

Portals to Growth: Creating Capacity for Service
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Notes from a Series of Talks by Dr. Farzam Arbab

Day 4

Core Activities of the Five Year Plan and the Movement of Clusters

This is the last day of our conference. During the first three days we discussed issues related to education in the context of enhancing the capacity of the three protagonists of our plans to advance the process of entry by troops. Today we will focus more on the provisions of the Five Year Plan and on some of the actions it calls for. I will divide my talk into two parts. The first will provide a brief overview of the basic patterns of growth that are emerging in the Bahá'í world. The second part will be devoted to a few general remarks on the nature of the Bahá'í community.

By now it has become part of the vocabulary of the Bahá'í community everywhere to speak of the Five Year Plan in terms of two essential movements. The first has been described as 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, while the second, which receives its impetus from the first, has been expressed as the movement of geographic clusters from one stage of growth to the next. Much of our explorations over the past few days has been into the nature and purpose of the first movement. Today, we should examine more closely the second. Certain ideas I will present are already well known to you from your study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice and the document prepared by the International Teaching Centre called “Building Momentum”. Since the release of the document last year, however, a great deal of learning has taken place, and I will try to share with you some of the lessons that have come to light in these recent months.

As you well know, the response of the Bahá'í world to the Five Year Plan was immediate and swift. Not too long into the Plan, most National Spiritual Assemblies divided their countries into small manageable units now commonly referred to as “clusters”, using the social, economic, geographic criteria set out in the 9 January 2001 message of the House of Justice. Once divided, these clusters were categorized according to their current stages of development. The 9 January message had indicated that some clusters would not yet be open to the Faith, while others would contain a few isolated localities and groups; some would have established communities gaining strength through a vigorous institute process, and a few with strong communities of deepened believers would be in a position to take on the challenges of systematic and accelerated expansion and consolidation. Soon everyone was referring to these four categories as D, C, B and A.

The friends, then, set out with remarkable energy to see how they could advance the Faith in their clusters, understanding that the engine for growth would be the institute process. Early on, it became clear that it was beyond the capacity of most national communities to give equal attention to a large number of clusters. So they began to

focus on few specific ones, and thus the concept of a “priority” cluster was born. This did not mean that the friends ignored the other clusters, but priority clusters provided a means for the collective learning to accumulate in a more efficient way and to be diffused to other areas. Initially priority clusters were chosen from among all four categories of growth. National Assemblies had goals to open a few through the dispatch of homefront pioneers, to strengthen in others the institute process through the establishment of study circles, and to increase substantially in a few other clusters the number of study circles, children’s classes and devotional meetings, thus preparing them for intensive programs of growth.

During this period, essentially the first year and a half of the Plan, a great deal was learned about multiplying what became known as the three core activities of the Plan. And the number of these activities rose dramatically enough in a sufficient percentage of clusters across the globe that the worldwide Bahá’í community began to feel the effect. A whole new dynamics of growth was emerging.

The 17 January 2003 message of the House of Justice provided an analysis of the learning that had occurred to date. “In most clusters,” it confirmed, “movement from one stage of growth to the next is being defined in terms of the multiplication of study circles, devotional meetings and children’s classes, and the expansion they engender.” It explained that the “coherence” achieved through the establishment of these core activities “provides the initial impulse for growth in a cluster,” an impulse that “gathers strength” as these activities “multiply in number.” It identified “campaigns that help a sizeable group of believers advance far enough in the main sequence of courses to perform the necessary acts of service” as the force that lent “impetus to this multiplication of activity.”

Thus the House of Justice was able to conclude that “a systematic approach to training” had “created a way for Bahá’ís to reach out to the surrounding society, share Bahá’u’lláh’s message with friends, family, neighbours and co-workers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings.” Along with this ability had appeared a most notable aspect of the change of culture that the House of Justice had already praised in previous messages: the opening of essential elements of Bahá’í community life to society at large. “This outward-looking orientation”, it said, was “one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place.” Since the core activities of the Plan were actually beginning to serve as portals through which individuals were entering the Faith, the House of Justice could confidently state that this “pattern of activity” constituted “a proven means of accelerating expansion and consolidation.” The pattern is now a well-known feature of growth around the Bahá’í world, and the believers in cluster after cluster are learning how to establish it.

