

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT GROWTH, CLUSTERS AND CORE ACTIVITIES

REGIONAL BAHÁ'Í COUNCIL OF THE SOUTHWESTERN STATES

June 2006

## STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH

### Q1: What are the two essential movements of the Five Year Plan?

A1: *The Five Year Plan ... requires concentrated and sustained attention to two essential movements. The first is the steady flow of believers through the sequence of courses offered by training institutes, for the purpose of developing the human resources of the Cause. The second, which receives its impetus from the first, is the movement of geographic clusters from one stage of growth to the next. These two movements have been at the heart of the learning experience of the Bahá'í world ....*

*(Building Momentum: A Coherent Approach To Growth, A document prepared by the International Teaching Centre, April 2003, Section 1.)*

### Q2: What will guarantee a systematic pattern of growth?

A2: *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 divers 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.*

*(December 27, 2005 letter from the Universal House of Justice To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors*

*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.*

*(December 27, 2005 letter from the Universal House of Justice To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors*

## CLUSTER DEFINITION AND FUNCTION

### Q3: What is a cluster?

A3: A cluster is a geographic area defined by the Regional Bahá'í Council to enable the friends to think about the growth of the Faith on a manageable scale and to design and implement plans of expansion and consolidation close to the grassroots of the greater community.

### Q4: How are cluster boundaries determined?

A4: The Regional Council, in consultation with the Auxiliary Board members, determines cluster boundaries-on the basis of a number of specific demographic, social, and economic factors present in the general population of the cluster and without regard to the condition of local Bahá'í communities or the strength of Local Spiritual Assemblies. The Universal House of Justice, in its 9 January 2001 letter to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors states: *“Among the factors that determine the boundaries of a cluster are culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants.”*

### Q5: How should suggested changes in cluster boundaries be offered?

A5: An individual, Assembly, or group which would like to suggest cluster changes to the Council, should preferably first consult with the Auxiliary Board members and/or assistants. If this consultation results in agreement that the cluster configuration should be changed, specific recommendations may be sent to the Council, copied to the Auxiliary Board members.

### Q6: What is the administrative function of a cluster?

A6: Clusters do not have any administrative function or status and therefore do not in any way diminish or alter the jurisdiction and duties of Local Spiritual Assemblies.

## CLUSTER ACTIVITIES

### Q7: What activities should be happening within each cluster?

A7: Study circles, multiple neighborhood children's classes, multiple neighborhood devotional meetings, and junior youth groups, all accessible to the public. Where these activities are occurring, clusters should also hold reflection meetings every few months to set goals, make plans, and evaluate its activities. This does not preclude other activities, but these four should be high priorities for every community.

### Q8: We have trouble getting enough people to participate in the activities we already have. Can we just focus on one of the four recommended cluster activities for now, until we are able to do more?

A8: Yes. Make a small beginning, building capacity and resources for expanded efforts in the future. Individual initiative in harmony with the features of the Five Year Plan is indispensable-

### Q9: How are cluster activities determined and evaluated?

A9: Regular cluster reflection meetings offer the friends in the cluster the opportunity to share what progress is being made in individual initiatives throughout the cluster, set goals, and evaluate progress toward these goals.

**Q10: How are cluster reflection meetings arranged?**

A10: All A and B clusters have Area Teaching Committees (ATCs), usually appointed by the Regional Council, to work with the institutions and friends to help systematically plan and evaluate cluster progress. Infrequent cluster reflection meetings in C clusters need only be arranged when the institute process intensifies sufficiently that the friends are involved in acts of service associated with the Ruhi curriculum. Once there is a pool of service experience, reflection meetings in C clusters serve as an opportunity to share these experiences, study the guidance from the World Center, and develop a unified vision for future development.

**Q11: What is the role of the Local Spiritual Assembly?**

A11: The Local Spiritual Assemblies, as “planners of the teaching work,” retain the responsibility for the teaching work in their jurisdiction. However, as conveyed in *Building Momentum*: “Because the planning environment has now broadened to the level of the cluster, often involving several Local Assemblies and the active participation of the believers in formulating short-term goals, an Assembly’s scope of interest has begun to stretch beyond its boundaries. Its vision is expanded, its resources magnified, and its opportunities enlarged.... The Universal House of Justice hopes that the consultations which take place in periodic meetings at the level of the cluster will generate such unity of thought about the growth of the Faith, that, in those cases where the lines of action affect localities with Local Assemblies, the requirement of receiving their approval will easily be met.” The Council warmly encourages the Assemblies to do all they can to develop a close, loving, collaborative relationship with the Area Teaching Committees.

