festivals—occur with increasing frequency, and music and song feature prominently on such occasions. Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of acquainting those in the wider society with the principles of the Cause. And naturally, there remains a strong focus on being outward looking: finding ways to continually share the fruits of a thriving pattern of action with souls who are as yet unfamiliar with the Faith.

Amid all this, we have observed a specific, heartening phenomenon, whose early glimpses we described in our message to your 2015 conference as representing a new frontier. Although learning how to embrace large numbers is a characteristic of any cluster where the third milestone has been passed, the focus of the friends necessarily begins to broaden as they approach a point where a significant proportion of the population of a particular area is taking part in community-building activities. This might be true for only a specific residential area in a cluster, or for several such areas, or for a single village; other parts of the cluster might not yet share the same reality. But in such locations, the thoughts of the friends labouring at the grassroots are increasingly occupied with the progress

and well-being of everyone dwelling in the vicinity. Bahá'í institutions feel more keenly their responsibility for the spiritual education of an entire generation of children and junior youth, most or even all of whom might already be engaged in community activities. Local Spiritual Assemblies strengthen their relationships with authorities and local leaders, even entering into formal collaborations, and growing attention is given to the multiplying initiatives of social action arising from groups of junior youth, youth, women, families, or others who are responding to the needs around them. The sheer level and variety of activity requires Auxiliary Board members to appoint multiple assistants to serve a single village or neighbourhood; each assistant might follow one or more lines of action, offering counsel and support as necessary, and lending momentum to the processes in motion.

In places where the activities of the Plan have reached such a degree of prevalence, the inhabitants now possess a substantially increased capacity to steer the course of their own development, and the institutions and agencies of the Faith there now have an expanded vision of their responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities still include having robust systems in place to continually build capacity and support those taking initiative. But the advancement of the community depends, to a greater extent than before, on local institutions and agencies being conscious of the social forces at work in the environment and acting to preserve the integrity of the community's many endeavours. Meanwhile, the relationship of the Bahá'í community to the surrounding society undergoes profound change. As represented by its formal structures of administration and informal collaborative arrangements, the Bahá'í community has become a highly visible protagonist in society in its own right, one that is ready to shoulder important responsibilities and intensify a broad, collective process of learning about spiritual and material progress. At the same time, as the wider society embraces many aspects of Bahá'í community life and imbibes its unifying spirit, the dynamics thus created allow diverse groups to come together in a combined movement inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity. To date, the number of places where a Bahá'í pattern of community life has attained such prevalence is modest, yet it is growing. Here is witnessed a release of the society-building power of the Faith unlike anything that has been seen before.

Naturally, prevalence of Bahá'í activity on this scale is not a prospect everywhere. It is necessary to appreciate the difference that is made by the conditions in a cluster or in parts of a cluster and by the characteristics of a people—that is, by the reality of circumstances. Accordingly, the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary. But regardless of the extent to which Bahá'í community life embraces those who reside in a particular area—regardless, even, of the intensity of a programme of growth in a cluster or the level of activity in a neighbourhood or village—the

challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles? You and your auxiliaries are ideally placed to put this question and to ensure that appropriate strategies are identified. Much can be learned from the experience of the friends in similar clusters, for a community that is a step further along the same path can provide valuable insights about the goal to strive for next. As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it. Looking ahead on this path, might we not perceive Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the reins of humanity's affairs in one hand, His other beckoning all to hasten, hasten?

### **Contributing to social transformation**

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is concerned with the transformation of both humanity's inner life and social environment. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi describes how the social environment provides the “atmosphere” in which souls can “grow spiritually and reflect in full the light of God” shining through the Revelation. A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

As the intensity of community-building work in a cluster increases, the friends there inevitably become more conscious of social, economic, or cultural barriers that are impeding people's spiritual and material progress. Children and junior youth lacking support in their education, pressures on girls resulting from traditional customs related to early marriage, families needing help with navigating unfamiliar systems of healthcare, a village struggling for want of some basic necessity, or long-standing prejudices arising from a legacy of hostility between different groups—when a Bahá'í community's efforts in the field of expansion and consolidation bring it into contact with these situations and many others, it will be drawn to respond to such realities as its circumstances permit. In reflecting on such situations it becomes evident that, within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society. All these efforts are pursued according to a common framework for action, and this above all else brings coherence to the overall pattern of activity.

The initial stirrings of grassroots social action begin to be seen in a cluster as the availability of human resources increases and capacity for a wider range of tasks develops. Villages have proven to be notably fertile ground from which social action initiatives have emerged and been sustained, but in urban settings too, friends living there have succeeded in carrying out activities and projects suited to the social environment, at times by working with local schools, agencies of civil society, or even government bodies. Social action is being undertaken in a number of important fields, including the environment, agriculture, health, the arts, and particularly education. Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, and especially as the study of specific institute courses stimulates greater activity in this area, we expect to see a proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a people. Some of these community-based initiatives will require basic administrative structures to sustain their work. Where conditions are propitious, Local Spiritual Assemblies will need to be encouraged to learn how best to cultivate new, fledgling initiatives and to foster efforts that show promise. In some cases, the needs associated with a particular field of endeavour will warrant the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, and we anticipate the appearance of more such organizations during the coming Plan. For their part, National Spiritual Assemblies will have to find ways in which they can stay well informed about what is being learned at the grassroots of their communities and analyse the experience being gained; in some places this will call for the creation of an entity dedicated to following social action. Looking across the Bahá'í world, we are delighted to see how much momentum has already been generated in this area of endeavour through the encouragement and support of the Bahá'í International Development Organization.

Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs. However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and

on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts. This has particular implications for Local Spiritual Assemblies. In places where the activities of the Plan have attained a degree of prevalence, the Assembly begins to be viewed more widely as a source of moral insight. Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation. We are pleased with the steps that have already been taken to learn how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and from the experience of Bahá'í communities can be brought to bear upon pressing social issues at the local level; much more is sure to be learned in this regard during the Nine Year Plan.

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations. Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

### **Educational endeavours and the training institute**

The importance of education to a Bahá'í conception of spiritual and social transformation can hardly be overestimated. "Consider", Bahá'u'lláh states, "the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings dependeth upon it." The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Pre-eminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í

world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional training institutes operating with such proficiency around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans. Building capacity for service within communities by enabling ever-increasing numbers of individuals to benefit from the institute process will continue to be a central feature of the Plans in the present series. The capacity for community development that has already emerged, represented by hundreds of thousands of individuals who are able to serve as tutors, animators, or children's class teachers, is a resource of historic consequence.

When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever-deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release. Although the task of developing curricular materials to support this purpose is a long-term undertaking, existing materials already aim to build capacity for a broad range of initiatives. Moreover, they offer a seamless coherent educational experience from the age of five, upwards to the age of junior youth, and through into adulthood, and they serve as a direct counterpart to the pattern of activities unfolding at the grassroots. In relation to this, we have been pleased to see the rich insights that the friends in different parts of the world, in a variety of social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of community development. If these insights, and those still to emerge, are to benefit Bahá'í communities more widely, systems for the preparation and refinement of educational materials will need to be extended. With this in mind, we will soon set out the approach that will guide this work over the coming years.

With respect to raising the capacity of institutes to deliver each of the three stages of the educational process, we are glad to see that attention is increasingly being given to enhancing the quality of the educational experience itself, in addition to expanding the system for its delivery. A critical requirement is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections. Many training institute boards have been supported in this regard by the collaborative groups described in our message to your 2015 conference. In places, separate teams have also begun to focus respectively on children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, identifying factors that contribute to their effectiveness and finding ways to assist

the friends involved in each avenue of service to further raise their own capacity. The Auxiliary Board members in a region and their assistants are often the first to see to it that what is being learned reaches a wider number of friends across adjoining clusters and within centres of intense activity. Individuals with a depth of experience in the promotion of institute activities are serving as resource persons, and they have proved instrumental in helping institutes at an earlier point of development to advance. Nevertheless, in general it is Counsellors who are ensuring that each institute becomes familiar with the many essential insights being generated by their sister agencies in neighbouring countries and regions. Counsellors have arranged for institutes to be organized into groupings of varying sizes to enable the lessons that are being learned by the most experienced institutes to be shared more widely, increasingly through the means of formal seminars. All these arrangements will need to be strengthened during the next Plan. In places where a site for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme is operating, collaboration between the learning site and associated institutes has already proved extremely fruitful, and it should intensify; their pursuit of a common goal and their shared desire to see clusters advance create ideal conditions for the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance to flourish. The knowledge that has now accumulated about factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the institute process is extensive, and we look to the International Teaching Centre to organize what has been learned and make it available to you.

What we have described above is an educational system in a state of constant refinement. This requires many individuals to lend their support to its further development; it also requires institutes, and Bahá'í institutions more generally, to plan ahead and ensure that individuals who have developed considerable capacity in supporting the community's educational endeavours are able to sustain their service and can, when their life circumstances change, continue to be involved in the work of the institute in other meaningful ways. Appreciating the effectiveness of the institute process, every follower of Bahá'u'lláh will feel a desire to contribute to its advancement in some way—not least, the Bahá'í youth. Institutes know well that releasing the potential possessed by young people is, for them, a sacred charge; we now ask that Bahá'í youth view the future development of the institute in the very same light. At the vanguard of a nine-year, community-wide endeavour to bring the institute to a higher level of functioning, we expect to see a broad movement of youth setting the standard. They should seize every opportunity—in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction—to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute's programmes. Some youth will be able to devote a period of service—perhaps even successive years—to the provision of education, especially to those younger than themselves; for many, support for

the institute's activities will be an ever-present dimension of their lives throughout their own education and as they seek a livelihood from their calling in this world; but for none should it be anything less than a cherished commitment.

In many parts of the world, a natural outcome of the participation of individuals and families in the institute process has been an increased consciousness of the importance of education in all its forms. Friends serving as children's class teachers take a keen interest in the broad educational development of those they teach, while friends serving as tutors and animators are naturally concerned with the extent to which those approaching or entering adulthood—girls and boys alike—can access and benefit from education of many kinds, not limited to the courses offered by the institute itself. For instance, they can encourage young people to look towards apprenticeships or university studies. We have been struck by how, in many communities, engagement in the institute process by large numbers has gradually reshaped this aspect of culture within a population. The institutions of the Faith will need to take responsibility for ensuring that, as consciousness is raised in this way, the noble aspirations that arise in young people as a result—aspirations to acquire the education and training that will allow them to offer a lifetime of meaningful service to their society—can be fulfilled. The long-term development of a community and, ultimately, of a nation, from generation to generation, depends to a large degree on the effort made to invest in those who will assume responsibility for collective social progress.

This exploration of the centrality of education to a community founded on Bahá'í principles would be incomplete without a further observation. Shoghi Effendi has laid great stress on the importance of striving, through “constant endeavour”, to obtain “a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation”. The training institute has no parallel as an instrument for the systematic exposure of limitless numbers of souls to the life-giving waters of the Revelation and the inexhaustible meaning of the Word of God. But the friends' efforts to increase their understanding of the Faith and its teachings are of course not limited to participation in the institute process. Indeed, one strong indicator of an institute's effectiveness is the thirst it cultivates within those who engage with its materials to continue to study the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh—individually, but also collectively, whether in formal spaces created by the institutions or in more informal settings. Beyond the study of the Revelation itself, the implications that the teachings hold for countless fields of human endeavour are of great importance. A notable example of one form of education through which young believers are becoming better acquainted with a Bahá'í perspective on issues relevant to the progress of humanity is participation in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. Given the vastness of the ocean of the Revelation, it will be apparent that

exploring its depths is a lifelong occupation of every soul who would tread the path of service.

As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.

### **Raising capacity for administration at all levels**

Eighty years ago, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian described Bahá'í administration as “the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living”. Today, at the beginning of the second century of the Formative Age, the shape of Bahá'í administration has developed considerably, and its continued development will be essential for the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

The administration of the Faith at the grassroots is, of course, intimately connected with the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies. These nascent Houses of Justice are described by Shoghi Effendi as “the chief sinews of Bahá'í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure”, and he greatly emphasizes the importance of their formation. In 1995, we called for the reinstatement of the practice that required all Local Assemblies, including those being newly formed, to be elected on the First Day of Ridván rather than at any other time of year. This development was related to the fact that, while believers from outside a locality could assist with the electoral process, the primary responsibility for electing any Assembly and maintaining its operations rests with the Bahá'ís of that place; much depends on their readiness for undertaking administrative activity. It has been seen, in recent years, how a sense of Bahá'í identity can gradually gain strength in an area as a pattern of action grounded in the teachings becomes established among individuals and families living there. Thus, a community will often have attained a certain level of capacity in relation to community-building endeavours by the time the formation of a Local Assembly becomes possible. As this point approaches—and it should not be unduly delayed—efforts have to be made to cultivate an appreciation for the formal aspects of community life associated with Bahá'í administration. The Local Assembly that emerges in such a milieu is likely to be well aware of its responsibility to encourage and strengthen those activities which help to sustain a vibrant community. However, it will also need to gain proficiency in discharging a wide range of other responsibilities, and the support provided to it by your auxiliaries and their assistants will be vitally important. In our message to your 2010 conference, we described the

developmental path of such an Assembly, and we referred to various dimensions of its functioning that would need to receive attention, including its ability to manage and develop a Local Fund and, in time, to support initiatives of social action and to interact with agencies of local government and civil society. The benefits that accrue to a community being served by such an Assembly need no elaboration.