Now, once this pattern of growth is put in place in a cluster, the next challenge is to accelerate the multiplication of the number of each of the core activities. How to do this became the next object of learning around the Bahá’í world, most notably during the second year of the Five Year Plan. As the friends in various clusters began to address this challenge, they often found that they were faced with one of two

difficulties, or both. Not infrequently there was an insufficient number of tutors to allow for the systematic multiplication of the number of study circles. But sometimes, even though a reasonable number of people in the cluster had reached the point in the sequence where they could act as tutors, very few believers had acquired the skills needed to seek out receptive souls and invite them to join the core activities—this despite the fact that by now they were convinced of the need to be more outward looking. Since courses in the institute sequence deal with these skills and abilities, it was concluded that, in most such cases, the friends had gone through them too hastily, not giving adequate attention to the practice called for. The decision was made in many clusters to go back over some of the books, emphasizing certain activities, particularly those encouraged in Book 2. Personally, I feel that although the courses and the corresponding practice do help, one also has to be patient until collective experience is accumulated in the cluster and the friends learn from one another and build capacity incrementally from success to success.

As to the shortage of tutors—the other difficulty encountered—the answer that seems to have emerged is to hold intensive campaigns to move a large group of believers through the main sequence of courses and raise the number of those who have finished Book 7. Experience seems to have shown that once the number reaches 40 or 50, the multiplication of core activities acquires a momentum of its own, this, of course, in the presence of other necessary conditions. If I understand it correctly, care is being exercised to ensure that the sense of urgency to finish the sequence of seven courses does not lead to the neglect of practice and the methodical building of capacity to carry out one act of service after the other.

Important as the multiplication of core activities is, we know that it is only the beginning. In its 17 January 2003 message, the Universal House of Justice called our attention to those clusters in the “vanguard” of the learning process, “still relatively few in number,” which were “ready to launch intensive programs of growth.” “The scale of expansion that is to mark the next stage of growth in these clusters,” the House of Justice explained, “calls for an intensity of effort yet to be achieved.” Learning how to achieve rapid accelerated growth, then, has been the focus of the friends in several clusters around the world for some time now, I believe in about 100 or so, and the results are most encouraging.

In order to clarify what “rapid accelerated growth” or “a program of intensive growth” may mean, I would like to take you through three examples. To do so, I will need to refer to numbers. The numbers I will use will be relatively large, representing clusters that may not look like the ones in which you are serving at this time. I know that it sometimes creates feelings of frustration when examples have little to do with one’s own reality. But please be patient with me; these illustrations are intended merely to help you see the dynamics of the process of growth that can emerge once momentum is built. I also realize that some of the friends become a little agitated when there is too much talk of numbers. Obviously an overemphasis on numbers is not desirable. But reactions to statistics and numerical plans can also be exaggerated.

Before we examine these examples, it would be fruitful to review some of the relevant passages from the 9 January 2001 message of the Universal House of Justice. It stated that:

It is important that national communities not rush into establishing intensive programs in an area before conditions are propitious. These conditions include: a high level of enthusiasm among a sizeable group of devoted and capable believers who understand the prerequisites for sustainable growth and can take ownership of the program; some basic experience on the part of a few communities in the cluster in holding classes for the spiritual education of children, devotional meetings, and the Nineteen Day Feast; the existence of a reasonable degree of administrative capacity in at least a few Local Spiritual Assemblies; the active involvement of several assistants to Auxiliary Board members in promoting community life; a pronounced spirit of collaboration among the various institutions working in the area; and above all, the strong presence of the training institute with a scheme of coordination that supports the systematic multiplication of study circles.

And the message went on to explain:

Programs initiated in such areas should aim at fostering sustainable growth by building the necessary capacity at the levels of the individual, the institution, and the community. Far from requiring grandiose and elaborate plans, these programs should focus on a few measures that have proven over the years to be indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation. Success will depend on the manner in which lines of action are integrated and on the attitude of learning that is adopted. The implementation of such a program will require the close collaboration of the institute, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, and an Area Teaching Committee.

