

Some Insights from the First Century of the Formative Age

PAUL LAMPLE

Abstract

In 1930, Shoghi Effendi explained that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament would require “at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed.” In the closing years of the first century of the Formative Age, we now have some greater insight into the implications of this charter document. This article explores six concepts: the Covenant from a historical perspective; the range of authority and powers of the Universal House of Justice; learning within an evolving framework for action; organic growth and development; relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions; and society-building power.

Résumé

En 1930, faisant référence au Testament d’Abdu’l-Bahá, le Gardien expliquait qu’il faudra « au moins un siècle de travail réel avant que les trésors de la sagesse qui y sont cachés puissent être révélés. » Alors que nous approchons de la fin du premier siècle de l’âge de formation, il est possible de commencer à saisir quelque peu les implications de cette charte. L’auteur explore six concepts : l’Alliance dans une perspective historique; l’ampleur de l’autorité et des pouvoirs conférés à la Maison universelle de justice; l’apprentissage dans un cadre d’action en constante évolution; la croissance organique et le développement; les relations entre les individus, les communautés et les institutions; le pouvoir de bâtir une société.

Resumen

En 1930, el Guardián explicó que la Voluntad y el Testamento de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá requiere “por lo menos un siglo de trabajo real antes de que los tesoros de sabiduría escondidos en él puedan ser revelados”. En los últimos años del primer siglo de la Edad Formativa es posible tener un mayor conocimiento de las implicaciones de este documento carta magna. Se exploran seis conceptos: La Alianza desde una Perspectiva Histórica; El Alcance de la Autoridad y los Poderes de la Casa Universal de Justicia; Aprendiendo dentro de un Marco para la Acción que Evoluciona; El Crecimiento y Desarrollo Orgánicos; Las Relaciones entre los Individuos, las Comunidades y las Instituciones; y el Poder para Construir Sociedad.

In outlining the unfoldment of the Cause, Shoghi Effendi described three great ages: Heroic, Formative, and Golden. The Heroic, Apostolic, or Primitive Age, marked by the ministries of the three Central Figures of the Faith, was “unapproached in spiritual fecundity by any period associated with the mission of the Founder of any previous Dispensation” and “was impregnated, from its inception to its termination, with the creative energies generated through the advent of two independent Manifestations and the establishment of a Covenant unique in the spiritual annals of mankind” (*Citadel* 5).

The Formative, Transitional, or Iron Age of the Dispensation, the period in which the Faith progresses toward maturity, will, according to the Guardian, witness the crowning stage in the erection of the framework of the administration, the election of the Universal House of Justice, the codification and promulgation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother-Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, and the establishment of the Lesser Peace. He also observed that the “unity of mankind will have been achieved and its maturity attained, the Plan conceived by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will have been executed, the emancipation of the Faith from the fetters of religious orthodoxy will have been effected, and its independent religious status will have been universally recognized” (*Citadel* 6).

And finally, in the course of the Golden Age, the age of the culmination and fulfillment of the promises of the Dispensation, “the banner of the Most Great Peace, promised by its Author, will have been unfurled, the World Bahá'í Commonwealth will have emerged in the plenitude of its power and splendor, and the birth and efflorescence of a world civilization, the child of that Peace, will have conferred its inestimable blessings upon all mankind” (*Citadel* 6).

As people embrace the Faith and become struck by the wonder of a new Manifestation and His Teachings, which offer the healing remedy to the ills afflicting a sore-tried humanity, it is not unreasonable to expect to see a dramatic transformation expressed in the lives of individual believers, in the spirit and practice of the community, and in the wise and just ministrations of its institutions. While some faults are anticipated as part of the developmental process, how long, one may wonder, must humanity wait

for the promise of these Teachings to appear? The answer, Shoghi Effendi explained, was to recognize that the profound changes promised by Bahá'u'lláh would not appear spontaneously, but had to be patiently pursued over a prolonged period through the sacrifice and struggles of those who recognize Him. "I consider it my duty," he wrote, "to warn every beginner in the Faith that the promised glories of the Sovereignty which the Bahá'í teachings foreshadow, can be revealed only in the fullness of time, that the implications of the Aqdas and the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as the twin repositories of the constituent elements of that Sovereignty, are too far-reaching for this generation to grasp and fully appreciate" (*World Order* 16).

The embryo in the womb, though fully human, cannot manifest the powers of a later stage but is concentrated on its current developmental needs. Even after birth, capabilities are acquired according to the degree of effort and within the range of possibilities and limitations of organic development, until the age of maturity is achieved, when, even as an adult, development continues within another set of prospects and constraints. What is necessary in order to contribute as much as possible to the advancement of the Faith, is a greater awareness on the part of every Bahá'í of its particular requirements, its potentialities, and its challenges during each stage of development.