In your interactions with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, we ask that you devote attention to the matter of establishing Local Spiritual Assemblies and consolidating their operations, especially in areas where this aspect of growth may have received less emphasis. We anticipate this will contribute to a rapid rise in the number of Local Assemblies formed year on year. In some countries, your consultations will need to include consideration of whether in rural areas existing arrangements for defining the boundaries of each locality are adequate.

One compelling insight which has emerged is that the extent to which the station and leadership of a Local Assembly is recognized in a community is related to how deeply the believers appreciate the sacredness of the electoral process and their duty to participate in it, in an atmosphere wholly free from the taint of suasion or worldly attitudes about power. As consciousness is raised in a community about the spiritual principles underlying Bahá'í elections, a new conception is formed of what it means for someone to be called to serve on an institution, and understanding grows of how the individual, the community, and the Local Assembly and its agencies relate to one another. Where systematic effort has been made to stimulate conversations in a community about the formation of the Local Assembly and its purpose, and to sustain those conversations year after year, the strength of the elected body and the dynamism of community life reinforce each other.

This reciprocal effect has been especially noticeable over the last two years in places where we have approved the adoption of a two-stage electoral process for a Local Spiritual Assembly, an approach which traces its origins to instructions given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Spiritual Assembly of Tíhrán. Twenty-two Local Assemblies, spread over eight countries, have already begun to be elected by this method during this period. Similar in many respects to the election of a National Spiritual Assembly, it involves the division of a locality into units from each of which one or more delegates are elected, after which the delegates elect the members of the Local Assembly. As the number of Bahá'ís residing in a locality grows large and the community's capacity for managing complexity increases, the case for implementing a two-stage electoral process becomes commensurately stronger. Accordingly, in the coming Plan, we expect to authorize the adoption of this method for electing a Local Assembly in many more places, both urban and rural, where conditions make such a step timely.

A Local Spiritual Assembly maintains a keen interest in learning how best to advance the community-building work within its jurisdiction, and as such it consults regularly with friends involved in coordinating endeavours in the cluster. It follows closely the development of any centres of intense activity in the locality, especially by offering support to the teams of believers who have emerged there and are stimulating the process of growth. In general, the more the intensification of activity requires organizational arrangements at the level of the locality or in parts of the locality—say, arranging campaigns of home visits, accompanying families who are holding devotional meetings, or encouraging them to form groups to work together—the more prominent the role that can be assumed by the Local Assembly in this regard. In localities where large numbers are being welcomed into the embrace of Bahá'í activities, and where the complexity of an Assembly's work and manifold responsibilities is increasing, the Assembly sometimes finds that its Secretary needs to be supported by a staffed office, and eventually, the need for a befitting local Ḥazíratu'l-Quds becomes more pressing.

As Local Assemblies begin to take on a greater and greater share of responsibility for nurturing the development of the community, institutions at the regional and national levels must become more systematic in their efforts to support them. We have been pleased to see this need being addressed in methodical ways, for instance by National Assemblies or Regional Councils convening periodic meetings with the Secretaries and other officers of Local Assemblies to consult about the unfoldment of specific lines of action.

Where a Regional Council has developed an enhanced capacity for administration, including an ability to provide appropriate kinds of support to many clusters at once, this has been conducive to the accelerated progress of the whole region. Our message to your 2015 conference indicated that in smaller countries where the establishment of Regional Councils is not required, a formal structure would need to emerge at the national level which would be charged with helping clusters to advance. We ask that, in countries where this has not yet occurred, you now consult with National Assemblies about the steps that can be taken to appoint that formal structure, namely, a National Growth Committee with three, five, or seven members. The National Assembly will need to give this agency the necessary latitude to foster the movement of clusters, drawing relevant insights from what has been learned about Regional Councils in this regard. Its responsibilities can include appointing Area Teaching Committees and encouraging them in their plans, arranging for the deployment of homefront pioneers, supporting teaching projects, and distributing core literature. The Committee will benefit from being able to collaborate closely with the training institute, itself an agency of the National Assembly, and with the Auxiliary Board members serving the country, and it will also be able to communicate directly with the



relevant Counsellor. While a National Assembly will naturally wish to maintain an ongoing familiarity with the work of the Committee and provide it with guidance, support, and encouragement, creating an entity that is wholly occupied with promoting growth should enable an Assembly to give greater attention to other important matters. In countries where Councils have not been formed but could be established eventually, a National Growth Committee should also be appointed at this time.

As the spiritual energies released by earnest pursuit of the Plan surge, they meet resistance from the countervailing forces that hold humanity back from attaining full maturity. In the face of such forces, the vitality of the various lines of action being followed at the local level needs to be preserved and fortified. This critical responsibility is of special relevance to the members of the two Auxiliary Boards, whose numerous, demanding duties keep them closely connected to conditions at the grassroots and alert to anything that might affect the spirit of a community. Across different cultures and social environments, they must assist the friends to face different kinds of challenges: to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal; to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity's period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds; to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook; to put the equality of women and men into practice; to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative; to put one's support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference; to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects; to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests; to reject the opiate of consumerism; to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God. These, and many more besides, constitute a formidable set of responsibilities for the company of the faithful to fulfil as they navigate what are sure to be tumultuous years in the life of humanity. Your auxiliaries, who have so creditably acquitted themselves in advancing the process of entry by troops, must be equal to all such challenges whenever and wherever they arise. Through the power of their good example and the clarity of their good counsel, may they help the friends to grow in faith, assurance, and commitment to a life of service, and accompany them as they build communities that are havens of peace, places where a harried and conflict-scarred humanity may find shelter.

Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many

lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society- building power of the Faith shine forth.

## A historic mission

We hope to have impressed upon you, in these pages, that the present-day capacity of the Bahá'í community, combined with the discipline it has achieved through adherence to a coherent framework for action, has prepared it for an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material. The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than those with which it honours the glorious deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.

We put great reliance on you and on National Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that, in all the efforts made to acquaint the friends with the nature of this collective enterprise, the perspective of history is kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: "Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?" The establishment of Divine Civilization is, in the words of the Guardian, "the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith". It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration, fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth, a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart.

How we long to see humanity illumined with the love of its Lord; how we long to hear His praise on every tongue. Knowing the ardency of our wish, you know then the emotion with which, when we lay our heads upon the Most Holy Threshold, we implore Bahá'u'lláh to make you, and all who cherish His precious Faith, ever more perfect channels of His ineffable grace.

– The Universal House of Justice

# The educational materials of the training institute

From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 1 January 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

Over the twenty-five-year period that ended at Riqdán 2021, the endeavours of training institutes to help the friends enhance their capacity for service were central to progress. When, at the beginning of the last series of global Plans, we called for systematic attention to be given to devising methods for training large numbers of believers, institutes faced the task of developing their own materials or selecting from those readily available. Generally, institutes found it challenging to develop new materials; however, those that adopted the courses prepared by the Ruhi Institute were able to make rapid progress. Therefore, as was stated in our message to you of 28 December 2005, we determined that the books of the Ruhi Institute, which had proven their efficacy, would constitute the main sequence of courses of institutes everywhere at least for the remainder of that series of Plans. The extensive use of these courses, as well as of the lessons and texts for the spiritual education of children and junior youth, expedited the advance of the institute process across the globe. Now, with the Bahá'í world embarked on a new series of global Plans, we have considered again the question of the materials of training institutes and wish to convey our conclusions.

The knowledge and insights, the spiritual qualities and attitudes, and the skills and abilities for service treated in the courses of the Ruhi Institute remain vital to the efforts of Bahá'í communities. Therefore, these materials will continue to be a prominent feature of the educational endeavours of all training institutes during this new series of global Plans. We are aware that the Ruhi Institute will, during the Nine Year Plan, seek to complete the preparation of all the materials it has outlined for use in children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, and the revision of published editions as necessary in light of experience. However, beyond what it has already delineated, it is not expected to develop new materials to be used worldwide.

In our message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we highlighted how pleased we have been to observe the rich body of knowledge and insights which the friends, labouring in diverse social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of the community-building

process. The friends are also becoming increasingly adept at identifying needs related to growth that are emerging naturally from efforts at the grassroots. These developments have implications for the systems for preparing and refining educational materials. We have thus concluded that it would now be propitious for more attention to be paid to extending the capacity to prepare educational materials, particularly in relation to supplementary materials and branch courses.

When we addressed the question of materials for the education of children and junior youth in our message to you of 12 December 2011, we indicated that, beyond the materials that are the core of each of these programmes, teachers and animators would, often in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level, determine whether or not additional elements would be required to reinforce the educational process. The impressive advances in many parts of the world with regard to offering spiritual education to large numbers of children and junior youth have certainly involved a growing capacity of teachers and animators to wisely supplement the study of the lessons and texts with appropriate elements on the basis of their specific circumstances. Notable in this respect are elements related to artistic activity and service projects. Nonetheless, when the need to supplement the study of a particular topic has been felt across a country or region, some institutes have themselves developed or adopted additional materials and have arranged for them to be disseminated more extensively. These supplementary items have, for the most part, been simple elements, such as songs or stories. A similar experience is unfolding in relation to the main sequence of courses, although the additional materials that some institutes have introduced in this connection, which include compilations from the Bahá'í writings on specific topics and case studies of relevant experience, tend to be of a more complex nature.

The flourishing of a vibrant process of spiritual education in growing numbers of clusters will require of institutes a well-developed ability to oversee the appropriate introduction of supplementary elements. In this, institutes must be as much concerned with reinforcing the educational process as with maintaining its integrity. They will thus need to bear in mind the various cautions we set out in our 12 December 2011 message. They must, of course, also guard against overwhelming the friends with diverse additional elements that, by their sheer volume, might inadvertently detract from the effective delivery of the principal materials.

Concerning branch courses, how they are to emerge must be understood in the context of the dynamics in countries and regions where the community-building process is

advancing with intensity. As many more friends dedicate themselves to promoting the various activities to which the study of institute courses gives rise, distinct areas of learning associated with each of these activities steadily take shape in the life of a population. Some of these areas of learning, such as those concerned with collective worship, deepening, and teaching, are supported by Area Teaching Committees, while others related to the spiritual education of children, junior youth, and youth and adults are fostered by the training institutes. Additional areas of learning supported by other agencies also gradually come into place as more and more people study the higher courses of the institute's sequence. As the endeavours in each of these areas are sustained by growing numbers of friends, fresh insights are generated that are distinctive in that they arise from systematic effort undertaken in a particular social and cultural setting.

*There is an increasing understanding of what other concepts, approaches, abilities, and attitudes are essential to advancing an aspect of the community-building process.*

There is an increasing understanding of what other concepts, approaches, abilities, and attitudes are essential to advancing an aspect of the community-building process. These become objects of conversation in periodic gatherings held to consult and reflect on the experience being gained. Aside from the initiatives individuals or institutions and agencies may take to respond to these needs, the institute might decide to promote the use of a supplementary material as described above. Over time, what is learned is captured by the institutions and agencies of the Faith in various documents, narrative accounts, and case studies which, in their totality, constitute a record of unfolding experience. When a sizeable body of knowledge accumulates, it becomes possible to further systematize it by developing a branch course.

We have in the past likened the main sequence to the trunk of a tree that supports other courses branching from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. The preparation of such branch courses would necessarily occur over time through a pattern marked by action and

reflection and in which conceptualization and activity in the field go hand in hand. For training institutes that take on this task, there are several requisites. They will need to be able to understand profoundly the content of the institute's main sequence and the pedagogical principles involved, analyse clearly the experience arising at the grassroots as activities advance, collaborate with teams of friends dedicated to the progress of specific aspects of the community-building process, operate in a learning mode, and draw into their work individuals with abilities needed for preparing materials. Once in place, the branch course would help the friends promoting the related activity to further strengthen their capacity, and it would contribute to extending the associated process of learning in the life of the population. The course would also serve as a repository of the accruing knowledge and as a means for its propagation.

Developing materials of this nature is a complex exercise, and it is of course not a goal that every training institute develop its own branch courses. Training institutes, in consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Counsellors, will determine when it is timely to develop or adopt such additional educational materials. Many institutes will simply select branch courses appropriate to their needs from those of proven effectiveness created by other institutes. Beyond branch courses, it is anticipated that institutes will in the future prepare or adopt other types of courses, which may be integrated in some way into the main sequence or be offered separately. This will, naturally, require the acquisition of even greater capacity by the institutes. However, notwithstanding the far-reaching effects of their efforts, institutes are not expected to address all the educational needs of the Bahá'í community. Within diverse populations, large-scale growth will lead to new educational endeavours to address other pressing demands.