At the core of the program must lie a sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development. A range of teaching efforts needs to be carried out, involving both activities undertaken by the individual and campaigns promoted by the institutions. As the number of believers in the area rises, a significant percentage should receive training from the institute, and their capabilities be directed towards the development of local communities.

From what I understand, to create and follow such a process, when the friends in a cluster come together, whether at a reflection meeting or at certain meetings of the institutions—the Area Teaching Committee, Local Spiritual Assemblies, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, and so on—there are two sets of numbers with which they have to be concerned. One has to do with several basic activities—devotional meetings, study circles, junior youth groups, children’s classes, firesides, home visits, and teaching projects among one or more receptive groups. The other set of numbers is concerned with populations—the population of the cluster, the total Bahá’í population, the number of those over the age of 15 who have completed each of the institute courses in the main sequence, and the number of children and junior youth

in programs for their spiritual education. It is a basic assumption of the present strategies that if the proportions among all of these numbers are somehow correct, plans can be made for cycles of intensive activity which allow for growth to be sustained and, in fact, accelerated. Now let us look at our examples. Actually, as far as I know, no cluster has accomplished what I will describe in the first example in terms of numbers. However, we have enough empirical data on the approach being taken in various clusters to understand what the dynamics of the kind of growth we are seeking may look like.

Imagine a cluster in a relatively advanced stage of growth that has about 1000 believers over the age of 15 and a couple of thousand junior youth and children. From what we see around the world, we can safely assume that some 400 to 500 of the adults and youth over 15 have gone through the first course in the sequence. In most such clusters, there is a noticeable drop in the number of those who complete the first and the second courses and the friends are striving to learn how to close this gap; so let us assume that some 200 to 250 have completed the second course. Even if only half of these friends end up carrying out the principal act of service addressed in the second course, there will be a sufficient number to ensure that the rest of the Bahá'ís are visited, invited to devotional meetings, and kept involved in Bahá'í community life.

Now of these 200 or 250, certain percentages continue from one course to the next. So there might be some 150 who have finished the third course and can act as children's class teachers, 100 who have done the fourth, fifth and sixth courses, and 50 to 70 who have completed the study of Book 7. The proportions are such that the adults, junior youth and children of the Bahá'í population receive, in various degrees, spiritual nourishment. There may be as many as 50 or 60 study circles running, 50 or 60 children's classes, some 20 junior youth groups, and up to 100 or more devotional meetings—this, in addition to the program of home visits being systematically conducted. We have already said that this pattern of activity has some expansion built into it since many adults and children from the wider population will be involved in these activities. But this is clearly not enough, if the cluster is to enter a stage of accelerated growth. So the friends are no longer content with the level of enrolments achieved up to that point and wish to take advantage of teaching opportunities among some receptive population. Referring to clusters that have advanced to such a degree, the Universal House of Justice has said: “Seizing such opportunities requires a major shift from the gradualist approach that meets the needs of clusters at earlier stages of progress.”

So let us say, the institutions serving our cluster consult and then call for a reflection meeting in which they help the friends examine their present level of collective capacity. They have decided that, given the current pool of tutors, at least ten more study circles can be established in the cluster, initiating another 100 people in the study of Book 1. To achieve this, they determine that, judging from the present proportions, they will need to bring about 200 or 250 new believers into the Faith. So they devise a two-week intensive teaching campaign that will form part of a three-month cycle of growth. We can assume that receptivity is high among the population and contacting

people is easy, so within the two-week period, the teams working in various localities reach their goals. The Bahá'í population in the cluster over the age of 15 is now slightly above 1200.

The friends spend the next several weeks consolidating the gains made and preparing the ground for launching another teaching campaign in about three-months' time. What is important, they realize, is to pay attention to certain proportions, otherwise the enterprise may eventually collapse. Besides the ten study circles, classes for the children of the newly enrolled believers, study groups for junior youth, a program of home visits to the new believers not in the institute program, and devotional meetings are established, and every effort is made to increase during this period the number of those who have completed courses of the institute at each level. In this consolidation process there are further enrolments, largely from among the relatives of the new believers who have joined study circles and participated in the home visits. At the end of the three-month period, special meetings of various institutions are conducted, a reflection meeting is called, and the friends chart their course for the immediate months ahead, analysing the data before them and the lessons learned, and launching another cycle of growth that will bring in new believers and change the reality in the cluster once again.

