

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

27 December 2005

To the Conference of the
Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

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

Our 26 December 1995 message, which focused the Bahá'í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith, described in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead. As a first step, Bahá'í communities were urged to systematize their efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes. While every national community took measures to create institutional capacity to perform this essential function, it was not until the outset of the Five Year Plan that the significance of a well-conceived programme of training became widely appreciated. The introduction of the concept of the cluster made it possible for the friends to think about the accelerated growth of the community on a manageable scale and to conceive of it in terms of two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next. This image helped the believers to analyse the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate their findings. Never before have the means for establishing a pattern of activity that places equal emphasis on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation been better understood. Indeed, so consistent has been the experience with intensive programmes of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in diverse clusters, that no cause for equivocation remains. The way forward is clear, and at Ridván 2006 we will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.

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

The Individual

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

Developments since then have served only to demonstrate further the efficacy of a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the application of the spiritual insights gained through profound study of the Writings. Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service. Discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of a study circle, raise the level of consciousness about one's duties to the Cause and create an awareness of the joy one derives from teaching the Faith and serving its interests. The spiritual context in which specific deeds are addressed endows them with significance. Confidence is patiently built as the friends engage in progressively more complex and demanding acts of service. Yet, above all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavours. How abundant the accounts of believers who enter the teaching field with trepidation only to find themselves bolstered by confirmations on all sides. Seeing the possibilities and opportunities before them with new eyes, they witness first hand the power of Divine assistance, as they strive to put into practice what they are learning and achieve results far exceeding their expectations. That the spirit of faith born out of intimate contact with the Word of God has such an effect on souls is by no means a new phenomenon. What is heartening is that the institute process is helping such large numbers experience the transforming potency of the Faith. To extend this edifying influence to hundreds of thousands more should be the object of intense effort over the next five years.

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

Nowhere has the rise in individual initiative been more clearly demonstrated than in the field of teaching. Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase. Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's

message. From among all those they encounter—parents of neighbourhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances—they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker's needs, employing direct teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.

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

The Community

The enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the individual believer is equally evident in Bahá'í community life. The degree to which this vitality manifests itself depends, of course, on the stage of development of the cluster. A cluster in an advanced stage of growth offers far greater insight into what can be achieved than one in an earlier stage, where the friends are still struggling to translate the provisions of the Plan into action. It is to these more advanced clusters, then, that we must look in analysing the accomplishments of the community, convinced that their experience will be emulated by others as they continue to progress.

On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavours gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enrol in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favourable for launching an intensive programme of growth.

What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community's collective endeavours. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen

the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, “home visits” are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.

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

As in the case of the individual, learning is the hallmark of this phase of the development of the community. You and your auxiliaries are urged to exert every effort in the coming years to ensure that, in cluster after cluster, learning is woven into the fabric of decision-making.

One of your primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize.

By the same token, desire and willingness to open certain aspects of community life to the wider public should be integrated into a pattern of behaviour that attracts souls and confirms them. Much has been achieved in this respect as the friends have adopted new ways of thinking and acting at a collective level. In welcoming large numbers into its embrace, the community is learning to see more readily the latent potentiality in people and to avoid setting artificial barriers for them based on preconceived notions. A nurturing environment is being cultivated in which each individual is encouraged to progress at his or her own pace without the pressure of unreasonable expectations. At the heart of such developments is a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity. Most gratifying are the endeavours being made to reach receptive populations with the teachings of the Faith. As unrelenting social and political forces continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents, an uncompromising appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds and for the strength it confers on the whole will prove crucial to the expansion and consolidation of the community.

Perhaps the task that will occupy the attention of you and your auxiliaries above all others is to assist the community in its effort to maintain focus. This ability, slowly acquired through successive Plans, represents one of its most valuable assets, hard won through discipline,

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

The Institutions

None of the accomplishments of the individual or the community could be sustained without the guidance, encouragement and support of the third participant in the Plan—the institutions of the Faith. It is heartening to see to what extent the institutions are promoting individual initiative, channelling energies into the teaching field, underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment. In helping the community to remain focused on the aim of the Plan, they are learning in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavours and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set. These priorities include, of course, areas of activity that require the specialized skills of individuals. Worthy of particular mention in this category are the work of external affairs, which National Spiritual Assemblies are following diligently, and ventures of social and economic development, as, for example, undertaken by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. While tending to needs of this kind, the institutions find themselves increasingly capable of directing the thrust of the effort exerted by the generality of the believers towards the prosecution of the central tasks of the Plan.

Encouraging, too, are the determined steps being taken by National Spiritual Assemblies, in collaboration with the Counsellors, to respond to the administrative challenges brought by large-scale growth at the cluster level. Schemes that are emerging tend to call for one or more individuals named by the training institute to coordinate the delivery of courses in the main sequence, as well as programmes for children and junior youth. An Area Teaching Committee appointed by the Regional Council, or by the National Assembly itself, is also required to administer other aspects of systematic effort to achieve accelerated expansion and consolidation. Auxiliary Board members work on both fronts to ensure that the two movements which have come to characterize the process of growth proceed unhampered. While these various components are being established in cluster after cluster, there is still much to be learned about the functions each is to perform and about the relationships among them. What is important is that the current degree of flexibility, which allows for the creation of new instruments as needed, not be compromised so that the scheme of coordination represents a response to the demands of growth itself. We count on you and National Assemblies to guide this learning process.