We are confident that, as the friends labour in all regions to release the society-building power of the Faith, the years ahead will witness a significant further expansion of the capacity of training institutes to provide spiritual education to large numbers and to generate, apply, and disseminate knowledge. As part of its mandate to watch over the process of human resource development, we have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow closely the raising of capacity for preparing educational materials. It will establish mechanisms for supporting the institutes and for ensuring that what is learned is appropriately propagated.

We will beseech the Blessed Beauty in the Holy Shrines that the operations of training institutes, these vital agencies of the Faith, may ever receive His unflinching blessings and confirmations.

– The Universal House of Justice

# Message to the Auxiliary Board members

From the Universal House of Justice to the  
Auxiliary Board members throughout the world,  
3 January 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

**O**n this day that we had awaited with so much anticipation to welcome you all in the Holy Land for a joint conference with the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we feel moved to write to you and express our sadness that, owing to world conditions, this longed-for gathering could not take place. The sentiments that we had hoped to express to you in person must now be conveyed from afar. But distance does not diminish the intensity of the love we have for each one of you.

It is one hundred years to the day since the first public reading of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In that precious Document, He set out the obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God, for whose support the Auxiliary Boards for Propagation and Protection were originally created. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summoned the Hands of the Cause “to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things.” Reading these words at this time evokes for us the service that each of you are carrying out across the Bahá’í world. Indeed, the worldwide Bahá’í community owes a debt of gratitude to the entire institution of the Counsellors, including all those who have served as Continental Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, and assistants in years gone by. Without such devoted service from so many, the marvellous advances made in recent decades, which are evident in the world today, could not have occurred. And an indispensable contribution to that progress has been the guidance and encouragement provided by the International Teaching Centre: an institution agile and perspicacious, and wholly indefatigable.

By now you have had the opportunity to become acquainted with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan and to ponder its implications. As will be apparent, the range of fields in which the believers are being asked to serve within their clusters, in order to release the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures, has broadened. Correspondingly, the range of matters to which you must give serious attention has broadened as well. Your efforts are integral to the work of developing

capacity to contribute to the Bahá’í community’s various areas of endeavour, and your efforts are just as integral to helping the friends demonstrate in action the capacity they have acquired. In attending to both of these needs, and more generally in fulfilling your responsibilities for education and the improvement of character, you of course rely a great deal on the efficacy of the institute process. Ever since its creation, the institute has been an essential instrument for your work, and equally, your energetic support has been essential to its development. It brings us much joy, then, to see the pronounced, earnest spirit of collaboration that characterizes your relationship with all those responsible for coordinating the institute’s endeavours.

You have no doubt read the description we presented, in our message to the Counsellors a few days ago, of how you must help the friends to find a fitting response to each of the many challenges they encounter in their pursuit of the Plan. In this regard, we feel sure you are conscious that, however beneficial the influence of your counsel, the influence of your example will be greater still. A notable strength of your office is that it connects the believers with the different levels of Bahá’í administration and reinforces the spirit of cooperation that binds them together. You have a vital duty to help raise consciousness of the purpose of Bahá’í administration and to assist with the establishment and proper functioning of new Local Spiritual Assemblies. You keep the friends connected with the plans and projects of Bahá’í institutions operating at the local, regional, and national levels. Ultimately, you strengthen the connection between the friends and the Universal House of Justice by encouraging and leading the study of messages as they emerge. The believers look to you for a sound understanding of the Plan and for a courageous example of how to put its provisions into effect, especially in teaching the Faith. Your strong familiarity with the reality of circumstances in various clusters, combined with your thorough grasp of what is required for the Cause to advance, puts you in an ideal position to make thoughtful, creative, and timely contributions to consultations about how to release the society-building power of the Faith in every setting.

In addition to the foregoing, we wish to draw attention to your special role in encouraging the youth. So many youth who are now winning victories for the Cause were inspired by an Auxiliary Board member or assistant whose enthusiastic support and spirit of devotion taught them to rely on the power of divine confirmations and boldly enter the arena of service. Your responsibilities extend even further to the promotion of the education of children and junior youth, to the upliftment of the young, and to the

strengthening of a pattern of family life that will produce generation after generation of consecrated souls, faithful followers of Bahá'u'lláh who have chosen the betterment of the world over the advancement of personal interests. The youth who, in the final year of the Nine Year Plan, will be carrying out acts of service to ensure its ultimate success are in many cases the children who, today, need to be nurtured in their love of the Blessed Beauty and their understanding of His mission.

Beloved friends, in your moments of prayer, be assured that all your entreaties to Bahá'u'lláh are accompanied by our own supplications in the Holy Shrines on your behalf. May your movement and your stillness be guided by the gentle winds of His Will, and may He bestow upon you the enduring bounty of being enabled to serve Him in accordance with His wish.

– The Universal House of Justice

## Regarding the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 4 January 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

We are at this moment with the company of the Continental Counsellors—the great majority of them present in the Holy Land, while some who could not travel here join from a distance—and the sixth and final day of their conference, focused on the upcoming Nine Year Plan, is about to conclude. There is so much that could be shared with you about the spirit of this conference, as seen in its participants. Steeped in experience, they have been eyewitnesses to the rise in capacity in the Bahá'í world, and they brim with confidence about what you can further accomplish. We could not have wished for a keener, more insightful grasp of what is called for in the next Plan than was demonstrated in the consultations of these consecrated souls. But this, of course, is just the beginning. When the Counsellors return to the countries of five continents, they will bring to you and those who serve with you all that they have absorbed. They and their auxiliaries will be at your side as you prepare for this immense collective enterprise—especially through your participation in the wave of conferences soon to sweep across the globe, where Bahá'u'lláh's universal summons to work for the betterment of the world will galvanize the assembled well-wishers of humanity.

A confluence of circumstances in the world at large and within the Faith has made this a charged moment. The

global challenges now facing humanity are a severe test of its willingness to put aside short-term self-interest and come to terms with this stark spiritual and moral reality: there is but one, interconnected human family and it shares one precious homeland. At this same moment, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are examining anew the possibilities before them to release the society-building power of the Faith. This Plan will test their stamina, their willpower, and the strength of their love for those who dwell alongside them. They will help to nurture, in every place, communities of common purpose that recognize the power of unity to heal, to transcend. Within these communities, every soul may find sanctuary, and in the friends' many endeavours for worship and praise, for education, for social transformation, for the development of communities—in all these, every soul may find room to grow and to serve. We are stirred by the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: “The small shall be made great, and the powerless shall be given strength; they that are of tender age shall become the children of the Kingdom, and those that have gone astray shall be guided to their heavenly home.”

When Bahá'u'lláh sent forth His glad tidings, the devoted believers who could carry His message to humanity were so few in number. Today, praise be to God, the devotion of the friends is undimmed and their numbers have soared. May their hearts be fortified through the power of His Word and, on every occasion and in every space, may they shine with the light of the splendours of heaven. Such will be the prayer on our tongues and the hope in our breasts when, today, with the Counsellors, we enter the Shrine of the Blessed Beauty to supplicate on your behalf.

– The Universal House of Justice

# Riḍván Message 2022

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Riḍván 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

A year of preparation and reflection, as well as of great exertion, has concluded, distinguished by the efforts of the friends worldwide to mark the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, including by sending representatives to participate in a special event honouring Him in the Holy Land. Through these efforts, the inspiration offered by the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has been felt by countless souls and not only Bahá'ís. His concern for every member of the human family, His teaching work, His promotion of undertakings for education and social well-being, His profound contributions to discourses in both the East and the West, His heartfelt encouragement of projects to construct Houses of Worship, His shaping of early forms of Bahá'í administration, His cultivation of varied aspects of community life—all these complementary facets of His life were a reflection of His constant and complete dedication to serving God and serving humanity. Beyond being a towering figure of moral authority and surpassing spiritual insight, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a pure channel through which the forces released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh could act upon the world. To comprehend the society-building power possessed by the Faith, one need look no further than the achievements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His ministry and the transformative effects of the guidance that flowed unceasingly from His pen. So many of the marvellous advances made by the present-day Bahá'í community—which were surveyed in our message to you last Riḍván—trace their origins to the actions, decisions, and directions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

How fitting, then, that the Bahá'í community's collective tribute to its perfect Exemplar should form the prelude to its commencement of a major undertaking focused on the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The areas of endeavour that fall within the scope of the Nine Year Plan, and of the current series of Plans, are directed towards the fulfilment of this overarching objective. It is also the focus of the more than 10,000 conferences being held across the globe to mark the launch of this great spiritual enterprise. These conferences, expected to welcome unprecedented numbers of participants, are bringing together not only Bahá'ís but many other well-wishers of humanity who share with them a longing to foster unity and better the world. Their determination and strong sense of purpose are reflected in the spirit generated at the gatherings that

have already occurred, where the participants have been galvanized as much by the dynamic consultations to which they have contributed as by the collective vision explored at these joyful events. We look with eager anticipation to what the coming months and years will bring.

Since we addressed our 30 December 2021 message to the Counsellors' Conference, National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils have been earnestly assessing the possibilities for intensifying the process of growth in the clusters within their jurisdiction during the Nine Year Plan. We feel it would be helpful, for the purpose of gauging the progress made over time, to view the Plan as unfolding in two phases of four and five years' duration, and National Assemblies were invited to consider the advances they expect to see in their respective communities by Riḍván 2026 and then by Riḍván 2031. This exercise also involved a re-evaluation of cluster boundaries, and the outcome of these adjustments is that the total number of clusters in the world has risen by a quarter and now stands at over 22,000. Judging by the forecasts received, it is estimated that, by the end of the Plan, a programme of growth at some level of development will exist in around 14,000 of these clusters. From among them, the number where the programme of growth could be considered intensive is projected to climb to 11,000 over the same time period. And of these, it is anticipated that the number of clusters where the third milestone has been passed will rise above 5,000 by 2031. Without question, to make such advances will entail colossal effort over the entire duration of the Plan. Yet we find these to be worthy aspirations towards which to strive, for they represent an ambitious but serious appraisal of what lies within reach.

This is telling. Such objectives could not be realistically contemplated if administrative institutions and agencies had not evolved markedly, endowing them with significantly heightened capacity to manage the affairs of a community whose activities have multiplied so quickly, embracing a vast and growing number of kindred souls. It would not be possible to aspire to such growth if a desire to learn—to act, to reflect, to capture insights, and to absorb the insights emerging elsewhere—had not been cultivated at all levels, extending to the grassroots of the community. And the effort implied by such projections would hardly be feasible if a systematic approach to the teaching work and to human resource development had not become increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í world. All this has brought about an advance in the Bahá'í community's awareness of its own identity and purpose. A determination to be outward looking in the process of community building had already become an established aspect of culture in many, many places; it has now blossomed, in a rising number of communities, into a

sense of real responsibility for the spiritual and material progress of larger and larger groups within society, well beyond the membership of the Bahá'í community itself. The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles. The significance of the developments we have described, reaching this point one hundred years after the inauguration of the Administrative Order, cannot be overlooked. In the extraordinary rise in capacity that has occurred in the last two decades—and which has made it possible for the Bahá'í world to view its endeavours in terms of the release of the society-building power of the Faith—we see incontrovertible evidence that the Cause of God has entered the sixth epoch of its Formative Age. We announced last Riḍván that the widespread phenomenon of large numbers participating in Bahá'í activities, being kindled by faith, and acquiring the skills and abilities to serve their communities signalled that the third epoch of the Master's Divine Plan had commenced; thus, the One Year Plan, at its inception then and at its conclusion now, has come to mark a set of historic advances made by the company of the faithful. And at the threshold of a new, mighty undertaking, this united body of believers stands ready to seize the possibilities wide open before it.

A prominent feature of the epoch that now ends was the erection of the last of the continental Houses of Worship and the initiation of projects to establish Houses of Worship at the national and local levels. Much has been learned, by Bahá'ís the world over, about the concept of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* and the union of worship and service it embodies. During the sixth epoch of the Formative Age, much more will be learned about the path that leads from the development within a community of a flourishing devotional life—and the service which it inspires—to the appearance of a *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*. Consultations are beginning with various National Spiritual Assemblies, and as these proceed, we will periodically announce places where a Bahá'í House of Worship will be raised up in the coming years.

Our joy at seeing the community of the Greatest Name go from strength to strength is tempered by our deep sorrow at seeing the persistence of conditions and conflicts in the world that create misery and desperate suffering—in particular, at observing the recrudescence of destructive forces that have disordered international affairs while visiting horrors upon populations. We know well and are reassured that, as Bahá'í communities have repeatedly demonstrated in many different contexts, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are committed to offering relief and support to those around them, no matter how straitened their own circumstances. But until humanity as a whole undertakes to establish its affairs on foundations of justice and truth, it is, alas, fated to stagger from one crisis to another. We pray that, if the recent outbreak of war in

Europe is to yield any lessons for the future, it will serve as an urgent reminder of the course that the world must take if it is to attain genuine and enduring peace. The principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh to the monarchs and presidents of His time, and the weighty responsibilities with which He charged rulers past and present, are perhaps even more pertinent and imperative today than when they were first recorded by His Pen. For Bahá'ís, the inexorable advance of the Major Plan of God—bringing with it ordeals and upheavals, but ultimately impelling humanity towards justice, peace, and unity—is the context within which the Minor Plan of God, with which the believers are chiefly occupied, unfolds. The dysfunctional state of present-day society makes the need for the release of the society-building power of the Faith abundantly clear and pressing. We cannot but expect that, for now, convulsions and disturbances will continue to afflict the world; you will no doubt appreciate, then, why every earnest supplication we offer for all God's children to be relieved from bewilderment and bitter hardship is coupled with an equally heartfelt prayer for the success of the much-needed service you are rendering for the Cause of the Prince of Peace.