**Q12: What cluster am I in?**

A12: You can find out what cluster you are in from the list on the Council website, or by sending a query to the Council, being sure to include your city and state.

**CLUSTER CATEGORIES**

**Q13: How are clusters categorized?**

A13: The Regional Bahá’í Council of the Southwestern States has developed a set of criteria, based on the *Building Momentum* document, by which any cluster may be rated. The progressive development of clusters falls into four basic categories with the following goals:

**D:** Opening virgin clusters without Bahá’ís

**C:** Establishing the institute process in emerging clusters where there are a few isolated believers and groups

**B:** Advancing clusters with a vigorous institute process where there are established Bahá’í communities with Assemblies

**A:** Accelerating expansion and consolidation in advanced clusters where there are strong communities/Assemblies with a substantial core of capable individuals who understand the process of growth and are capable of sustaining accelerated growth and consolidation activities.

**Q14: What do these A-B-C-D labels mean?**

A14: The categorization of clusters is not a way of judging performance, but simply a means of assessing cluster development and helping the friends to make systematic plans and adopt goals that suit the needs and resources of each cluster.

**Q15: How do I know what level of development my cluster is at?**

A15: The Council is continually assessing cluster development and periodically shares updates with the friends, through regional email lists, correspondence, and postings on the Regional Council website.

**Q16: How does a cluster move from a C to a B level?**

A16: A vigorous institute process makes a cluster a “B.” A vigorous institute process involves:

- Significant percentage or number of individuals going through the sequence of courses
- Participation by non-Bahá’ís
- Participants doing the practices
- Significant number of active tutors and ongoing study circles.

**Q17: How does a cluster move from a B to an A level?**

A17: The transition from a “B” to an “A” is gauged by evidence of:

- Intensive institute campaigns
- Vibrant and lively cluster reflection meetings
- Multiplication of core activities
- Regular participation of seekers in the core activities
- Presence of a critical mass of 40 to 50 friends who have completed the Ruhi sequence and understand the pre-requisites for sustainable growth
- Increased institutional capacity.

**Q18: When is a cluster ready for an intensive program of growth (IPG)?**

A18: When a cluster has reached the “A” stage, it is ready for an IPG

**Q19: When can there be an intensification of teaching efforts?**

A19: There can be an intensification of teaching efforts when the following conditions are present

- Growth in the number of Bahá’ís
- Vigorous institute process
- Multiplication of core activities and their integration
- Successful outreach to local inhabitants
- Increasing number of individual and collective teaching initiatives
- Vibrant community life
- Commitment to ongoing learning process
- Pronounced spirit of collaboration among the institutions
- Reasonable degree of administrative capacity.

*(Building Momentum 2.4.3 The Dynamics of Intensive Growth)*

**Q20: What are characteristics of an intensive program of growth (IPG)?**

A20: Characteristics of an intensive program of growth include:

- A sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development
- A range of teaching efforts involving both activities undertaken by the individual and campaigns promoted by the institutions.
- Carefully designed teaching projects to reach specific segments of the population

- Assisting the institute in designing an institute course that is specific to a particular population, offered as a branch of the basic institute sequence on becoming an effective teacher.

(*Building Momentum 2.4.2 Intensification of Teaching Efforts*)

**Q21: What are steps or phases of an intensive program of growth (IPG)?**

A21: The year can be divided into four cycles of three months each. Each cycle of activity consists of three phases: 2 weeks for expansion, 10 weeks for consolidation, and 1 week for reflection and planning. The first few cycles may not produce a lot of declarations as we all learn new modes of behavior.

**CHILDREN'S CLASSES**

**Q22: We already have area children's classes in which all the neighboring communities participate. Does this fulfill the requirement for our cluster to have children's classes?**

A22: No. The experience gained from your existing inter-community children's classes will be invaluable to you in building your own community's institutional capacity. A goal is to multiply children's classes in each cluster and open them to the public. A children's class need not be large and most likely will begin with only a few neighborhood children, initiated by individuals.