Of course what I have described for you is greatly simplified. There are numerous other things going on in the cluster. Core literature is produced and made available to the friends, the institutions are enhancing their capacity to serve the friends, the Nineteen Day Feast is celebrated, Holy Days are observed, other types of gatherings are arranged, and new possibilities are opening before them. But, for now at least, the outcome of all this activity is the pattern of growth I have described.

The next two examples are real ones and will be closer to what I believe, in at least one cluster, you yourselves are witnessing. However, I have deliberately not chosen an example from Australia because you are familiar with your own experiences and, in any case, are reflecting on them in this conference.

The first is a city whose population is largely Muslim. It is a single cluster divided into seven sectors, under the guidance of one Local Spiritual Assembly. In May, it had a Bahá'í population of about 300 believers over the age of 15, some 20 junior youth and about 30 children. At that point 205 believers had completed Book 1, and 43 believers had completed Book 7. Nineteen study circles were running and nine children's classes. There had been an average of two to three declarations every month in the past few years.

During a visit of one of the members of the International Teaching Centre and a Continental Counsellor, a meeting was held with the Local Assembly. Given the fact that they had 43 potential tutors, the Assembly felt that 11 more study circles could be established with around 50 new participants. To reach this goal, they estimated that they would need to share the message of the Faith with around 500 people. A two-week teaching campaign was then designed. It also became clear in the consultation that ten

new children's classes and junior youth groups could be formed with the participation of 80 children and young people. Further consultation concentrated on identifying receptive populations on which to focus the campaign; on the strategy to be followed in the subsequent phase of consolidation, which would last two and a half months; and on the role of the various institutions and agencies of the Faith. At the end of the three months, the cycle of activity would be repeated, incorporating the lessons learned from the first experience.

A few days later, the Local Assembly arranged a reflection meeting in the cluster. Following a program with prayers, songs and dramas performed by the children, the vision of the cycles of growth was shared with over 50 friends. Of them, 43 volunteered to join the two-week teaching campaign scheduled to begin the following week. They were immediately formed into seven teams: three would teach their friends, neighbours, relatives and colleagues; one team would teach the parents of the children in the Bahá'í classes; one would focus on the people residing on a particular street where many Bahá'ís had lived over the years; another would teach refugees living in the city; and another the students of an English class that was being offered to the public. While still at the meeting, every team member drew up a list of those that he or she would try to teach, and the figures did come to about 500. A refresher course on certain parts of Book 6 would be held for the participants a few days prior to the launch of the campaign, and they intended to get together every three days to analyze their activities and to coordinate and plan for the next couple of days.

From the latest reports available, the numerical results were not as high as the friends had hoped. Rather than 500, only 184 individuals were reached in the two-week campaign. Of these, 6 were brought into the institute process during the campaign, and another 14 afterwards. It was felt that about 10 more might join study circles if contact with them was maintained. Work with the children also moved forward but not to the extent anticipated. Seven classes with 34 children were formed as a result of the campaign, with all the children coming from families that were not Bahá'ís. Indeed, from among all the populations on which the teams focussed, the parents seemed to be the most promising.

Despite the fact that the friends did not attain all their goals, they are nonetheless greatly encouraged by their efforts, and rightly so. To bring 20 individuals into the institute process in the span of a few weeks in this particular city is no small task. Given the proportions achieved, the initial estimate of receptivity was proven accurate. So when the cycle was over, the friends in the cluster could examine the new capacity of their community, and plan another cycle, now based on a better understanding of the reality of their city and its population.