In every cluster where the activities of the Plan are gaining momentum, we see the development of communities with the noble characteristics we described in the 30 December 2021 message. As societies experience stresses of various kinds, the followers of the Abhá Beauty must stand out more and more for their qualities of resilience and rationality, for their standard of conduct and their adherence to principle, and for the compassion, detachment, and forbearance they demonstrate in their pursuit of unity. Time and again, the distinctive characteristics and attitudes shown by the believers in periods of acute difficulty have prompted people to turn to Bahá'ís for explanation, counsel, and support, especially when the life of a society has been upset by peril and unforeseen disruptions. In sharing these observations, we are mindful that the Bahá'í community itself also experiences the effects of the forces of disintegration at work in the world. Moreover, we are conscious that the greater the friends' efforts to promote the Word of God, the stronger the countervailing forces they will encounter, sooner or later, from various quarters. They must fortify their minds and spirits against the tests that are sure to come, lest these impair the integrity of their endeavours. But the believers know well that whatever storms lie ahead, the ark of the Cause is equal to them all. Successive stages of its voyage have seen it weather the elements and ride the waves. Now it is bound for a new horizon. The confirmations of the Almighty are the gusts that fill its sails and propel it towards its destination. And the Covenant is its lodestar, keeping the sacred vessel set on its sure and certain course. May the hosts of heaven send blessings upon all who sail within.

– The Universal House of Justice

# Pioneer call

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 24 May 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

Since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's clarion call in His Tablets of the Divine Plan for the believers to rise and travel far and wide, to plant the "pure seeds" of the divine teachings, and to "become the cause of the illumination of the world of humanity", wave upon wave of His loved ones have responded enthusiastically to enter the pioneering field. The Divine Plan—whose unfoldment is now in its third epoch—as well as the global Plans of the Bahá'í community that constitute its successive stages, continue to inspire and channel the efforts of the friends and reinforce their sense of mission and commitment to creating a world materially and spiritually prosperous. Indeed, through these dedicated efforts the Faith has taken root in the farthest corners of the earth and is flourishing in numerous settings, and where the soil of the human heart has been especially fertile, the release of its society-building power is increasingly evident. Owing to the requisites of the last two Plans, greater emphasis was given to homefront pioneering, resulting

*What has become apparent in this respect is the advantage of having a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. In this light, one of the chief objectives of the Nine Year Plan is to have at least one such cluster in every country and region.*

in over 7,000 friends entering this field of service, while some 700 responded to the call for pioneers in the international arena. Considering the restrictions on movement and travel in place for a significant part of this period, this achievement is truly remarkable. Even more astounding is the fact that these pioneers were raised in 169 countries—a testament to the spiritual capacity, consecration, and resolve of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

As indicated in our message of 30 December 2021 addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, countries or regions where the Faith is at an early stage of development can greatly benefit from what is being learned in Bahá'í communities around the world about accelerating the work of expansion and consolidation. What has become apparent in this respect is the advantage of having a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. In this light, one of the chief objectives of the Nine Year Plan is to have at least one such cluster in every country and region. There are some 160 places where this goal remains to be achieved; several hundred pioneers, mostly in the international arena, are needed early on to ensure that this objective is attained by the end of the Plan. In this regard, Bahá'í communities in countries where the processes of growth are firmly established are expected to provide the majority of such pioneers. It is anticipated that these friends would come from stronger clusters, settle in less advanced centres of activity in receiving countries or regions, and quickly become part of an emerging nucleus of individuals committed to cultivating a vibrant pattern of community life. The spiritual forces released by such movement and the experience that a pioneer is able to bring to the community are potent catalysts for progress. The National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils in the countries from which pioneers are expected to arise bear a special responsibility to facilitate this movement and to offer support to the goal clusters, such as by facilitating visits by travelling teachers and institute resource persons, or connecting active participants in a pioneer's new community to the process of learning under way in the advanced clusters in their country.

As outlined in our message to the Bahá'ís of the world at Riḍván, it is anticipated that over the course of the current Plan, programmes of growth will be established in thousands of new clusters, that the number of clusters with an intensive programme of growth will more than double to 11,000, and that over 5,000 of these will have advanced further. The achievement of these formidable global objectives, based on forecasts made by the National Assemblies themselves, calls for urgent advances on many fronts, among them generating a steady flow of homefront pioneers who can arise and move to neighbourhoods or clusters where help is required. In this connection, results are more easily obtained when these pioneers move from



a cluster with a well-established programme of growth to a locality that is nearby or within the same region, thus taking advantage of similarities in culture and language, and building on social and familial connections that may exist. One pattern of service that developed during the last two Plans and brought us great joy concerned the movement of youth who, taking advantage of their relative freedom, would spend several months in a nascent community, making a valuable contribution to its development. This pattern holds great promise for the Nine Year Plan.

Beyond what is described above, believers who are moved to offer a period of service as a pioneer can, of course, arise from anywhere and settle wherever in the world they feel they can make a contribution to the development of the Faith. Familiarity with the provisions of the global Plans and experience with teaching the Cause and community-building activities in one's own cluster can be of tremendous advantage in this field of service.

Confident of the community's appreciation of the significance of this historical juncture and in its capacity to respond to the demands of the hour, we now call on the friends to consider how they can contribute to the pioneering imperatives of the Nine Year Plan—both on the home front and in the international field. In preparing to enter this vital arena, they will find the counsels of the institutions indispensable. As they arise to shed abroad ever more widely the divine fragrances, the words of the Guardian to the followers of the Blessed Beauty some seven decades ago at the opening of the World Crusade will no doubt resound in their ears: “‘Light as the spirit,’ ‘pure as air,’ ‘blazing as fire,’ ‘unrestrained as the wind’—for such is Bahá'u'lláh's own admonition to His loved ones in His Tablets, and directed not to a select few but to the entire congregation of the faithful—let them scatter far and wide, proclaim the glory of God's Revelation in this Day, quicken the souls of men and ignite in their hearts the love of the One Who alone is their omnipotent and divinely appointed Redeemer.”

– The Universal House of Justice



# Regarding the acquisition of properties

To the Bahá'í community of Canada,

18 January 2022.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

**T**he Nine Year Plan beckons, its scope and features outlined in a series of thrilling recent messages from the Universal House of Justice. Three brief months remain in the One Year Plan, the first year and first Plan in a series of global Plans that will “carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Ridván 2046.”<sup>1</sup> A precious privilege has been accorded this generation to lay the final foundations for what is to come. We are writing to share news of one long awaited victory that has been won and on which we can now build.

In April 2016, the Universal House of Justice wrote to our Assembly to underline the pressing need for properties that would include dormitory space for institute camps and campaigns that serve clusters where institute activities had increased significantly, namely Canada's two learning sites, Toronto and Vancouver. Not surprisingly, the search that began in these two clusters was slowed by rising real estate prices and the unavailability of suitable properties with the requisite conditions. Nonetheless, the need highlighted by the House of Justice became even clearer over time, and the first property of this kind, the Vancouver Bahá'í Centre of Learning, was acquired in March 2018 through the generosity of the Vancouver Bahá'í community, and provides, in addition to administrative space, capacity for both daylong and overnight institute camps and other events.

After a visit in 2019 to Sydney, Australia by teams from Toronto and Vancouver who witnessed what is possible with access to this kind of space and the dedicated service of youth and other friends, the search for a similar space for the Toronto cluster intensified. In May 2020, we acquired the Bethany Bahá'í Centre of Learning, which is a 12-acre property about an hour outside of Toronto and sleeps 120. At the same time, the Ottawa cluster had also begun to rapidly grow in multiple neighbourhoods, its pace of growth outstripping all expectations. In Canada's three most advanced clusters, a clear vision emerged of at least 1,000 core activities that embrace the populations in several centres of intense activity. The conditions of the

pandemic offered both challenge and opportunity, and these communities continued to grow.

With great joy, the National Spiritual Assembly announces the recent acquisition of a 60-acre educational facility located approximately 80 kilometres outside of Ottawa to meet the educational needs of that cluster. The array of properties that serve the three clusters of Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver, as well as their surrounding regions, thus expands substantially. They include this 60-acre riverfront property and the buildings that served as a camp previously known as the Providence Point camp, with accommodations for 125 as well as campsites. Another is the property next to the Bahá'í National Centre in Markham, that had been leased out to a tennis camp for over ten years and now returns to us for our use. This facility has a day-use capacity of over 150.

Beyond this, however, 11 properties have been acquired since 2017, primarily through rental, to serve growing neighbourhood needs in nine clusters. In addition to these neighbourhood centres, a number of pioneer homes now serve a range of needs, including informal spaces for activities and a base for youth offering a period of service. A slide show highlighting these exciting developments can be accessed here: [https://bnc-media-pub.s3.ca-central-1.amazonaws.com/general/New\\_Properties\\_20220118.pdf](https://bnc-media-pub.s3.ca-central-1.amazonaws.com/general/New_Properties_20220118.pdf).

The Community Properties Fund, established in 2017, serves as a reservoir for this critical area of activity. An initial infusion of \$2.5 million from the National Assembly has grown through the generous contributions of friends and Assemblies across the country, including a number of bequests. Thus, a total principal of \$5 million is now generating an annual investment income that has allowed the National Assembly to act with confidence. As we survey the horizons of the next Plan, we see that access to dedicated space will be a determining factor to support growth in community after community. Where neighbourhood centres have been leased and sufficient experience has been gained in their upkeep and use, the next step is to consider the purchase of a property, rather than continuing to pay monthly rent. In more than 150 neighbourhoods across the country, existing and new centres of intense activity will need space over the next few years.

Thus, the National Assembly places before you a goal worthy of Canada's generous response to the material needs of the Cause thus far. By the mid-point of the Nine Year Plan in 2026, a total principal of \$10 million will be needed to generate the annual revenue required to finance a range of property needs. This special goal must be met without diminishing in the slightest the

<sup>1</sup> From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

community's support to other funds of the Faith, calling for creativity and sacrifice, two qualities that shine bright in the Canadian community. In the final paragraphs of the 30 December 2021 message, the House of Justice states that the "present-day capacity of the Bahá'í community, combined with the discipline it has achieved through adherence to a coherent framework for action,

has prepared it for an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material." With gratitude, anticipation and love, we offer prayers for each of you.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

# Regarding elections

To the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1 February, 2022.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

With love, the National Spiritual Assembly greets you on the occasion of the Feast of Dominion, just days before the election of delegates to the National Convention. Indeed, the weekend of 12-13 February 2022 offers every believer of voting age in Canada a precious opportunity. In one of His Tablets to the friends in Persia, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice." By voting in the upcoming election of delegates, and through their presence at unit conventions where it is possible to hold them, the friends participate in the process that decides the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly at Riḍván 2022. That membership will be called to elect the Universal House of Justice during the period of Riḍván 2023. This year, then, the simple, profound act of casting a ballot in the unit election is a direct and sacred link between the individual believer and the election of the Universal House of Justice. It is our longing to see every believer of voting age experience this grace by prayerfully availing themselves of one of the many ways that a ballot can be cast in this election, despite limitations in gathering in much of the country.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time this year, while the age of eligibility to be elected remains 21, those between the ages of 18 and 20 will participate in this stage of the electoral process by voting. Another thrilling development concerns the House of Justice's approval of a two-stage electoral process in a number of communities around the world, an approach which traces its origins to instructions given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Spiritual Assembly of Tíhrán. It is with great joy that we announce: at Riḍván 2022, the two communities of Ottawa and Toronto will be the first in Canada to elect their Local Spiritual Assemblies in this manner. These communities are also the first two clusters

in Canada to be within clear reach of winning their goal of 1,000 core activities.

In its 4 January 2022 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, the Universal House of Justice wrote: "A confluence of circumstances in the world at large and within the faith has made this a charged moment." What wonders we have seen in these days! Despite the constraints of the last two years, the number of those involved in core activities has risen to 29,000. An initial surge in devotional gatherings in response to the National Assembly's call has been sustained, connecting hearts with the Word of God and generating new conversations within families and between friends, online and in spaces large and small. Building on these conversations, the friends are also learning to invite others to participate in the institute process as agents of community building, kindling the spark of faith in many a heart.

