NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

 $536\,SHERIDAN\,ROAD, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS\,60091\text{-}2849 \bullet (847)\,733\text{-}3537\bullet\,EMAIL:\,secretariat@usbnc.org$

February 20, 2008

To the American Bahá'í Community

Approaches to Direct Teaching

Dearly loved Friends,

The National Spiritual Assembly is delighted with the progress made in recent months to advance the objectives of the Five Year Plan. A new spirit of teaching is clearly arising in our country, and in many clusters the resulting growth has been marvelous. In certain clusters, recent intensive teaching activities have yielded dozens of declarations of faith in a matter of days. Just as exciting is the news that the majority of the new believers are benefiting from immediate follow-up visits, leading many to participate in institute courses and other core activities.

One of the important lessons being learned from recent successes in such clusters is the effectiveness of direct teaching. This was noted in a letter from the International Teaching Center, dated September 30, 2007, which observed: "Those [clusters] that have attained a healthy, sustainable growth pattern are characterized by a focus on teaching, in particular direct teaching, and not just on extending invitations to core activities." Because the issue of direct teaching is now gaining widespread attention, we believe the following remarks to be timely.

The beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, referred to direct teaching as "an open and bold assertion of the fundamental verities of the Cause," as contrasted with "a less direct and more cautious method of teaching." The goal of each method is the same: "to help in the eventual recognition by all mankind of the indispensability, the uniqueness and the supreme station of the Bahá'í Revelation." The choice of method lies with the teacher, who must act with wisdom in all circumstances, according to his or her perception of the seeker's receptivity.

There are clearly occasions when the indirect method of teaching is preferable. However, experience in clusters at every stage of advancement is increasingly demonstrating the effectiveness of a more direct approach in most teaching encounters. This is especially true with respect to the essential activities of the Five Year Plan, which include:

- Asserting clearly and directly, in a fireside setting, the fundamental verities of the Cause.
- Presenting the fundamental verities of the Cause openly and boldly to family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers in a non-fireside setting.
- Nurturing toward acceptance of the Faith those who have already indicated their interest by their participation in the core activities.

February 20, 2008 Page 2

• Teaching "door-to-door" — or "neighborhood teaching" — in receptive areas. This approach has proven to be very effective when carried out by trained teaching teams of two or three individuals, and in the context of an organized, systematic campaign.

As these various examples indicate, the phrase "direct teaching" refers to the content of the message and not the place where the teaching occurs. Whatever the situation, we have witnessed wonderful results when Bahá'í teachers have presented the Faith in a comprehensive and audacious manner.

Teachers in clusters around the world are finding "Anna's presentation" from Book 6 of the Ruhi curriculum to be a helpful model for direct teaching. As teachers gain in experience, they learn to adapt the presentation according to individual circumstances. Yet the general content—comprehensive, clear, and forthright presentation, with a loving invitation to receptive souls to embrace the Faith—remains essentially the same.

The effectiveness of the direct approach is illustrated in this excerpt from the most recent edition of *Reflections on Growth*, the newsletter of the International Teaching Center:

A believer in the United States reported that after giving "Anna's presentation" to her brother-in-law, he said that "if he had heard this presentation two or three years ago when he first heard of the Faith, it would have saved him a lot of time and hunting around for information. He liked how it covered many topics and helped things fit together." Her brother-in-law declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh a few days later. Over the past few months this response has been repeated in countless settings — urban and rural, in Bahá'í centers or in home visits — across five continents. And with very similar results. . . . The efforts of the friends to align their teaching approaches with the skills acquired in the institute courses continue to yield outstanding results.

In this Plan, there is special emphasis on organized, collective campaigns of teaching. Such campaigns usually take place in specific neighborhoods where receptive populations have been identified. A common element of these campaigns, in addition to core activities, is a type of outreach usually referred to as "door-to-door" teaching—by which is meant some form of calling on individuals or families for Bahá'í purposes at home, without prior invitation.

A number of the friends have raised concerns about this approach for various reasons. Some consider it to be undignified, some believe it to be ineffective, and some fear that it amounts to proselytizing. There are also those who worry that as a result of large numbers of enrollments we will have more growth than can be successfully consolidated.

The National Assembly has already shared recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice addressing the issue, which is available on the national Administrative Website, www.usbnc.org. While wisdom is always to be observed, virtually every cluster includes neighborhoods where door-to-door approaches would not be considered by the residents as undignified. It should be remembered that "dignity" has much to do with the manner of an interaction after it is initiated. We should approach people with genuine love, a humble desire to share the Message, and with complete sensitivity to their wishes.

February 20, 2008 Page 3

Nor should the direct approach to teaching, whether door-to-door or by other means, be confused with proselytizing, about which the Universal House of Justice has stated:

Proselytizing implies bringing undue pressure to bear upon someone to change his Faith. It is also usually understood to imply the making of threats or the offering of material benefits as an inducement to conversion.

(From a letter dated May 5, 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

At this point, the effectiveness of direct teaching is beyond question. That very effectiveness may challenge our capacity to deepen increasing numbers of new believers, but, as with expansion, it is simply another frontier for action, reflection, and learning. In the years to come, we will gradually learn how to nurture larger and larger numbers of new believers, hand in hand with the teaching work.

We hope that the friends everywhere will adopt, where teaching is concerned, an attitude of experimentation and learning. Even more important will be an attitude of loving encouragement toward each other. Those who are inspired to participate in door-to-door teaching campaigns should not try to make those who are not so inclined feel guilty or "disobedient." And those who prefer other teaching approaches should proceed in their chosen arenas of service with confidence.

Let each believer ardently pray for the success of all the friends. Let each of us appreciate the wonderfully diverse talents and capacities that comprise our community. And let us work together with a love and unity that will attract the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

Kenneth E. Bowers Secretary-General

cc: Continental Counselors residing in the United States Regional Bahá'í Councils