In the first years of the Formative Age, as Bahá'ís endeavored to forge the instruments of the administrative order to systematically execute the Divine Plan, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly emphasized their rudimentary conceptions of the work at hand. A letter written on his behalf states, "The contents of the Will of the Master are far too much for the present generation to comprehend. It needs at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed" (qtd. in *Messages 1963-86* par. 75.18). "How vast is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh!" he wrote, in another context. "And yet, how poor, how inadequate our conception of their significance and glory! This generation stands too close to so colossal a Revelation to appreciate, in their full measure, the infinite possibilities of His Faith, the unprecedented character of His Cause, and the mysterious dispensations of His Providence" (*World Order* 24). And, stressing

the importance of obtaining a “clear conception of the exact purpose and methods of this new world order, so challenging and complex, yet so consummate and wise,” he further explains,

We are called upon by our beloved Master in His Will and Testament not only to adopt [the new world order] unreservedly, but to unveil its merit to all the world. To attempt to estimate its full value, and grasp its exact significance after so short a time since its inception would be premature and presumptuous on our part. We must trust to time, and the guidance of God’s Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications. (*Bahá'í Administration* 62)

Decades have passed since these statements were made. Only a few years remain until the close of the first century of the Formative Age. After almost a century of actual working, it is now possible to have much greater insight into the implications of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament and the unfoldment of Bahá’u’lláh’s new order that remained beyond the grasp of the believers of an earlier age. These insights are significant not simply for the perspective they offer on the past but also for understanding the current efforts of the Bahá’í world, and they will continue to be meaningful in shaping the course the Faith will trace in future centuries throughout the Dispensation. Different individuals may well derive different understandings from the experience of the past ninety-three years. The following is a personal perspective only, touching on six critical points.

THE COVENANT FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

First among the concepts that can be better grasped by the current generation of believers is a historical perspective of the unfoldment of the provisions of the Covenant. At any given time, the Bahá’í community has a particular understanding of the Covenant based on the Sacred Text and its authoritative interpretation as well as the experience of the community. Because the outward form of the institutional arrangements pertaining to the Covenant changed at certain points in history, most notably at the

passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of Shoghi Effendi, the believers at those moments were challenged to reshape their prevalent assumptions and understandings to accommodate realities, inherent in the Text, that they had not anticipated or appreciated. For some this was a challenging task, resulting, in extreme cases, in a loss of faith or even violation of the Covenant. From the vantage of almost a century of actual working, however, a coherent picture of the provisions and safeguards of the Covenant provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament has emerged.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed away in 1921, the Bahá’ís of the world, shocked and saddened, had no clear idea what the future arrangements for the Cause would be. Cognizant of the Universal House of Justice from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, many believers surely anticipated that it would soon be formed. Except for an awareness among a few, there was no anticipation of the Guardianship or explicit understanding of the future role of Shoghi Effendi (see, for example, *Priceless Pearl* 2–3); even he later indicated that “he had no foreknowledge” of the position to which he would be called (*Priceless Pearl*, 42).

Only after the reading of the Will and Testament, its translation, and its wide circulation did the friends begin to understand this new institution. While the vast majority responded with firmness in the Covenant and rallied to support the Guardian, others, beyond the group of old Covenant breakers yet equally lost in the wilderness of their idle fancies or personal ambitions, sought to raise questions, plant seeds of doubt and confusion, pursue their own path, and attempt to incite open revolt. Such challenges included questioning the authenticity of the Will and Testament, attempting to ignore or supplant the Administrative Order, and endeavoring to undermine the Guardian’s authority.

Surveying the range of such attacks, Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*, notes the “strenuous exertions of an ambitious Armenian, who, in the course of the first years of its establishment in Egypt, endeavored to supplant it by the ‘Scientific Society,’” the “agitation provoked by a deluded woman who strove diligently both in the United States and in England to demonstrate the unauthenticity of the Charter responsible for its creation,” the “volumes which a shameless apostate composed and

disseminated, during that same period in Persia, in his brazen efforts not only to disrupt that Order but to undermine the very Faith which had conceived it," the "schemes devised by the remnants of the Covenant-breakers," and "the infamous and insidious machinations of a former secretary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá . . . to pervert the purpose and nullify the essential provisions of the immortal Document from which that Order derives its authority." Yet, he concludes, none of the opponents who "misrepresented its character, or derided and vilified it, or striven to arrest its march, or contrived to create a breach in the ranks of its supporters, succeeded in achieving their malevolent purpose" (*God Passes By* 327). In *The Priceless Pearl*, Rúhíyyih Khánum describes these attacks and the toll they took on the young Guardian:

The entire life of the Guardian was plagued and blighted by the ambition, the folly, the jealousy and hatred of individuals who rose up against the Cause and against him as Head of the Cause and who thought they could either subvert the Faith entirely or discredit its Guardian and set themselves up as leaders of a rival faction and win the body of believers over to their own interpretation of the Teachings and the way in which they believed the Cause of God should be run. No one ever succeeded in doing these things, but a series of disaffected individuals never ceased to try. The ringleaders misled the fools, the excommunicated tried to pervert the faithful.