The launch of the Nine Year Plan is but three months away. Still, between now and Riḍván much remains to be done. Each individual and each family has a part to play in laying the foundation for the momentous venture that awaits. In over 20 clusters, Bahá'ís and their friends are increasing the intensity of their efforts with the aim of being one of the 5,000 intensive programmes of growth to be established by the Plan's conclusion. In other communities, in both neighbourhoods and across the cluster, groups of friends are reaching out to large numbers, advancing the frontiers of learning. In still others, efforts to establish a programme of growth are gaining strength with the prospect of extending an invitation to one of the conferences that will soon "sweep across the globe, where Bahá'u'lláh's universal summons to work for the betterment of the world will galvanize the assembled well-wishers of humanity."<sup>2</sup>

In its letter dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice describes the Plan to begin shortly as "the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance."<sup>3</sup> It "will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the

<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> 4 January 2022, The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World.

<sup>3</sup> 30 December 2021, The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than those with which it honours the glorious deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.<sup>74</sup>

4 30 December 2021, The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

The National Assembly prays at every meeting for you, that the heroism of your daily efforts may be confirmed by His grace, and for all those whose path you seek to illumine with the light of faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

# Regarding the series of worldwide conferences in Canada

To the Bahá'ís of Canada, 23 March 2022.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

At a time when the world is in turmoil, its order shaken, and the hearts of so many of our compatriots are overshadowed by fear and anxiety, the National Spiritual Assembly is moved to address you with deepest love and admiration. In contrast to the disintegration of the old world order, what you have accomplished in this One Year Plan fills our hearts with hope and confidence: you have become connected to thousands upon thousands who believe in the oneness of humanity and translate this belief into daily acts of service; 84 clusters in Canada have an intensive program of growth, 24 of which are embracing large numbers; almost 8,000 core activities are attracting the participation of nearly 30,000 souls. And around them are scores of others with whom you and they are engaged in meaningful conversation. You have already begun to see all those around you with new eyes, regarding them as souls brought into being in this day to “work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony”. Against this backdrop of dramatic crisis and victory, the upcoming global conferences will be a turning point on that path for the peoples of Canada, drawing them into a direct conversation with the Universal House of Justice that will give meaning to their shared hope for change.

In its 4 January 2022 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, the House of Justice described a charged moment:

“The global challenges now facing humanity are a severe test of its willingness to put aside short-term self-interest and come to terms with this stark spiritual and moral reality: there is but one, interconnected human family and it shares one precious homeland. At this same moment, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are examining anew the possibilities before them to

release the society-building power of the Faith. This Plan will test their stamina, their willpower, and the strength of their love for those who dwell alongside them. They will help to nurture, in every place, communities of common purpose that recognize the power of unity to heal, to transcend. Within these communities, every soul may find sanctuary, and in the friends' many endeavours for worship and praise, for education, for social transformation, for the development of communities—in all these, every soul may find room to grow and to serve. We are stirred by the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: “The small shall be made great, and the powerless shall be given strength; they that are of tender age shall become the children of the Kingdom, and those that have gone astray shall be guided to their heavenly home.”

*In the series of worldwide conferences called for by the House of Justice, we see an instrument perfectly designed to open wide the door for this ingathering of humanity.*

In the series of worldwide conferences called for by the House of Justice, we see an instrument perfectly designed to open wide the door for this ingathering of humanity. The wave of these conferences in Canada, slightly delayed by the public health conditions, is now ready to surge. Over 80 gatherings are being planned under the able leadership of the Regional Bahá'í Councils and in close collaboration with the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Board members. They will cover the entire country

over the next three months, inspiring action in the assembled well-wishers of humanity. The participants—children and grandparents, youth and elders, Bahá’í families generations-strong, and friends newly associated with the community—will explore themes that build understanding of conditions in the world and offer a channel for the longing to serve that has been awakened in every heart in this day.

A national website is being created at the URL <https://conferences.bahai.ca> to share basic information and a registration form for the conferences. The National Assembly will write again as soon as the link is live. In the meantime, we invite you to visit the Bahá’í World News Service coverage of the conferences held by your brothers and sisters in other lands at <https://news.bahai.org/story/1587/>.

The final weeks of the One Year Plan are unfolding, in a year dedicated to profound reflection on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Covenant of which He was the Centre. In just six weeks, delegates will come together at the National Convention in Toronto to elect the membership of the National Assembly and consult on the affairs of our national community, as we embark on a momentous Nine Year Plan focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. Between now and then, many

conferences will have already taken place and infused fresh spiritual energy into the community. The well-familiar passage from the Tablets of the Divine Plan takes on new significance as the pressing need of humanity meets the opportunity of these days:

“Again I repeat that the future of Canada, whether from a material or a spiritual standpoint, is very great. Day by day civilization and freedom shall increase. The clouds of the Kingdom will water the seeds of guidance which have been sown there. Consequently, rest ye not, seek ye no composure, attach not yourselves to the luxuries of this ephemeral world, free yourselves from every attachment, and strive with heart and soul to become fully established in the Kingdom of God. Gain ye the heavenly treasures. Day by day become ye more illumined. Draw ye nearer and nearer unto the threshold of oneness...”<sup>1</sup>

As each of you makes plans to attend a nearby conference, who among your friends and family will you invite to join you, and what acts of heroism might each offer for the cause of the Most Great Peace?

With loving Bahá’í greetings,  
— National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada

1 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Tablet to the Bahá’ís of Canada and Greenland.

# Call for Nine Year Plan pioneers

To the Bahá’ís of Canada, 18 April 2022.

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

**T**he final hours are upon us, in a year dedicated to profound reflection on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Covenant of which He was the Centre. How many are the ways that He has been called to mind during this period! How many the acts of service that have carried the fragrance of His love far and wide! “Every community-building endeavour undertaken today, every educational activity and every outreach, carries with it the hope of communicating, through our own efforts, a token of the same love He showered upon every soul. Such efforts are the best tribute that can be rendered to Him, at this centenary and every day that follows.”<sup>1</sup>

We turn to you today, stirred by these familiar, poignant words of the Master: “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 ...”<sup>2</sup>. Generations of Canadian believers have arisen to fulfil that longing, from the first travelling teachers responding to the divine mission carved in fourteen Tablets of the Divine Plan, to the Knights of Bahá’u’lláh who opened new territories to the Cause during the Ten Year Crusade, to the present-day youth who have moved to a neighbourhood to dedicate years of their lives to their younger peers and their families. Over one hundred years of this movement has carried the love of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá around the world and embedded it in countless hearts here at home.

On the threshold of a new stage of the Divine Plan, it brings us great joy to raise a new call, for the next generation of pioneers with a special mission.

In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice pointed out the immense value to a region, of a cluster where the third milestone has been passed:

1 27 November 2021 The Universal House of Justice, *Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*.

2 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

“Once the friends in a given cluster have developed the range of capacities that such progress implies, and the means to disseminate insights and share experience about community-building endeavours are in place, then a swift acceleration of the work of expansion and consolidation in surrounding clusters becomes possible. With this in mind, it is imperative that during the Nine Year Plan the process of growth reach this level of intensity in at least one cluster in every country and every region. This constitutes one of the Plan’s chief objectives and it will call for the concentrated effort of many a consecrated soul. The International Teaching Centre is ready to work with you to implement several strategies to bring this about. Foremost among these will be the deployment of teams of international and homefront pioneers who are familiar with the framework for action and are prepared to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to serving the Cause over a number of years. You will need to impress upon National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá’í Councils the urgency of encouraging believers who, following in the footsteps of so many heroic souls of the past, can arise to ensure that the light of the Faith shines bright in every territory. We look in particular to countries, regions, and clusters where strength and experience have accumulated to generate a flow of pioneers to places where help is needed, and also to provide support by other means. This flow of support is one more way in which the spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance, so essential for progress, manifests itself in systematic action.”

The Supreme Body has indicated that “The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá’í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade.” The International Teaching Centre has prepared a preliminary list of regions in over 75 countries, and Canada has been asked to collaborate with a number of other communities to ensure that the first wave of pioneers sets forth in the first year of the Plan. Within Canada, specific clusters have been identified to receive pioneers to help accelerate the process of growth underway, aiming to more than triple the number of clusters in Canada where the third milestone has been passed, from the current 24 to over 80 by the end of the Nine Year Plan. With the guidance of the National Assembly and in close collaboration with the Counsellors, task forces have been

*The International Teaching Centre has prepared a preliminary list of regions in over 75 countries, and Canada has been asked to collaborate with a number of other communities to ensure that the first wave of pioneers sets forth in the first year of the Plan.*

appointed in British Columbia and Ontario, to coordinate an orientation and training programme that will prepare both homefront and international pioneers for their service. Contact information of these task forces and the national pioneer desk are provided below. The Auxiliary Board members in every region stand ready to assist you, and all the local, regional and national institutions and agencies will support those who are moved to step into the arena. Indeed, the entire community is summoned to participate in this endeavour. Some will be able to arise to serve as pioneers, some will depute a pioneer directly or contribute to the Deputization Fund, some will host pioneers in training in clusters chosen to serve as training grounds, and all will support through prayers and loving encouragement for those who arise.

Dear friends, we need not speak of the condition of the world, and the acceleration of the forces of disintegration. These forces must be matched by a mighty effort by those who carry the love of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá into every corner of the planet, prepared with the present-day strategies of a Plan He devised for the healing of the world. Who among you will claim this honour, in this day?

With loving Bahá’í greetings,  
– National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada



Participants at the youth conference in Vancouver, B.C., which took place August 3-5, 2013. Photo: Ryan Lash

## In the throes of learning

The following article, prepared at the request of the National Spiritual Assembly, provides a perspective of the achievements of the Canadian Bahá'í community during the 25-year period of 1996-2021, when the focus of the Bahá'í world was on advancing the process of entry by troops.

While the earliest stirrings of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada are traced to London, Ontario at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the persistent teaching work of May Maxwell after she settled in Montreal in 1902 that led to the formation of the first permanent Bahá'í group in Canada. Ten years later, the Bahá'ís of Montreal would welcome 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Whose presence would infuse the small band of believers with vision and a sense of

mission and endow them with an awareness of being a community.

Over the next half century, under the ceaseless guidance and encouragement of Shoghi Effendi, the Faith began to take root across the whole country. Small groups of believers audaciously presented the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in diverse settings: in the media, at exhibitions and public meetings, in literary circles and, notably, in firesides. As the number of believers increased,

nascent communities emerged. The first Local Spiritual Assembly formed in Montreal in 1922, the same year that community held the first formal Nineteen Day Feast in Canada. Five years later, in 1927, the second Local Assembly was established in Vancouver, followed by Moncton, St. Lambert and Toronto in 1938; Hamilton in 1940; Halifax and Winnipeg in 1942; Edmonton in 1943; Charlottetown and Regina in 1944; Scarborough and Vernon in



The first Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ottawa, which was elected in 1948.

Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

1947; Ottawa, West Vancouver and Victoria in 1948. That same year the first National Convention was held in the city of Montreal leading to the establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, the ninth pillar of the institution of the Universal House of Justice, marking the Canadian community's emergence from infancy. A year later, in 1949, the Canadian Parliament was the first sovereign legislature to formally recognize the Bahá'í Faith by incorporating the

National Assembly by a special act of Parliament.

In 1963, at the end of the Ten Year Crusade, there were some 1,500 Bahá'ís residing in Canada, with a number of major cities having reached 20 to 30 believers. A notable exception was the First Nations community of Kawacatoose, Saskatchewan that counted over 70 believers in 1962, the largest Bahá'í community in Canada at the time.

From the 1960s to the mid-1980s the Canadian community underwent a profound change in character, propelled by the entry into its ranks of a sizeable number of people from three distinct populations. The first was of Indigenous peoples across the country who manifested a remarkable receptivity to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty; the spark of Faith was kindled in hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds during this period. The second population was the youth who, attracted to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a just, peaceful, and prosperous future, entered the community in large numbers. As these youth became young adults, many moved as pioneers to smaller towns and villages across

the country to help extend the influence of the Faith and more firmly root it into the fabric of the country. The third population arrived under tragic circumstances. From 1979 through the early 1980s some 2,000 Iranian Bahá'í refugees settled in communities across the country, bringing with them knowledge and devotion that inspired and fortified the young, emerging community of the Greatest Name in Canada.

It is necessary to pause to appreciate the magnitude of what occurred during these years. At the first Holy Year in 1964 there were fewer than 2,000 Bahá'ís in Canada. Twenty-two years later, at the start of the Six Year Plan in 1986, that number had risen to well over 21,000. During these years, on average, just under 1,000 people a year were moved to identify with the Cause of the Blessed Beauty. The rise of enrollment tested the resources—mental and physical—of local Bahá'í communities to tend to the task of deepening growing numbers of believers and consolidating emerging communities and Spiritual Assemblies.

The Canadian Bahá'í community, as so many of its brother and sis-



The first National Native Bahá'í Council, which took place at Silver Creek Ranch near Cochrane, Alta., in 1979.

Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives



ter communities around the world, found itself grappling with the interlocking challenges of expansion and consolidation. No matter how elusive the goal appeared, no matter how frustrating and difficult the work of consolidation proved to be, the friends in every region of the country persisted, confident that with His help the path would become clear. Their efforts, combined with those of their brothers and sisters labouring in country after country, led to abundant insights into how to systematize the promotion of entry by troops.