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

What has brought us particular joy is to see that the process of growth unfolding around the world is gathering momentum in urban centres as well as rural areas. An important step taken in many large cities early in the current Plan was to divide them into sectors. This proved crucial to planning for sustained growth. As communities expand, however, it is not unreasonable to expect that cities will need to be divided into smaller areas—perhaps ultimately into neighbourhoods—in each of which the Nineteen Day Feast is conducted. Maintaining a vision of the potential size of future communities is essential for the further development of Local Assemblies. To administer the affairs of communities whose membership will swell into the thousands, and to fulfil their purpose as the “trusted ones of the Merciful among men”, those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead. We intend to monitor the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies closely during the coming Plan and, as the size of the Bahá’í population and other circumstances in a locality demand, authorize a two-stage electoral process on a case-by-case basis, following the pattern developed in Tīhrán during the ministry of the Guardian.

Intensive Programmes of Growth

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

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

The expansion phase, often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them. Although this phase might include some element of proclamation, it should not be seen as a time to hold a few events for this purpose or to undertake a set of activities that

merely convey information. Experience suggests that the more closely teaching approaches and methods are aligned with the capacity acquired from the study of the institute courses the more rewarding the results.

Plans being devised for this phase invariably involve the implementation of carefully designed teaching projects and campaigns of home visits and firesides, often through the mobilization of teaching teams. The pattern of expansion that unfolds, however, varies from cluster to cluster. Where the population has traditionally shown a high degree of receptivity to the Faith, a rapid influx of new believers is to be expected. In one cluster of this kind, for example, the goal of enrolling fifty souls over a three-week period in a locality was surpassed by the second day, and the team wisely decided to end the expansion phase in anticipation of activities related to consolidation. One of the primary objectives of this next phase is to bring a percentage of the new believers into the institute process so that an adequate pool of human resources will be available in future cycles to sustain growth. Those not participating in study circles are nurtured through a series of home visits, and all are invited to devotional meetings, to the celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast and to Holy Day observances and are gradually introduced to the patterns of community life. Not infrequently, the consolidation phase gives rise to further enrolments as the family members and friends of new declarants accept the Faith.

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

Whatever the nature of the cluster, it is imperative to pay close attention to children and junior youth everywhere. Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it. What has become especially apparent during the current Five Year Plan is the efficacy of educational programmes aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. When accompanied for three years through a programme that enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of fifteen, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. So impressed are we by the results already achieved, and so compelling is the need, that we will urge all National Assemblies to consider the junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

Key to the progress of an intensive programme of growth is the phase dedicated to reflection, in which the lessons learned in action are articulated and incorporated into plans for the next cycle of activity. Its principal feature is the reflection meeting—as much a time of joyous celebration as it is of serious consultation. Careful analysis of experience, through participatory discussions rather than overly complex and elaborate presentations, serves to maintain unity of vision, sharpen clarity of thought and heighten enthusiasm. Central to such

an analysis is the review of vital statistics that suggest the next set of goals to be adopted. Plans are made that take into account increased capacity in terms of the human resources available at the end of the cycle to perform various tasks, on the one hand, and accumulated knowledge about the receptivity of the population and the dynamics of teaching, on the other. When human resources increase in a manner proportionate to the rise in the overall Bahá'í population from cycle to cycle, it is possible not only to sustain but to accelerate growth.

To meet the ambitious goal of establishing 1,500 such intensive programmes, the Bahá'í world will have to draw fully upon the experience gained and capacity built over the past ten years. Following your departure from the Holy Land, you will need to enter into thorough consultation with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils and together carefully assess conditions in each national community in order to identify the clusters that will receive focused attention and to map out strategic plans.

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

Equally important will be the support lent to a cluster through an influx of pioneers. The desire to pioneer arises naturally from deep within the heart of the individual believer as a response to the Divine summons. Whosoever forsakes his or her home for the purpose of teaching the Cause joins the ranks of those noble souls whose achievements down the decades have illumined the annals of Bahá'í pioneering. We cherish the hope that many will be moved to render this meritorious service during the next Plan, whether on the home front or in the international field—an act that, in itself, attracts untold blessings. The institutions, in turn, will have to exercise sound judgement to ensure that such friends are strategically placed. Priority should be given to settling short-term and long-term pioneers in those clusters that are the focus of systematic attention, whether as a means of reinforcing endeavours to lay the groundwork for accelerated growth or stabilizing cycles of activity under way. It is not unreasonable to assume that a concerted effort to build on strength will result in the eventual outflow of pioneers from such clusters to areas destined to become the theatre of future conquests.

Dear Friends: In the weeks and months ahead and over the course of the Plan, you and your auxiliaries will be a constant source of encouragement to the believers as they rise to the challenge being presented to them. We ask that you take every opportunity to convey to them our confidence in their capacity to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably appear in their path. They should not fail to recognize the scope of what they have achieved through the

sustaining grace of Bahá'u'lláh over the past decade. In the course of the first four years, they created the institutional capacity throughout the planet to impart spiritual education to growing contingents of believers. Building on this accomplishment, they engaged in a rigorous process of learning that opened before their eyes vistas of great yet attainable possibilities. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in multiplying the number of devotional meetings sixfold over the past five years, that classes for children and junior youth have increased more than threefold during the same period, that the number of study circles worldwide has surpassed eleven thousand—these provide a measure of the extraordinary strength the believers can draw upon in shouldering the responsibility entrusted to them.

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

The Universal House of Justice