. . . Shoghi Effendi, particularly after reading the denunciation of the old Covenant-breakers in the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was prepared for their attacks, but the sudden stirring up of so much mischief and opposition in so unexpected a quarter left him shocked and greatly disturbed. I shall never forget how he looked when he called my mother and me to his bedroom, in 1923; we stood at the foot of his bed, where he lay, obviously prostrated and heart-broken, with great black shadows under his eyes, and he told us he could not stand it, he was going away. It must have been terribly difficult for such young a man to find himself the centre of so many attacks and to realize it devolved upon him to exercise his right and perform his duty of

excommunication in order to protect the Faith and keep the flock safe from the wolves prowling around it. (118–19)

Among his earliest responsibilities, Shoghi Effendi had to clarify and defend the administrative order in general and the institution of the Guardianship in particular. This task included an explanation of how the existence of the Guardianship in no way infringed upon the authority and prerogatives of the Universal House of Justice. He provided a number of clarifications, especially within the letters compiled in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (including pages 8–9, 16–25, 143–57).

The Bahá'í Writings do not suggest that misguided individuals will not attempt to create sects or divisions in the Faith; such efforts have repeatedly been made throughout its history. What the Writings do state is that, because of a firm and explicit Covenant, such attempts will ultimately fail (*Messages to America* 50). By the end of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, the attacks were refuted, and the validity of the administration and importance of the Guardianship were well understood by the entire body of believers. However, another shock and challenge to their understanding came when Shoghi Effendi passed away without the appointment of a successor. How, some wondered, was it possible for the line of Guardians to come to an end? How could the Faith continue without a Guardian? Thus, in 1921, the friends had no idea there would be a Guardian, expecting the House of Justice alone to guide the Faith, and they had to be patiently educated about the Guardianship in the face of attacks against it. Only 36 years later, in 1957, the friends had to learn to accept that there would no longer be a Guardian and to understand how, even without a Guardian, the Universal House of Justice was fully empowered to guide the affairs of the Cause to unfailingly achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose. The experience and expectations of the Bahá'í community in 1921 were reversed, and then reversed again in 1957.

As in 1921, the years following the passing of the Guardian witnessed misunderstandings of the believers as well as attacks by some on the provisions of the Covenant and on the Centre of the Faith—this time on the authority of the Universal House of Justice. A handful of susceptible individuals

were swept away in the tide of their personal imaginings, yet ultimately the result was a greater clarity and firmer ties to the Covenant among the mass of believers. Ironically, whereas after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá problematic individuals complained about the existence of the Guardianship and sought the immediate formation of the House of Justice, after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, problematic individuals complained that there was no longer a Guardian and sought to undermine the authority of the House of Justice. Just as the Guardian did at the start of his ministry, the House of Justice after its establishment in 1963 began to clarify the understanding of the friends and help them grasp the implications of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. A series of letters gradually elucidated a range of questions, especially messages of the House of Justice dated 6 October 1963, 9 March 1965, 27 May 1966, 7 December 1969, and most recently, 18 February 2008. The House of Justice explained that it found "that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi" (*Messages* par. 5.1); yet, "the mighty Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh remains impregnable" (*Messages* par. 75.14), and "the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth" (*Messages* par. 23.20).

Now, many years after these two dramatic events that deeply affected the understanding of the friends, the provisions of the Covenant can be seen in a clearer light. The House of Justice has stated, "An attentive reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will makes it clear that He did not indicate a predestined outcome but did provide for a number of circumstances which, depending on future conditions, might eventually confront the Faith" (18 Feb. 2008). It has further explained that in the early 1900s, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life was in jeopardy, and provision was made for the possibility that the House of Justice might be formed while Shoghi Effendi was but a boy and could not yet fulfill the duties of the Guardian. If such a situation had unfolded, the House of Justice would have functioned initially after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá without a Guardian. When Shoghi Effendi assumed his responsibilities as Guardian, he initially, although only briefly, considered establishing the House of Justice. If conditions had made it

possible to establish it in his lifetime, or if conditions had allowed for him to appoint a successor according to the specific criteria laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will, then the Guardian and the House of Justice would have functioned simultaneously. Furthermore, the Text holds no guarantee that the line of Guardians would continue throughout the Dispensation. As historical circumstances actually unfolded, the line of Guardians did come to an end before the formation of the House of Justice.

In one of His Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh asks a question central to every soul that professes belief: "Where shalt thou secure the cord of thy faith and fasten the tie of thine obedience?" (*Gems* 13). After nearly a century in which the provisions of the Will and Testament were put to the test—including two events, the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the passing of Shoghi Effendi, that radically challenged the understanding of the believers—the answer is evident and will stand over the course of the Dispensation. For Bahá'ís there are two centers of authority: the Book, with its body of authoritative interpretation, and the guidance of the House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself" (*Will and Testament* 39–40).