Shoghi Effendi perceived in the organic life of the Cause a dialectic of victory and crisis: “Indeed, its history, if read aright, may be said to resolve itself into a series of pulsations, of alternating crises and triumphs, leading it ever nearer to its divinely appointed destiny.”<sup>1</sup> Progress, then, emerges from the continuous interplay of crisis and victory, as we struggle to advance in understanding and to more fully develop and manifest spiritual qualities. Canada’s experience with large-scale expansion will need to be organized and examined within a framework of crisis and victory, far removed from simplistic notions of success and failure. This is a task that future historians can undertake in the fullness of time. This article has only a modest objective of reminding us of the great distance travelled in the past quarter century. Many decades will need to pass before the story of the series of Plans extending from 1996 to 2021 can be placed in proper perspective.

### The Four Year Plan: 1996–2000

The Four Year Plan focused the entire Bahá’í world on a single aim: to achieve a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. No one present in 1996 could have conceived of the magnitude of effort that would be demanded, nor envisioned the profound advance the culture of the Faith would undergo, nor foresee the tremendous victories that would be achieved as each of the three protagonists—the individual,



A national training for Ruhi Book 1, organized by the National Teaching Committee, took place in March 1999 at the Bahá’í National Centre in Markham, Ont. Photo: Canadian Bahá’í Archives

the institutions, and the community—developed capacity and together learned to harmonize expansion and consolidation.

The initial objective was to systematize the development of human resources, with the view to substantially increasing the number of “believers trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.”<sup>2</sup> In November 1996, following extensive consultations, the National Spiritual Assembly established six regional training institutes, each with a committee charged with overseeing the development and deployment of training programs.

The newly appointed committees worked diligently and by March 1997 submitted their initial plans of action to the National Assembly. In April of that year, the first institute courses were held in most regions, focused generally on fundamental verities. Progress during the remainder of 1997 and 1998, however, was slow, with the committees needing to oversee the development of training material, identify and prepare facilitators, and handle the logistical arrangements of courses.

In July 1994, the National Assembly had established Regional Teaching and Administrative Committees in

several regions with the aim of fostering the development of the Cause, particularly the teaching work, closer to local communities. In May 1997, as training institutes were being established, the Universal House of Justice wrote to all National Spiritual Assemblies to announce its decision—made considering the expansion of the Bahá’í community and the growing complexity of issues facing some National Assemblies—to formalize a new element of Bahá’í administration between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, to be designated as Regional Bahá’í Councils. Canada was one of the first countries in the world to establish this level of administration. Councils were to be elected once each year and the National Assembly set the first elections for June 1998.

At Ridván 1998, the National Assembly travelled to the Holy Land to participate in the Eighth International Bahá’í Convention. During the consultations, the Assembly was moved by the descriptions of the progress being made in raising human resources in countries that had adopted the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute. These accounts, together with the positive response of increasing numbers of friends in Canada, led the National Assembly to decide in December 1998 that there was

<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World, Ridván 1996.

merit in the community seeing its engagement with the Ruhi courses as a long-term undertaking; it called for the courses of the Ruhi Institute to be the first priority for all institute participants until Riqván 2003.

In January 1999, the National Assembly asked the National Teaching Committee to organize a training on the Ruhi materials for members of each Regional Council and institute committee. That spring, a small number of friends gathered to study portions of *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, which helped the institutes become familiar with the curriculum and the approach to training that the Ruhi Institute had devised. During the summer of that year, the institutes trained a few tutors to offer *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. The committees, freed from the challenges of developing content, were able to focus attention on identifying, training, and mobilizing tutors. This led to a substantial rise in the number of friends studying and completing courses. In December of that year, the National Assembly called for the Ruhi courses to be at the core of Canada's institute process for the foreseeable future.

Following this decision, at the suggestion of the Universal House of Justice, the National Assembly invited tutors and other key individuals involved in the institute process to attend a special gathering in May 2000 in Montreal. The spiritually-charged gathering was attended by several Continental Counsellors and institute resource persons from South America. Those present studied sections of *Walking Together on a Path of Service*, then in draft form, and reflected on their experience to date. The gathering became a turning point for the institute process in Canada. It strengthened the vision of the regional institutes and infused them with confidence. Many of the secondary questions that had been discussed at length, such as the difference between education and training, fell away. The work required became clearer and practical next steps apparent. The following month, in June 2000, each institute



Friends gather to study Ruhi Book 1 in Pincher Creek, Alta. in March 1999.

Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

committee was encouraged by the National Assembly to set targets for the number of tutors to be trained, study circles to be formed, and children's class teachers to be raised up. The National Assembly also encouraged the committees to establish some form of coordination to provide ongoing support to the increasing number of tutors, through regular reflection gatherings and other means. It was anticipated that this step would strengthen the learning process and help free the committees from being preoccupied with the logistics of training.

### **The Twelve Month Plan: 2000–2001**

The moving call of the Universal House of Justice at Riqván 2000 regarding the spiritual and moral education of children and junior youth had a profound effect on the thinking of the friends and institutions in Canada. Heartfelt and thoughtful discussion occurred at every level of the community and in the meetings of each institution. With a heightened consciousness of the needs and aspirations of children, the community consulted on what more could be done to support families and to ensure that the environment of every

gathering was one that valued, recognized, and embraced the young. As efforts were made, the community came to appreciate that an environment warm and welcoming to children and junior youth benefitted every member, young and old alike. A more profound consciousness of the necessity of nurturing and educating the youngest members of society galvanized the training institutes, which intensified their efforts to train children's class teachers. Some of the earliest efforts in Canada to learn about educational material for junior youth occurred during this year.

This Plan, while brief, had a deep and enduring effect on the Bahá'í community. The spiritual and moral development of the young became more tightly woven into the fabric of the culture of the Faith. While the principal focus of action at this time was directed to the well-being and development of children from Bahá'í families, the heightening concern for children would, in the not distant future, lead the community to undertake strenuous efforts to extend spiritual, moral, and intellectual education to all children, to nurture the most valuable treasure a community can possess.



Indigenous friends in attendance at a training institute conference to launch the Twelve Month Plan, which took place at the Louis Bourgeois Centre in Pierrefonds, Que. in May 2000. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

During this Plan, each of the training institutes developed sufficient administrative capacity to raise human resources with a degree of regularity. There was a steady increase in the number of tutors trained and deployed, in the number of study circles, and in the number of people completing one or two courses of the Ruhi curriculum. While statistics were not yet being systematically recorded, it appears that by the end of the Twelve Month Plan nearly 2,000 individuals in Canada had completed at least one institute course since the Ruhi curriculum became the focus of training in 1999. Considering the rising numbers, institute committees began to ask individuals to serve in coordination roles with a primary focus on training tutors and helping them to gain initial experience. Coordinators also helped to keep the committees connected to what was being learned at the grassroots of the region they served. This rising institutional capacity was an important step in the development of the institutes, leading the National Assembly to decide it was timely for the Committees to evolve into institute boards.

By the conclusion of the Twelve Month Plan, Regional Councils and institute boards were beginning to find their place. They had established a pattern of consultation and were developing capacity to formulate plans to foster expansion and consolidation; Local Spiritual Assemblies and an increasing number of friends in the regions were beginning to turn to the Councils and Boards for advice in the teaching work. Rising institutional capacity at the regional level enabled decision-making to move closer to the grassroots. Many more friends—those serving on Regional Councils, and institute boards; coordinators, tutors, and participants themselves—were grappling with the challenging questions emerging from action in the field. The number of people thinking about growth was increasing at an historically rapid rate. This was one of the first fruits of the training institute and an illustration of the statement of the Universal House of Justice at the outset of the Four Year Plan that, “As for the institutions, entry by troops will act upon them as much as they will act upon it.”<sup>3</sup>

3 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 1996.

## The Five Year Plan: 2001–2006

On a weekend in mid-February 2001, regional institutions gathered with the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assembly at the Toronto Bahá'í Centre to deliberate on the five-year enterprise that lay ahead. The participants at the national meeting broke into regional groupings and, in the span of a few sessions, divided their regions into small geographic areas called clusters, based not on the characteristics of Bahá'í communities, but on the social and economic features of the population as a whole. Once a general outline of boundaries had been determined, each cluster was placed along a continuum of growth following the outline presented in the 9 January 2001 message of the House of Justice.

The task of placing clusters along a continuum was not, at the time, straightforward. It required building capacity to perceive movement and to think in terms of process. The friends had to overcome a tendency to equate a cluster's place on a continuum with a statement about its status and to recognize that such categorization was done only as a means of evaluating capacity for growth in order to adopt approaches and methods best suited to the reality of each cluster. It also entailed distinguishing between *equality*, which would imply that each cluster is treated equally and should receive the same amount of attention and resources, and *equity*, in which each cluster receives attention and resources according to its specific needs and abilities at a given time. The institutions were challenged to consult together and to collectively decide the categorization of clusters and the criteria for their movement from category to category. Over time, this raised their capacity to read reality together, sharing perceptions and analysis and identifying complementary observations and insights that enabled unity of thought and action.

During the first two years of the Plan, the relationship between the

movement of people through the sequence of courses, the establishment of core activities, and the development of a cluster became better understood. A sizeable number of people across the country had come to understand the prerequisites of growth, as described by the House of Justice in its 9 January 2001 message. By the end of the second year of the Plan, three interrelated areas of focus had emerged: assisting some 50 people to complete the full sequence of courses in selected clusters; increasing the number of participants from the wider community in core activities; and providing attention to the spiritual education of junior youth.

Working to ensure that 50 individuals completed the full sequence of courses in even a small number of clusters was, at the time, a daunting task that tested the nascent capacity of all the training institutes. It required a substantial rise in the number of study circles and intensive courses, which implied a rise in the number of tutors and the tempo of their activity. To help achieve this, the training institutes formalized and strengthened their schemes of coordination. By 2002, most institutes had a few coordinators, usually drawn from the ranks of experienced tutors, often serving part of a region or several clusters. Institute boards now began to appoint coordinators at the level of the cluster, focused on raising and supporting tutors, and at the regional or sub-regional level, focused on supporting cluster coordinators and ensuring a flow of learning across clusters. This development in the system of coordination fostered a similar flow of learning from the clusters to the institute boards. A close working relationship formed between institute coordinators and Auxiliary Board members, which further strengthened the learning process.

With an increase in the tempo of people progressing through the sequence of courses, Regional Councils were challenged to pay adequate attention to what the House of Justice described as the two essential



The first youth year of service training program in Canada to use the Ruhi curriculum was held just outside of Stratford, Ont. during the summer of 2002. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

movements: the movement of people through the sequence of courses and the strengthening of clusters. Councils began to appoint Area Teaching Committees, then called Cluster Growth Committees, with the initial aim of helping to mobilize those who were completing institute courses. Worldwide experience had shown that if certain activities were repeated every few months, it was possible to raise the rate of expansion. To this end, the committees helped maintain regular three-month cycles with phases dedicated to expansion, consolidation, and reflection. Their work in organizing cluster reflection meetings was particularly beneficial. Free from the demands of formal decision-making, participants began to reflect on experience, share insights and explore possibilities for action—all in an environment of joy and encouragement, helping everyone to achieve higher levels of unity of thought and action.

By 2004, it became apparent that the number of core activities being established was increasing at a much slower pace than the training of hu-

man resources. While initial efforts were focused on establishing Area Teaching Committees, it became clear that the challenge was not administrative, but concerned the approach to training itself. Much of the training to date had been carried out in a mode of deepening prevalent at that time in the Bahá'í community. A common belief was that if one knows a thing well, then one will act on it, which led to an emphasis on imparting knowledge. What the institutes were coming to appreciate is that the equation is not that simple. Knowledge does not always translate into action. Training also needs to be concerned with nurturing will and strengthening confidence to act.

The training institutes began to appreciate more fully the focus the Ruhi materials placed on enhancing the power of understanding, which Bahá'u'lláh described as the “first and foremost” favour the “Almighty hath conferred upon man.” It is a gift that enables “His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory,” gives us “the power to discern the truth in



A study circle in Uashat, Que. in 2004. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

all things,” leads us “to that which is right,” and helps us “to discover the secrets of creation.”<sup>4</sup> Enhancing understanding requires overcoming a dichotomy between theory and practice, between the abstract and the concrete. A concept such as participation can be understood abstractly only to a certain degree. It is only as one acts, as one tries to increase the quality and quantity of participation in the work of community building, that new insights emerge, which enrich understanding and lead to new practices. There is, then, a continuum between a concept and its practice; hovering too long at either the abstract level of the concept, or at the detail level of practice, leads to superficiality. Nurturing understanding involves repeatedly moving from the concept to the practice and back, gradually enriching understanding of the concept and increasing the effectiveness of practice. Thoughts such as these drew attention to the importance of participants in study circles attending diligently to the practices outlined in the institute curriculum.