**Q23: How do we include non-Bahá'í children?**

A23: *It is possible, of course, to create a programme for children which is inspired by the Baha'i teachings and conveys such topics as moral education, comparative religion, peace, concern for the environment, service to humanity, or world citizenship. Such programmes might also convey practical subjects such as literacy, academic tutoring, or vocational training.*

*In its message dated 9 January 2001, however, the House of Justice refers specifically to Baha'i children's classes as also being open to non-Baha'i children. In the case of these classes, which are intended to address the complete spiritual education of Baha'is, it would not be possible to eliminate Baha'i religious teachings, and topics such as Baha'i history, Baha'i laws, and the Covenant would be an integral part of these classes.*

*While Baha'i religious teachings are part of the programme of child education in Baha'i classes, the design of the programme, particularly the sequencing of content, may make it more attractive to non-Baha'is. For example, in the approach taken to child education in *Ruhi Book Three*, the emphasis is placed initially on character development, and only later are specific aspects related to the life of Baha'u'llah and the Báb introduced. So too can we see the same principle at work in the main sequence of books in which many non-Baha'i youth have participated. *Book One* addresses such broad topics as prayer and life and death (from a Baha'i perspective, of course). It is in *Book Four* that history is presented in detail. Thus a non-Baha'i can feel welcome to participate and is not overwhelmed by new, purely religious teachings. Then, if attracted by the principles and general spiritual teachings, the non-Baha'is would not hesitate to engage in the full programme; alternatively, they are free to withdraw or not participate in some segments.*

*Of course, Baha'is would always be clear about the nature of the curriculum when describing it to their friends and acquaintances.*

(Universal House of Justice, 25 September 2001 letter to a Spiritual Assembly)

## STUDY CIRCLES

### **Q24: What is the purpose of training?**

A24: Training is to endow growing numbers of believers with the spiritual insight, knowledge, and skills needed to carry out the many tasks involved in teaching and deepening large numbers of adults, youth, and children.

### **Q25: What is a study circle?**

A25: A study circle is a way that a Regional Training Institute provides training at the local level. Study circles are composed of a group of individuals who gather regularly to pursue a training curriculum. A tutor trained in facilitating the course conducts a study circle. The curriculum currently used in the United States is the Ruhi Institute sequence of courses.

### **Q26: How do we start a study circle?**

A26: Anyone can start a study circle by contacting the Regional Training Institute Area Coordinator for your cluster to find a trained tutor. When a trained tutor is directly contacted to start a study circle, the tutor will inform the Regional Training Institute. A study circle can be held anywhere.

### **Q27: Our community currently has an ongoing study circle with Bahá'ís from surrounding communities participating. Can this continue?**

A27: Yes. The goal is to multiply the study circles and open them to the public in all neighborhoods. Completing the sequence of courses (Ruhi books 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7) in an intensive manner will help the number of trained tutors to increase rapidly, which in turn will support the multiplication of the study circles.

## DEVOTIONS

### **Q28: What is a devotional meeting?**

A28: A devotional meeting is a gathering of Bahá'ís and their “not-yet Bahá'í” families, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to pray and meditate. It can be as small as one Baha'i and one seeker only.

### **Q29: “What does a devotional meeting look like?”**

A29: In response to an individual believer who asked this question, the Research Department developed a memorandum dated September 19, 2001 to the Universal House of Justice and a short compilation entitled “Selected Guidance Concerning Devotional Gatherings.” This memo and compilation are available on the national administrative website, [www.usbnc.org](http://www.usbnc.org), Communications from the Universal House of Justice, 2001, or on request from the Regional Council.

## JUNIOR YOUTH

### **Q30: Why have junior youth activities been added as a fourth core activity?**

A30: *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.*

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**Q31: What ages comprise junior youth?**

A31: Ages 12 through 14.

**Q32: What materials are currently available to work with the junior youth age and who would use them?**

A32: Three junior youth books-- “Breezes of Confirmation,” “Walking the Straight Path,” and “Drawing on the Power of the Word”—are available for use in junior youth groups, facilitated by trained animators. These animators are usually older youth and young adults who have taken Ruhi Books 1-4 plus Book 5, “Walking Together with the Junior Youth,” through the Southwestern Regional Training Institute (SWRTI).