THE RANGE OF AUTHORITY AND POWERS OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Another concept pertaining to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that can be more fully grasped by the current generation of believers is the range of authority and powers of the Universal House of Justice. In his writings, Shoghi Effendi makes a number of statements that define certain types of specific decisions that are left to the House of Justice. For example, the House of Justice will determine whether National Assemblies will continue to be elected on an annual basis, describe details concerning the use of birth control, and address questions associated with the implementation of the Bahá'í calendar, such as specifying the observance of the twin festivals marking the births of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, there are also

emphatic and far-reaching statements by the Guardian that describe its authority and powers in a broad manner.

The function of the House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi explains, “is to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration of the Movement” (*Bahá'í Administration* 63). It “will guide, organize and unify the affairs of the Movement throughout the world” (*Bahá'í Administration* 39), and it will share, in common with the Guardian, the responsibilities “to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings” (*World Order* 148). When established, the House of Justice will “consider afresh the whole situation, and lay down the principle which shall direct, so long as it deems advisable, the affairs of the Cause” (*Bahá'í Administration* 41), and it will launch in the Formative Age, as part of the execution of the Divine Plan, “world-wide enterprises . . . that will symbolize the unity and co-ordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies” (qtd. in *Compilations 1* 340). He adds, “[I]t will lay down new methods, establish a firm and inviolable Constitution and will initiate comprehensive projects and undertakings. Then all the meetings of the friends, be they private or public, local or national, will come under its shadow, deriving inspiration from it and will be sustained by it.”¹ “When this most great edifice shall be reared on such an immovable foundation,” the Guardian states, “God’s purpose, wisdom, universal truths, mysteries and realities of the Kingdom, which the mystic Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh has deposited within The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, shall gradually be revealed and made manifest” (qtd. in *Bahá'í World* 436). And, in addition,

When the Universal House of Justice shall have stepped forth from the realm of hope into that of visible fulfillment and its fame be

1. Letter from Shoghi Effendi dated 27 February 1923, addressed to the Bahá'ís of the East, published in *Tarwqí'át-i-Mubárahik* (1922-1926), p. 133. Provisional translation.

established in every corner and clime of the world, then that august body, solidly grounded and founded on the firm and unshakeable foundation of the entire Bahá'í community of East and West, and the recipient of the bounties of God and His inspiration . . . will proceed to devise and carry out important undertakings, world-wide activities and the establishment of glorious institutions. By this means the renown of the Cause of God will become world-wide and its light will illumine the whole earth. (qtd. in *Bahá'í World* 436)

The range of authority and powers granted to the House of Justice are summarized more fully in the preamble to its constitution. The House of Justice does not merely act within the context of a fixed administrative structure laid out by the Guardian. Indeed, for many issues that arose during his ministry, Shoghi Effendi, in order to meet the pressing concerns of the moment, either enacted a temporary measure to address a situation or permitted National Assemblies to take a preliminary decision. This course of action was continued until such time as the House of Justice could address the matter, which means to apply the Teachings, guide the continuing evolution of the administrative order, and direct the unfoldment of the Faith through the stages of the Divine Plan.

An example of authority of the House of Justice in guiding the administration and the direction of the Divine Plan can be found in the evolution of the institution of the learned and in the collaboration of the two arms of the administrative order², especially in relation to the propagation of the Faith. Shoghi Effendi did not appoint living Hands of the Cause of God until 1951, and thus, the institution of the learned had only been functioning actively for some six years before his untimely passing. Indeed, an important element of that institution, the Auxiliary Boards for

2. In devising the administrative order for the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh designates an elected branch, which He terms "the rulers," as having legislative and executive authority, and an appointed branch, which He terms "the learned in Bahá," as functioning in the role of advisors to the various institutions.

protection, was created only a matter of days before that tragic event. By comparison, Shoghi Effendi had discussed the importance and responsibilities of Local and National Assemblies and had guided the friends in their operation for over thirty-six years.

Obviously, much more was said about the functioning of Assemblies and much less about the functioning of the Hands of the Cause and the Auxiliary Boards. Therefore, the task has fallen to the House of Justice to fully describe the function of this arm of the administration. Additionally, the House of Justice established the International Teaching Centre and Boards of Counsellors to carry forward the work of the Hands into the future, defined in detail their role in the administrative order, and explained how the two arms interact and collaborate. Much of this information is summarized in *The Institution of the Counsellors*.

In more recent years, the House of Justice further clarified the duties of these standard-bearers of the teaching work in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. The responsibilities of National and Local Assemblies have similarly evolved and grown in complexity in recent years under the direction of the House of Justice. New institutional arrangements to guide a new approach to the teaching work have been created—including Regional Bahá'í Councils, training institutes, and agencies at the cluster level—which operate under the direction of National Assemblies, in close collaboration with the Counsellors, and which require careful attention for their sound development and integration with the Assemblies' other lines of action. And, where communities are growing, Local Assemblies find themselves drawn into greater responsibilities for the progress of the Plan and into the affairs of the wider community, as discussed in the letter of the House of Justice dated 28 December 2010.