During 2003, efforts to work with junior youth became more widespread, a development made possible

by the publication of two additional texts: *Breezes of Confirmation* and *Walking the Straight Path*. These, along with *Drawing on the Power of the Word* that had been available for some time, formed a nascent sequence of content to engage those aged 12 to 15. The first formal training sessions for those who could serve as “tutors” of junior youth were held in the summer of 2003. Toward the end of the Plan, as an intimation of what was to come, a group of young people in Ottawa who had been trained as animators outreached to all the junior youth in a neighbourhood, at that time known as Michelle Heights, forming a group with some 20 young participants, all from the wider community. This audacious initiative unequivocally demonstrated the receptivity of this age group to respond to the vision and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and strengthened conviction that the core activities could be portals to growth in Canada.

At the conclusion of the Plan, a defined pyramid of human resources had emerged in Canada, with 7,000 people having studied Book 1 and nearly 2,000 having studied Book 7. There were well over 1,000 core activities across the country, activities that had become centres of unity and points of attraction, not only for

members of the Bahá'í community, but gradually for more and more of their friends. Of the 7,000 participants in core activities at the end of the Plan, about 1,400—20 per cent—were from the wider community. The introduction of core activities had created spaces for more people to be involved in the work of expansion and consolidation and to be active in the life of the community. Canada concluded the Plan with 17 intensive programs of growth—clusters that had made significant progress toward achieving a sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development.

Two other significant developments during this Plan warrant mention. One was the decision of the National Assembly in April 2003 to establish regional branches of the National Fund in all six regions served by Councils. The second was the National Assembly's far-reaching decision in the closing months of the Plan to assign full responsibility to the training institutes for the training and mobilization of children's class teachers and junior youth animators.

### The Five Year Plan: 2006–2011

On a bitterly cold February weekend in 2006, institutions from across the country gathered in Pierrefonds, Quebec to review progress in the work of expansion and consolidation and to chart the work ahead. There had been a remarkable increase in the number of people who were thinking about and working toward growth. The nearly 200 people assembled at the national institutional meeting were informed by the experience of hundreds of members of Local Spiritual Assemblies and assistants to the Auxiliary Board members and hundreds upon hundreds of others: institute coordinators, members of Area Teaching Committees, tutors, animators, and children's class teachers. Never in Canada had there been so many people shouldering the work of expansion and consolidation.

<sup>4</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XVC. P. 194.



Participants in the Pebbles to Pearls junior youth animator training, which focused on forming junior youth groups in neighbourhoods in Toronto, Ont. during the summer of 2006. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

Over the course of the weekend, broad consensus emerged that Canada was well-prepared to labour toward audacious goals. Heartened by the crystallization of a framework for action that needed only to be exploited, those gathered in Montreal committed to raise the number of clusters with an intensive program of growth from 17 to 30; one year later, the goal was further increased to 46. This would be Canada's contribution toward the worldwide goal of 1,500 intensive programs of growth called for by the Supreme Body. It had taken a decade of work to raise 17 clusters to a place where intensive activity could be maintained. Achieving two and a half times this number would require a further intensification of efforts, a wholehearted embrace of the framework for action, focus, and audacious outreach.

The distinction of junior youth groups as a fourth core activity lent impetus to fledgling efforts already made in some clusters to engage this age group. From its experience, the community readily grasped the importance of accompanying young adolescents as they learn to navigate a challenging period of life during a tumultuous age of

transition for humanity. The vision of accompanying junior youth over a period of three years in a formal program that enhances their powers of expression, their spiritual perception, and their ability to reason critically, preparing them to enter the main sequence of courses at age 15, provided the training institutes with a practical course of action and encouraged them to be more audacious.

Early in the Plan, several institutes organized intensive training sessions to simultaneously train and mobilize youth as animators with the aim of establishing formal junior youth groups. Arranging these intensive trainings led the institutes to think about neighbourhoods, small geographic areas where people naturally interact, where they could walk to activities and where the Faith could become known as a source



A junior youth group in Toronto, Ont. during the Pebbles to Pearls junior youth animator training in the summer of 2006. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

of moral and spiritual excellence. During these early trainings, there was much uncertainty about the response of the wider community to the program, which is eminently spiritual. A great deal of care was given to preparing to engage junior youth and their parents in conversation about the program. There was an atmosphere of reliance on God and intense prayer. Yet, any apprehension quickly proved to be unfounded. Within days, hundreds of children and junior youth were engaged in the study of institute material; it was clear there was tremendous thirst. The overwhelmingly positive response from community after community to the program strengthened the resolve of the institutes and helped point a path forward for the work of expansion. These intensive initiatives also helped the institutes learn how to weave together training with systematic growth.

Many of the first junior youth groups did not last beyond several months. Yet the institutes recognized both their tremendous potential and that a great deal needed to be learned about how to engage this age group well. It became apparent that junior youth are not a monolithic group; different populations have different backgrounds and experiences to which the program would need to adapt while maintaining the integrity of its purpose. Cycle after cycle, the institutes followed the efforts to form and maintain groups, raising their capacity to maintain a line of linked action-research. Gradually, insights were gained, and practices were developed that allowed groups to study text after text, cycle after cycle, and engage in extracurricular activities and service initiatives.

The work to reach all the junior youth and children in small geographic areas—most commonly neighbourhoods—had a profound impact on the Bahá'í community. Efforts throughout the 1980s and early 1990s to enrich the Bahá'í community and strengthen Local Spiritual Assemblies were both



A group studying Ruhi Book 2 in Winnipeg, Man. in 2007.

Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

a response to the challenges of expansion and an effort to fortify the community and to protect its members, especially its children and youth, from a cancerous materialism that was becoming more prevalent. Materialism had nurtured a pervasive culture of consumerism in Canadian society, a culture whose roots had tapped into and reinforced the ideologies of individualism and secularism, dimming spiritual susceptibilities and weakening moral structure. What the training institutes set in motion in 2006 was a systematic process of action-learning to reach all children and junior youth and, in doing so, blurred the boundaries between those in and outside the Bahá'í community. The learning associated with this line of action was one of the finest fruits of this Plan.

By early 2007, about a dozen neighbourhoods in Canada had established a few core activities, often anchored by a junior youth group. Those working in these small geographic areas recognized that for the work of community building to flourish, the active participation of many more people with greater knowledge of the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His mission would be required. During the summer, numerous initiatives focused on establishing all four core activities in a neighbourhood and entering into conversation

with participants about the Blessed Beauty and His teachings. Again, there was a welcoming response from people, many of whom joined devotional meetings and study circles. The following year, during the spring and summer of 2008, more structured and systematic campaigns were undertaken to begin core activities in neighbourhoods, incorporating a direct presentation of the Faith as described in Book 6 of the Ruhi curriculum, *Teaching the Cause*. Hundreds of friends in every region of the country began to teach directly and to invite people into core activities. Over the span of a few cycles, capacity to teach the Cause was raised in scores of friends who learned how to move beyond a mere presentation of the Faith to engage in meaningful and distinctive conversation. Notions that the vast majority of people in Canada were insular and uninterested in spiritual conversation faded away in the bright light of experience. Teaching the Cause became more natural, particularly among the young. The friends, especially those labouring in neighbourhoods, were striving to better understand the relationship between teaching, community building, devotion, and service.

After five years of enormous effort, Canada concluded the Plan with 49 intensive programs of growth and another 24 clusters well on their way to establishing the requisite dynamics



A junior youth group during the Fire and Snow intensive campaign, in Toronto, Ont. in the summer of 2007.

Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

to undertake intense activity. At Riḍván 2011, there were nearly 1,900 core activities engaging just under 10,000 people, 3700 of whom were from the wider community, including over 1500 children and junior youth. Underlying these accomplishments was the rising capacity of institutions, particularly those at the regional level, that were elaborating systems to support the generation and diffusion of knowledge. These systems ensured a constant flow of guidance and encouragement to the grassroots and enabled insights and patterns of effective action at the local level to be identified, contextualized, and rapidly disseminated across the region.

### The Five Year Plan: 2011–2016

The Canadian Bahá'í community began the Five Year Plan in 2011 having significantly strengthened its mode of learning. It had gained strength from its experience, not only from its achievements but also

from its mistakes, which were now understood as an inseparable part of learning. The community had acquired greater confidence—a confidence born of faith in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

During the previous two Plans, focus was placed on learning about the elements of an intensive program of growth. This learning in action was undertaken only in a limited number of places, to enable an intensive process of action that could quickly generate insights and points of learning that would, in time, flow to all clusters. It was a strategy that considered the available human resources and the nascent capacity of the institutions to accompany the learning process. A central aim of the next five years was to extend this learning and the necessary practical support to many more clusters, enabling all to advance along a rich and dynamic continuum of growth. Consultations at the start of the Plan led to a pledge that 107 clusters would establish a program of growth at whatever

level of intensity by the conclusion of the Plan.

At the end of the previous Plan, there were well over 1,000 junior youth participating in junior youth groups, 70 per cent of whom were not from Bahá'í families. Receptivity to the program was not an obstacle; the limit of growth was the number of trained animators. As early as 2007, efforts were made in some clusters to invite youth from the wider community into the institute so that they could serve as animators. Some of these efforts were part of the work in neighbourhoods, others involved approaching youth at volunteer fairs and through school clubs, a strategy that by 2008 had borne fruit, but only on a limited scale. By 2013, as the mid-point of the Plan approached, the necessity of learning how to engage larger numbers of youth had become apparent, for it was not practical to engage more junior youth without a rise in the number of animators. The youth conferences called by the Universal





A group photo of participants at the Montreal, Que. youth conference, which took place 26–28 July 2013.

Photo: Louis Brunet

House of Justice in February 2013 provided the community with an invaluable opportunity.

One of the characteristics of the Canadian Bahá'í community has been its longstanding attention to nurturing youth and helping them to serve, a pattern of action often referred to as the youth movement. The work surrounding the conferences in 2013 built on decades of effort. Beginning that spring, efforts to reach large numbers of youth—whether from Bahá'í families or not—began in earnest. Small group facilitators, with the accompaniment of a large group facilitator and the support of Auxiliary Board members and institute coordinators, worked to build cohesive groups of about 20 youth who would prepare for and attend the conference as a group. This scheme of organization helped the institutes think of how practically to work with large numbers of youth. The intense effort that spring and early summer helped some 2,000 youth from every area of the country gather in either Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver in a spiritually-enriching environment. They stud-

ied the conference materials with earnestness and joy and left with a sense of mission. Their subsequent efforts extended the conversation to thousands of more youth across the country, drawing hundreds upon hundreds into study of the institute materials and helping them to support the work of community building. The strengthening of the youth movement was one of the defining achievements of the Plan. By 2016, nearly 5,000 youth in Canada were engaged in this movement. Nearly half of these were studying courses of the training institute and well over 500 were sustaining a core activity. Youth, indeed, can move the world.

Over the course of the Plan, regional institutions devised creative means of sharing insights and providing support to the friends in clusters along a wide continuum of development. The work of regional coordinators and development facilitators was indispensable, providing a conduit for information and learning at the grassroots to rapidly reach the Councils and institute boards and for guidance and encouragement

to flow back to the grassroots. Numerous creative means were also employed to try to disseminate learning and provide practical support to an organic continuum of clusters, including the deployment of travelling teachers and tutors, arranging for groups of friends to visit strong centres of activity, and regional and sub-regional reflection gatherings. In all these initiatives, the Auxiliary Board members were tireless in their encouragement and support. Strengthening systems for the dissemination of learning required the regional agencies to refine their capacity to foster environments of reflection—from the level of the neighbourhood, to the cluster, to the region—to encourage without imposing, and to think in terms of process.

In cluster after cluster, in a diverse array of social environments, small yet coherent programs of growth began to emerge. While the scale of the work varied according to the reality of the cluster, Canada concluded the plan with 116 programs of growth, well exceeding its initial goal. Eighty percent of the clusters in Canada now had at least a nascent



Junior youth take part in a gardening service project in St. John's, Nfld. in the spring of 2016. Photo: Zach Miloff

program of growth. Equally notable were the developments in clusters at the forefront of learning. When the Plan began in 2011, there were three clusters that were sustaining over 100 core activities with some 1,000 participants. By the Plan's conclusion, this number had risen to eight. Overall, in 2016, there were over 14,500 souls participating in 2,237 core activities, an increase of 5,600 people and 650 activities.