The other example we may quickly examine is Murun in Mongolia. Murun is the provincial capital in western Mongolia with a population of about 20,000. The boundaries of the cluster actually encompass several localities besides Murun, including three other active Bahá'í communities. The Bahá'í population over the age of 15 was about 400 in May. In the past two years the cluster had experienced steady and ever-

intensifying growth. From May 2003 to May 2004 there had been 228 declarations, an average of 19 new believers a month. By May, 46 of the friends had completed Book 7, and so it was felt the cluster was ready to consider launching an intensive program of growth. Again as a result of a visit from an International Counsellor and a Continental Counsellor, the friends went through a planning process similar to the one I just mentioned, deciding to launch a two-week teaching campaign as part of a three-month growth cycle.

The cycle began with a sixteen-day institute camp for youth aged 15-21 on Books 6 and 7 at the end of June. The total number of tutors was thus raised from 46 to 71, and the youth were immediately deployed in the teaching campaign that began in mid-July. The aim was to share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with 450 people, in the hope that 150 of them would join the ranks of His followers. A total of 19 teams were deployed, each team consisting of approximately 3-5 members. Sixty-eight friends participated full-time in the campaign, and another 30 or so on a part-time basis. Like the previous case, the teams focused on specific populations. By the end of the campaign, 780 people had been taught the Faith and 200 had declared, out of which 140 were over the age of 15. As of the last report, of these 140 new believers, 90 had completed Book 1, 39 had completed Book 2, and 28 had completed Book 3. There were several ongoing study circles aimed at involving more of the declarants in the institute courses. A public proclamation meeting had just been organized in one locality attended by about 200 people, of whom over 100 were seekers. One hundred and thirty-seven children were attending 23 children's classes, and a junior youth campaign was about to be launched. A reflection meeting would later be held to celebrate and analyse the achievements.

These examples provide us with an overview of what is happening in the Bahá'í world with respect to the movement of clusters. In a relatively large number of clusters, the friends are building the strength of their human resources, establishing core activities, learning how to multiply them, and are experiencing steady expansion. However, gradually, more and more clusters are emerging—as I mentioned earlier, about 100 right now—in which the friends are ready to establish cycles of growth to bring in larger numbers, not necessarily on the scale of the first illustration I gave, but all moving steadily in that direction.

I hope that, by describing the cold facts of a process of growth that is well within our capacity to reach and sustain, I have not given the impression that the process does not create an intense, tangible spiritual dynamics. To maintain the level of intensity required for such growth, there are powerful spiritual forces that have to come into play. We should not forget what the House of Justice has told us about the planning process: “At its core it is a spiritual process in which communities and institutions strive to align their pursuits with the Will of God.”

Clearly, there is a great deal more to say and to learn about the two movements that characterize the Five Year Plan. But it is time for me to bring this series of talks to an end. Our discussions over these past few days have been cast in the general framework of capacity building—building the capacity of the three protagonists of our plans to

advance the process of entry by troops. Much of what we have said has had to do with the individual and the need for individual initiative within the framework of the Plan. The institutions of the Faith have, of course, been ever present in our thoughts: they plan, guide, encourage and administer a rather complex set of systems and processes that make it possible for each of us to contribute to the civilization building enterprise in which we are all engaged. We have also touched on many themes related to the community and, I hope, furthered our understanding of the forces that shape our collective actions. But I would like to make a few more remarks on the nature of the community, as the final object of our reflections.

The basic questions I would like to explore are these: What are we a community of? What is the purpose of our labors together? What kind of a force are we in this world? What kind of a force are we to become?

The most immediate answer to the first question is that we are a community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. We share common beliefs and are connected to one another by bonds of love, a love that flows from our common love for Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore, an essential aspect of our community life is loving fellowship. Another aspect is clearly devotional; we are a community of people who come together to worship God. And we come together to share our understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and to deepen our knowledge of His Revelation. To this we may add the institutional dimension. We are an organized community that administers its own affairs. Our institutions take care of our marriages, arrange for the spiritual education of our children, settle our differences, and support us in our efforts to live according to the laws of the new Dispensation. And when we die, the community ensures that we receive a dignified burial; and we are remembered in prayers.