At any given historical moment, then, there may be a certain idea about the way Assemblies function, or about how the Counsellors and their Auxiliaries are to operate. Outwardly, it may even appear that there is some variance in guidance set forth by Shoghi Effendi. Yet, it is the duty of the House of Justice to progressively define these roles; any change it institutes is a necessary part of evolution and organic development, and an indication of the Faith's flexibility and growing capacity. The guidance

of the House of Justice is a further clarification of the administrative order, suited to the needs of the time in order to achieve the aims of the Faith. Such changes are a movement toward, not away from, true Bahá'í administrative practice. The believers were instructed by the Guardian to "trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice" (*Bahá'í Administration* 62) to ensure the unfoldment of the potentialities of the new order enshrined in the Will and Testament.

Since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice in 1963, a number of challenges to its authority have followed a pattern similar to the challenges directed against the Guardianship, whether in attempting to usurp its authority by baseless claims to leadership or in trying to undermine its authority by imposing personal views about the aims and purpose of the Faith or the meaning of the Teachings. Such challenges have arisen through the acts of the avowed enemies of the Faith and by Covenant breakers, but also by those who profess to be faithful, while hiding their true motives, and even, to an extent, through the unwise acts of the believers themselves.

Of course, a sharp distinction must be drawn between the honest inquiry of a soul seeking to understand the Teachings and the heedless individual who knows the Teachings well but is determined, for personal motives, to obscure the truth. Nevertheless, just as in earlier stages of development, the friends must continue to guard themselves and the Faith from spurious assertions that are made in an attempt to divide or damage the community or to force it to change in a manner that accords with the speakers' personal views. For example, in attempting to confuse or convince those investigating the Faith or those believers who have a limited grasp of the provisions of the Covenant, some individuals circulated assertions and whisperings from time to time that the House of Justice was not properly established, that it does not have sufficient knowledge to formulate its decisions, that its decisions merely represent the personal views of particular members, or that the House of Justice is moving the Faith in the wrong direction. Others have suggested that, without a Guardian, the decisions of the House of Justice may be called into question, that elucidations of the House of Justice on matters addressed in the Text are mere

opinion, and that all matters pertaining to the meaning of the Teachings are left to debate or to determination by learned individuals. All such false charges and misrepresentations directly contradict the explicit guidance and assurances set forth in numerous unambiguous passages of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as the following:

At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice. . . . That is all. (qtd. in *Messages* par. 23.13–14)

It is incumbent upon these members to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. (*Will and Testament* 40)

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.

Say, O people: Verily the Supreme House of Justice is under the wings of your Lord, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, that is, under His protection, His care, and His shelter; for He has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.

. . . Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice.

The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the world-wide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken. (qtd. in *Messages* par. 35.7b-d)

There will be no grounds for difference. . . . Beware, beware lest anyone create a rift or stir up sedition. Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems. Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance, and care of the one true Lord. He shall guard it from error and will protect it under the wing of His sanctity and infallibility. He who opposes it is cast out and will eventually be of the defeated. (qtd. in *Messages* par. 23.11)

More than ninety years after the Will and Testament was disseminated, the Bahá'í world is now able to have a much greater understanding of the provisions of the Covenant and the authority and powers exercised by the Universal House of Justice. "Thus it is seen that no means for dissension hath been left, but carnal desires are the cause of difference," 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns (*Selections* 187.3). In establishing the Covenant, stipulating the formation of the House of Justice, and assigning it certain powers and responsibilities, and in the emphatic and absolute language in which this was done, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá intended to close all doors to differences and dissention; to prevent protracted disputes on matters of theology, doctrine, practice, and purposeful direction that divided previous religions; and to ensure that Bahá'ís remain united in thought and action as they learn how to translate the Teachings into reality to build a new world that is the central objective of this Dispensation. "For nothing short of the explicit directions of their Book, and the surprisingly emphatic language with which they have clothed the provisions of their Will, could

possibly safeguard the Faith for which they have both so gloriously labored all their lives,” Shoghi Effendi explains. “Nothing short of this could protect it from the heresies and calumnies with which denominations, peoples, and governments have endeavored, and will, with increasing vigor, endeavor to assail it in future” (*World Order* 22).

LEARNING WITHIN AN EVOLVING FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Within this perspective on the Covenant, it is also possible at this time to better understand the efforts of the believers as they strive to translate Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings into action in an ever more systematic way. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh are various concepts, principles, laws, and exhortations that address the ills that afflict individuals and society. The Manifestation of God innately understands the condition of humanity and its potentiality and limitations, and, as the Divine Physician, He prescribes a healing remedy in His Teachings. However, if those Teachings remain merely as written exhortations in a book—if the remedy is not applied—then humanity will not be transformed. There must be a systematic effort, a type of practice and method in which the believers are engaged so that they come to understand what is in the Sacred Text and gradually translate that understanding into reality and action.