### **The Five Year Plan: 2016–2021**

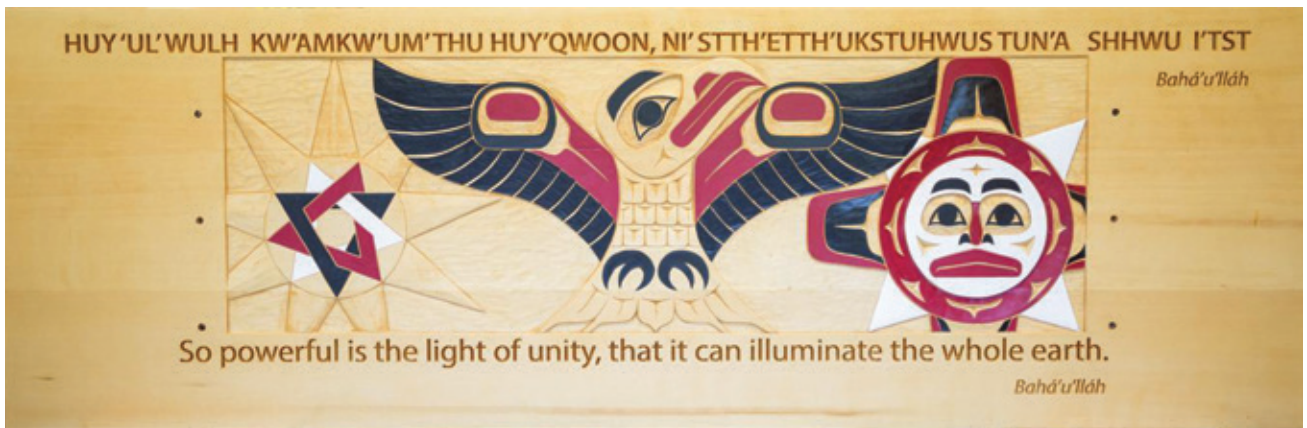
After two decades of labour, the Bahá'í community of Canada entered the Five Year Plan in 2016 with a clear vision of growth, a sound understanding of its requisites, and having accumulated an abundance of experience in a wide array of social contexts. The challenge before the community was to simultaneously extend the pattern of growth to more and more clusters while ensuring that those clusters where

intensive activity was underway continued to push the frontiers of learning and action.

A striking development of the Plan was a strengthening of the devotional character of community life. A heightened awareness of the sacred, the cultivation of a sense of reverence, and the development of a pattern of life characterized by devotion and service can be seen in the surge of devotional gatherings that are nurturing the fabric of the Faith across the country. At the start of the Plan there were some 1,230 devotional gatherings with just under 5,000 people participating, about 700 of whom were friends of the Faith. By the conclusion of the Plan, this number had risen to nearly 5,300 gatherings, reaching nearly 17,000 people, of whom 4,000 were from the wider community. The celebrations of the two bicentenaries each engaged some 30,000 souls and extended a conversation about

the Person of Bahá'u'lláh to as many as 100,000.

The work in neighbourhoods continued to deepen throughout the Plan, with well-established centres of intense activity reaching well over 100 core activities with over 500 participants. In these settings, sustained interaction among individuals and families nurtures bonds of friendship and fosters common vision and unified action. The active participation of so many people necessitated the acquisition of neighbourhood centres to provide physical space for core activities and meetings for reflection and planning. As the Plan closed, five such centres had been established. Notable also was the significant increase in the number of centres of intense activity across the country. At the start of the Plan, systematic activity was underway in a few dozen neighbourhoods across the country. By April 2020, work had begun in 167 neighbourhoods



A cedar bench was carved for the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh in Duncan, B.C., displaying a quotation in English and Hul'q'umi'num'. Photo: Galen Humber

in 72 clusters; 37 of these neighbourhoods had established a pattern of intense activity.

As this Plan, and the series of Plans, concluded at Ridván 2021, 120 of the 143 clusters in Canada had passed the first milestone and established a nascent program of growth; 75 of these had reached the second milestone and 18 had passed the third. Three of these 18 clusters—Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver—had each reached over 500 core activities with 8,000 participants combined. In the vanguard of these advances have been the youth. At the Plan's close, over 6,100 young people could be counted as part of a growing movement inspired by the message of the Blessed Beauty and growing in commitment and capacity to translate His teachings into reality and action. Of these 6,100 youth, nearly 2,400 were studying courses of the institute and over 600 were holding core activities. In Canada there were over 7,300 core activities with well over 25,000 participants. All of this was made possible by the efforts of the training institutes, which cumulatively facilitated some 66,000 book completions since their inception in the Four Year Plan.

### Conclusion

Two and a half decades of intense labour—the span of a full generation—irrevocably altered the character of the Canadian Bahá'í community. One of the enduring insights gained from these years of effort is that the

growth of the Faith is not measured only by number of enrollments, or number of activities, or number of people participating in some way. Growth is principally concerned with a rise of capacity in each of the three protagonists, and that capacity is related to the development of spiritual qualities and the enhancement of understanding. It is developed in cycles of crisis and victory in the context of the unfoldment of the Major Plan of God. This rise in capacity is best observed in the advance of culture of the community, its habits of thought, modes of ex-

pression and patterns of action.

The Canadian Bahá'í community concluded this 25-year enterprise with its thoughts and actions centred on the systematic expansion and consolidation of the Cause. All three protagonists have entered a learning mode, characterized by humility and devotion and a constant, interwoven pattern of action, reflection, consultation and study. Overcoming a fear of failure and preoccupation with mistakes, the will of the community has been strengthened. A spirit of accompaniment among the three protagonists



A friend delivers materials to children in Hamilton, Ont. during the global pandemic. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

has strengthened, leading to greater reciprocity and mutual support. The community has become acutely concerned with the intellectual, moral and spiritual wellbeing of the young, and in doing so has built their capacity to resist the effects of a disintegrating civilization and nurtured a potent movement of youth who have taken their place in the vanguard of the army of God. The community has become more determined, more systematic in its efforts, more conscious of the cycles of crisis and victory and the many processes that together generate the forward movement of the Cause. Its devotional character has strengthened, promoting a greater awareness of the sacred

and a pronounced spirit of devotion that finds expression in service. It is a community more united in its vision, purpose, thought and action. It is this advance in culture—refined in the crucible of noble struggle—that is the finest, fairest fruit of these 25 years of endeavor, a culture capable not only of resisting but of directly combating and in time eradicating the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society. That all this was achieved against a background of a society in rapid decline is a testament to the power of the Cause of God. For such blessing, we bow our heads in thanksgiving and praise.

Eighty-one years ago, in 1941, three Bahá'í summer schools were organized in Canada—in Montreal, with 25 attendees; Rice Lake, with 29 participants; and Vernon, with 17 attendees. During the spring and early summer of 2022, it is anticipated that at least 30,000 people will come together in over 80 conferences being organized from coast to coast to coast to explore the inherent oneness of humanity and a universal call to work for the betterment of the world. This rise in participation is but an indication of the increased capacity that the three constituent protagonists have gained in a span of 80 years, the duration of a human life, in the Dominion of Canada.

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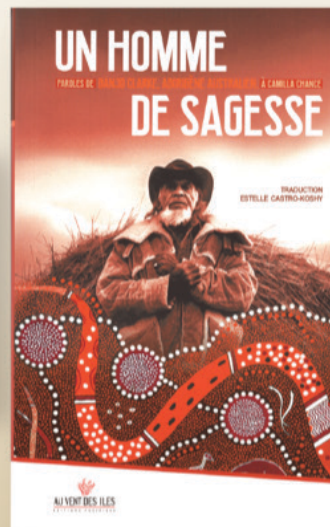
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## NATIONAL CONTACT INFORMATION

### National Spiritual Assembly

Secretariat: [secretariat@bahai.ca](mailto:secretariat@bahai.ca)

Phone: 905-889-8168 Fax: 905-889-8184

**Treasury:** [treasury@bahai.ca](mailto:treasury@bahai.ca)

**Bahá'í Canada Committee:** [bahaicanada@bahai.ca](mailto:bahaicanada@bahai.ca)

**National and Unit Conventions:** [conventions@bahai.ca](mailto:conventions@bahai.ca)

**Office of Public Affairs:** [publicaffairs@bahai.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@bahai.ca)

**Records Department:** [records@bahai.ca](mailto:records@bahai.ca)

**Contribute to the Funds of the Faith** through the Treasurer of your Local Assembly, the Regional Bahá'í Council in your area, or online at [www.bahaifunds.ca](http://www.bahaifunds.ca). You can also donate through the National Spiritual Assembly. In this case, kindly make your cheque payable to "Canadian Bahá'í Fund" and mail it to:

The Treasury Department, Bahá'í National Centre,  
7200 Leslie Street Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8.

The major Funds of the Faith to which one can make contributions are:

The Local Fund (only through a Local Spiritual Assembly or online)

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The Community Properties Fund

The International Bahá'í  
Development Fund

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Worship Fund

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The World Centre Endowment Fund

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Burnaby, BC, V5C 6P3  
[institute@bc.bahai.ca](mailto:institute@bc.bahai.ca)  
(604) 619-5859

#### Alberta

[ibsecretary@ab.bahai.ca](mailto:ibsecretary@ab.bahai.ca)

#### Saskatchewan and Manitoba

[sk.mb.ib@gmail.com](mailto:sk.mb.ib@gmail.com)

#### Ontario

[instituteboard@ontariobahai.org](mailto:instituteboard@ontariobahai.org)

#### Quebec

[secretariat@institut.bahaiqc.org](mailto:secretariat@institut.bahaiqc.org)

#### Atlantic Provinces

[institute.board@atlantic.bahai.ca](mailto:institute.board@atlantic.bahai.ca)

### BAHÁ'Í COUNCILS

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(250) 507-2765

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(587) 226-4260

#### Saskatchewan and Manitoba

521 McMillan Ave.  
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#### Ontario

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(905) 889-8168

#### Quebec

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(819) 743-7778

#### Atlantic Provinces

313 Arcona St. Summerside, PE,  
C1N 2X1  
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Or contact:

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In the event that the title you are looking for is not available, contact the Bahá'í Distribution Service

Email: [bds@bahai.ca](mailto:bds@bahai.ca)

Phone: 1-800-465-3287 or 905-889-8168

To purchase **Bahá'í books in French**, contact the Service de distribution bahá'í-Québec (SDB-Q)

75 d'auteuil Street, Québec, QC, G1R 4C3

Email: [sdbc@bahai.ca](mailto:sdbc@bahai.ca)

Phone: 418-692-2402

Website: [bookstore.bahai.ca](http://bookstore.bahai.ca)

**To travel teach or pioneer within Canada or internationally**, contact the Pioneer Desk at [pioneer@bahai.ca](mailto:pioneer@bahai.ca) or 905-889-8168.

**To change your address**, please notify your Local Spiritual Assembly, Regional Council or the Records Department of the National Spiritual Assembly, providing your name, old address, new address and your Bahá'í ID number to: Records Department, Bahá'í National Centre, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8; Phone: 905-889-8168; Fax: 905-889-8184; Email: [records@bahai.ca](mailto:records@bahai.ca).

**To request international credentials** from the Bahá'í National Centre when planning to visit countries other than the United States, contact the Records Department: 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8; Phone 905-889-8168; Fax: 905-889-8184; Email: [records@bahai.ca](mailto:records@bahai.ca).

**Pilgrimage requests** (nine-day pilgrimage or three-day visit) are to be made directly to the Bahá'í World Centre through the Bahá'í Pilgrimage Website <http://pilgrimage.bahai.org> or by post or fax: Office of Pilgrimage, PO Box 155, 3100101, Haifa, Israel; Fax: 011-972-4-835-8507.

**Getting married?** A Bahá'í wedding cannot take place without the authorization of a Local Spiritual Assembly. Please contact, as early as possible, the Local Assembly in whose jurisdiction the wedding will take place. The Records Department at [records@bahai.ca](mailto:records@bahai.ca) can provide you with the necessary contact details.

**Submit news, photos, etc. to Bahá'í Canada** through email [bahaicanada@bahai.ca](mailto:bahaicanada@bahai.ca) or mail to 7200 Leslie St., Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8. Items submitted to *Bahá'í Canada* are considered for publication online and in the magazine.

# The Right of God ~ Ḥuqúqu'lláh

"Ḥuqúqu'lláh is indeed a great law. It is incumbent upon all to make this offering, because it is the source of grace, abundance, and of all good. It is a bounty which shall remain with every soul in every world of the worlds of God, the All-Possessing, the All-Bountiful." – Bahá'u'lláh, Ḥuqúqu'lláh – *The Right of God*, p.5.

## ḤUQÚQU'LLÁH PAYMENT INFORMATION

In response to guidance from the International Board of Trustees, the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in Canada has set up a centralized system of receipting and recording of payments at the Treasury Department of the Bahá'í National Centre. Payments of the Right of God (Ḥuqúqu'lláh) are not processed through individual Deputies or Representatives.

Payments should be sent directly to the Ḥuqúqu'lláh Treasury at the Bahá'í National Centre, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8. The Ḥuqúqu'lláh Treasury will issue one receipt, which will serve both as an acknowledgment receipt and as an official tax receipt. It is up to the individual to determine whether or not she/he wishes to use the receipt when filing her/his income tax return. Cheques, bank drafts, bank and/or postal money orders should be made payable to "Canadian Bahá'í Fund" earmarked "Ḥuqúqu'lláh" or "Right of God." Payments to the Right of God can also be made utilizing the <[www.bahai-funds.ca](http://www.bahai-funds.ca)> Online Contribution System. The individual's Bahá'í identification number must be provided on all payments.

Payments should not be made through a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Inquiries regarding the law of the Right of God (Ḥuqúqu'lláh) should be directed to your nearest Representative or Deputee Trustee.

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