That Bahá'u'lláh has established a worldwide community that binds together people of such diverse backgrounds, so united in their understanding of a set of fundamental beliefs, is a miracle indeed. It seems even more miraculous when we think of the persecuted Bahá'í community of Iran in which we have our roots. Yet, we must certainly all agree that we will not be true to our purpose if we simply stay a community at this level. We can, of course, add to our list of characteristics the fact that we are a community engaged in service to humanity. But I would like to suggest that, unless we define service within a particular context, we will still fall short of the kind of community we are supposed to be. After all, are there not thousands of congregations that have most of the characteristics I have just mentioned—groups of wonderful people who have high ideals, whose community life is filled with love and fellowship, who come together to worship and to study their scriptures and who administer their own affairs so that they can support one another and can take good care of themselves and of their children? Do not many of these communities engage in some projects of service to the larger society, helping those in need and doing what good citizens are generally supposed to do?

Of course, the most significant factor that defines us is that we are a community created directly by the power of the Covenant which, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is the pivot of the oneness of humankind. So we can go on and mention all those characteristics of our

community life that are founded on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings: our efforts to abolish prejudice, our adherence to the principle of consultation, our openness and tolerance, the uniqueness of our Administrative Order. We could continue listing one characteristic after another. What we would actually be doing, of course, is praising the beauty of the teachings and their relevance to the life of humanity, which rightly fills us with a sense of uniqueness given the sublimity of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. But, still, all of these statements, it seems to me, answer only partially the question: "What we are a community of?" Let us see if we can look for a fuller answer by examining the concept of service more carefully.

The concept of service to the community, to society, to humanity can be understood in terms that have no claim to transformation, no claim to change. There are thousands and thousands of organizations in every society that are service oriented, but the thought of changing society, as they vigorously carry out their programs of service, has never occurred to them, even though they clearly hope to improve social conditions. There are also movements of reform, but even these do not seek the complete restructuring of society. When we say that we believe in Bahá'u'lláh's statement "Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead," we set ourselves apart from every other movement that exists in today's world. We do not fool ourselves into thinking that the world is more or less all right—that, even though we may be living in relative comfort, oppression does not reign the world, that greed is not a rampart force ruining the lives of billions of people. Yet, we are not a revolutionary movement in the usual sense of the word. While we believe that the present-day order is entirely defective, we refuse to have anything to do with its destruction. We are builders and do not wish to develop the habits of those who destroy, even when they hope to build something better once they have succeeded. We have no use for the conceptions of power that allow some to dominate others or manipulate them. We believe in the power of unity, the power of pure and goodly deeds, the power of sincere and disinterested service. Our highest aspiration is the station of service. We serve the interests of humanity, the entire human race, and cooperate with whatever project serves these interests, even in the smallest measure. But our own enterprise is concerned with building a totally new civilization the likes of which humanity has never imagined. Now this combination of beliefs and approaches is truly revolutionary. When we think of ourselves in these terms, an entire host of words and phrases come to mind, words that Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian have used in referring to us: "spiritual conquerors," the "army of light," the "heroic band of the warriors of Bahá'u'lláh, battling in His Name," the "ranks of its unreserved supporters," soldiers of "life". We are assured that "invisible battalions are mustered, rank upon rank, ready to pour forth reinforcement from on high", that "every crusader battling for His Cause" will receive "unfailing aid," that we should become "as a levied army of the Supreme Concourse and as a host of salvation descending from the Kingdom of Abhá". In this light, let me read for you this quotation from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Whensoever holy souls, drawing on the powers of heaven, shall arise with such qualities of the spirit, and march in unison, rank on rank, every one of those souls will be even as one thousand, and the surging waves of that mighty ocean will be

even as the battalions of the Concourse on high. What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea.

Today, you will have your last session of group discussion of this conference. You may find it fruitful to reflect on the dynamics of this movement in your own clusters and describe its features. Some issues you may wish to examine are:

The role various institutions are playing to propel the movement

The spirit of collaboration among the various institutions and agencies working in the cluster

Openness, freedom from territoriality, and the attitude of learning

Flow of information and material means

The effectiveness of reflection meetings

The effectiveness with which human resources are being deployed

The characteristics of approach to planning being followed

The ways in which seekers are attracted to the community and involved in core activities

Receptive populations and the way they are approached

The capacity of the cluster to accelerate the processes of expansion and consolidation