Individuals, in the course of their own lives, engage in such an effort as they read the Writings, study the laws and exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh, try to live a Bahá'í life, and bring themselves to account by reflecting on their behavior each day so that, after prayer and reflection, they can try to make the necessary changes to improve their character and make tomorrow better than today. A similar effort is expressed through the collective enterprise that involves the raising of the administrative order and the execution of the Divine Plan. This process is accomplished through application of the learning process described by the House of Justice that involve study of the relevant guidance, consultation, action, and reflection on action over time.

Such an approach to learning about the collective efforts of the community began under the direction of Shoghi Effendi, although the believers may not have been fully conscious that they were engaged in a learning process.

The first area addressed was the understanding and practice of the administration; the Guardian set forth the principles and encouraged the friends to act. Over time, mistakes were made, and progress was often delayed or disrupted. Questions arose about innumerable facets of the administration, such as the procedures for elections and the matter of nominations, the nature of the national convention and whether it should be a standing consultative body, the relationship between the individual and the Assemblies, and the association between the National and Local Assemblies. Each time the Guardian provided the necessary guidance, the friends refined their efforts, capacity grew, and challenges were resolved. The long-term result was an increase in levels of development in the administrative field and the opening of new horizons for progress but also, in turn, new questions and challenges.

Another major area of endeavor that unfolded through a process of learning during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi was the creation and execution of Plans, first national and then global, but all of which were aspects of the Divine Plan set forth by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Once the basis for the administrative machinery of the Faith was in place—the instrument intended for the propagation of the Cause—Shoghi Effendi encouraged the friends in North America to create a “systematic, carefully conceived, and well-established plan” to be “devised, rigorously pursued and continuously extended” (*Messages to America* 7). Finally, in 1937, the Seven Year Plan was initiated.

In subsequent years, other national communities, as they reached a stage of maturity, were able to adopt their own national plan. Eventually, as a result of this learning process, the twelve communities with National Assemblies were able to unite, in 1953, in a single global plan, the Ten Year World Crusade. By learning to use the instrument of the administration to act in a united and systematic manner in the collective execution of the Plan, the Bahá’í world was able to achieve more progress in the work of expansion and consolidation of the Faith during that decade than it had in the previous 109 years combined.

In a letter written on his behalf, the Guardian summarized the struggles of the believers over many years and in different countries to build the

administration and expand the Faith:

One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order. Either they crystallize it into too set a form, or they rebel against what they feel to be a System, and do not give it sufficient support. Both of these extremes impede the progress of the Faith, and the efficiency of the believers. (*Divine Guidance* 185)

Shoghi Effendi's introduction of the concept of a framework helps clarify how the complex objectives that must be addressed to enable the Faith to grow, to attend the ills of humanity, to raise the nucleus and pattern of a new world order, and to contribute to the emergence a spiritual civilization all require more than implementing a formulaic approach or merely insisting upon a single action. Nor can the friends set aside Bahá'u'lláh's divine system simply because some aspect of the Teachings conflicts with their own strong inclinations or convictions. A number of concepts and practices, laws and exhortations, spiritual qualities and principles, and methods and instruments must be employed, over time, in various ways, in different combinations, in diverse contexts, across changing conditions, within organic developmental stages—all to be integrated in a coherent manner. Learning, as described by the House of Justice, is the process of discovering through experience the approaches to putting the full range of these concepts into practical and systematic action.

Thus, whether or not the friends were aware of it, the current process of study, consultation, action, and reflection has been part of the efforts of the believers from the start of the Formative Age. Since 1996, the House of Justice has encouraged individuals, communities, and institutions to consciously engage in this learning process and to make their efforts more systematic. At the start of the Four Year Plan, it observed the need for the "active supporters of the Faith in each region" to "identify the approaches and methods applicable to their specific conditions and to set in motion a systematic process of community development. This process should be

one in which the friends review their successes and difficulties, adjust and improve their methods accordingly, and learn, and move forward unhesitatingly” (*Turning Point* par. 1.23). By the end of that Plan, the House of Justice stated,

The culture of the Bahá’í community experienced a change. This change is noticeable in the expanded capability, the methodical pattern of functioning and the consequent depth of confidence of the three constituent participants in the Plan—the individual, the institutions and the local community. That is so because the friends concerned themselves more consistently with deepening their knowledge of the divine Teachings and learned much—and this more systematically than before—about how to apply them to promulgating the Cause, to managing their individual and collective activities, and to working with their neighbors. In a word, they entered into a learning mode from which purposeful action was pursued. (*Turning Point* par. 21.2)

By 2008, “thousands upon thousands” were “engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting” and, as they endeavored “to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels” (Ridván 2008). “For those who are actively participating in the process described,” a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice explains, “it becomes readily apparent that, far from being an attempt to impose uniformity, the framework for action serves as a creative matrix, shaping an environment that is fostering significant growth” (20 July 2009).

As the series of Plans since 1996 have unfolded, it has become increasingly evident how the understanding of the Covenant, the broad range of the powers and capacities of the House of Justice, and the learning process in which individuals, communities, and institutions are engaged come together in the unfoldment of the Faith through various stages over time. For example, the concept of the institute has its roots in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s

emphasis on the systematic training of teachers of the Faith. It emerged in various forms after the Ten Year Crusade—as the friends in different parts of the world experienced large-scale growth—in an effort to balance expansion and consolidation permanent institutes, weekend institutes, and teaching institutes were established. It took its present form from the guidance of the House and experience in the world since 1996. The development of the current curriculum, which combines study and action to help develop human resources for participation in the work of expansion and consolidation, is also shaped by a process of learning; the intent is neither a mere deepening program nor an exhaustive study of the Revelation, although it does lay the foundation for a lifelong exploration of the Word of God by the believers.

In the Four Year Plan (1996–2000), training institutes worldwide created or adopted their own courses, until, as a result of experience and because of certain practical advantages, the House of Justice called for institutes everywhere to adopt the books of the Ruhi Institute in 2005, “at least through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age” (*Turning Point* par. 36.4). Since that time, the evolution of the materials has advanced significantly. No longer are there simply a few books designed for the advancement of the Faith in Colombia, but a substantial curriculum created through an intensive process of learning in all parts of the world that produced the majority of the content of the children’s classes, the materials for junior youth, and the sequence of courses after Book Four. Doubtless the institute and its curriculum will continue to evolve, both in content and form, to a level of greater complexity in regions and nations within the framework of the administrative order throughout the various stages of the Divine Plan in the second century of the Formative Age.

Another example of the learning process is the emergence of intensive programs of growth. At the beginning of the first of the series of Five Year Plans in 2001, it was not possible to describe the features of an intensive program of growth. But based on the previous experience of Bahá'í communities in the teaching field, the House of Justice described certain prerequisites, characteristics, and principles that constitute such a program

and then encouraged the friends to translate those concepts into practical action. By Ridván 2004, the Bahá'í world, through its efforts to put into practice the precepts of the Plan and revise and improve their action through reflection on experience, was just beginning to see the first stirrings of intensive programs of growth in a few clusters.

Since then, work toward the establishment of programs of growth has expanded to more than three thousand clusters, with some fifteen hundred reaching an intensive level. Scores of additional clusters have advanced even further to the point where a vibrant pattern of community life has been created, in which hundreds are supporting the participation of thousands, as illustrated in the video *Frontiers of Learning*. Such endeavors are described more fully in the document of the International Teaching Centre titled *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning*.

What began with an effort to learn about the development of capacity for participation in the teaching work and the establishment of a few core activities has become a complex pattern of growth and community-building that is unfolding within an evolving framework for action that embraces an array of concepts, methods, instruments, activities, approaches, practices, and institutional arrangements. A letter written on behalf of the House of Justice summarizes the effort:

The four core activities are but the nucleus of an organic pattern of life that, as the number of individuals who can initiate activities multiplies, increases in complexity over time, eventually requiring coherence among a range of efforts that also includes visits to homes, social gatherings, Feast and Holy Day observances, deepenings, administration, strengthening the Fund, social action, involvement in the discourses of society, and so on. All these activities are sustained and expanded by the constant endeavors of individuals to reach out to their personal contacts as well as to receptive populations through direct teaching, both personal and collective, and engagement in meaningful conversations. The process of building growing communities is cultivated within three-monthly cycles of planning and action, and it is supported by institutional arrangements at the local, cluster, regional, national, and international levels. (17 February 2014)

Of course, while the endeavor in certain clusters has advanced, in others it has struggled. In some, a once vibrant pattern of activity has diminished, and in almost ten thousand clusters in the world, no Bahá'ís yet reside. In still others, the friends were unable to avoid a tendency either to “crystallize” the guidance into “too set a form” or “rebel against what they feel to be a System” and fail to “give it sufficient support”—the persistent challenge identified by the Guardian in an earlier age. In such instances, however, just as in the past when believers were learning about the framework of the administration, there is no alternative but to better understand the concepts and provisions of the framework for action of the Plan and to strive to implement them more effectively. After all, the framework itself also evolves, through guidance provided by the House of Justice and the experience of the friends, and it contains within it the necessary elements for the believers at the local and cluster levels to reflect upon and revise their actions to resolve practical problems that appear.

Much remains to be done. Yet, the learning process, practically invisible during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, has become a conscious and distinguishing feature of the systematic work of individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide.

ORGANIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Yet another aspect of the Faith that can be grasped more fully as the close of the first century of the Formative Age approaches is the nature and pattern of the organic growth and development of the Bahá'í community. Shoghi Effendi refers to the community's organic development and to its organic life, which reflects the characteristics it shares with the unfoldment of a living organism and with the coherent, integrated, and harmonious nature of its component parts. He speaks of the “the internal functions of the organic Bahá'í community” (*God Passes By* 339), explaining that its “embryonic state, shall evolve within the shell of His law, and shall forge ahead, undivided and unimpaired, till it embraces the whole of mankind” (*World Order* 23). The progress of national communities is propelled by “prosecuting specific Plans designed to foster their organic development” (*Messages to Canada* 29). “Such close interaction, such

complete cohesion, such continual harmony and fellowship between the various agencies that contribute to the organic life, and constitute the basic framework, of every properly functioning Bahá'í community," he states, "is a phenomenon which offers a striking contrast to the disruptive tendencies which the discordant elements of present-day society so tragically manifest" (*Advent* 1). And in one of its earliest messages, the Universal House of Justice writes,

In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it. This is true of the body of mankind in which God "hast endowed each and all with talents and faculties," and is supremely true of the body of the Bahá'í World Community, for this body is already an organism, united in its aspirations, unified in its methods, seeking assistance and confirmation from the same Source, and illumined with the conscious knowledge of its unity. . . . The Bahá'í World Community, growing like a healthy new body, develops new cells, new organs, new functions and powers as it presses on to its maturity, when every soul, living for the Cause of God, will receive from that Cause, health, assurance and the overflowing bounties of Bahá'u'lláh which are diffused through His divinely ordained order. (*Messages* par. 19.4)

Among the characteristics of organic development are growth, differentiation, integration, evolution, developmental stages, complexity, internal coherence, maturation, and the dynamic engagement of an organism with its environment. For example, a human being is a very complex organism with significant and far-reaching capacities to understand and act in the world. But a person begins very simply, with a single cell and a single focus—cell division. A single cell obviously cannot act to be at the same time a brain, a kidney, a liver, skin, hair, and everything else. It cannot go off to university, get a degree in economics, and solve the economic problems of the world. Only over time does the organic process unfold and the

human organism begins to take on a more complex form and capacity. Cells multiply, then gradually there is differentiation and specialization, different organs appear and then different systems, until finally a baby emerges from the protective womb. Even this significant transition is but a beginning for new stages in the organic process that result in continuing physical, mental, and social development. The individual passes through infancy to childhood to adolescence and beyond until the mature human being emerges who, indeed, can go to college, get that degree, and tackle the economic problems of the world.

The characteristics of organic development are similarly found in the unfoldment of the Faith, in the progressive stages of the establishment of the administration and implementation of the Divine Plan. One need only trace the path from the birth of the Bahá'í Era, at the time of the fateful evening encounter between the Báb and the first believer, to the initial capacities for administration and teaching in the first years after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to the far flung and complex global community and its capabilities evident in the harvest of the fruits of the Ten Year Crusade, and to its current size, scope, capabilities, and influence as the first century of the Formative Age draws to a close. The past century has witnessed a series of developmental stages beginning in 1921, from the initial efforts to establish the system of Local and National Assemblies, to the adoption of the first plans to spread the Faith throughout the world from 1937 on, to the start of the focused development of the international sphere in 1950, to the establishment of the House of Justice and implementation of initial plans beginning in 1963, and to the current systematic approach to learning about growth and development initiated in 1996.

However, one should not think that organic development is impervious to intervention—that change is completely fixed and moves at its own pace. A knowledgeable farmer or agriculturalist, while serving the inherent organic characteristics of a plant and subject to the limitations of nature, can have a direct effect on the outcome of the harvest and even on plant genetics. The capacity of the parent and teacher leaves an indelible mark on the rate and extent of the progress of a child, who thrives from the optimum union of nurture and nature.

Of course, one critical difference between biological organic development and social organic development is that, in the former, the process is intrinsic and, within a range of material conditions, involuntary; in the latter, there is choice. The individual, possessing free will, must decide to act. The twin duties of recognition of the Manifestation of God and adherence to all that He revealed create the deontological commitment to the organic processes of the Faith. Individuals, communities, and institutions, as the House of Justice has repeatedly explained in recent years, are to become increasingly conscious of, and capable of acting within, the parameters of the Faith's organic process of growth and development in order to contribute to its efficient and effective progress.

Nevertheless, these stages of development take shape under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. As the Guardian writes, "God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth," is Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance. They, and not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them, have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation" (*World Order* 153). The friends, confident in the source of this guidance, are united in a collective enterprise, and each can find a part to play in bringing the potentialities of the Plan into reality.

An example of how the organic process continues to unfold under the direction of the House of Justice is found in the effort, extending more than a half-century, to accelerate the process of growth by learning to achieve a balance between expansion and consolidation. In outlining the stages through which the Faith would grow, the Guardian describes "a steady flow of reinforcements" that would "presage and hasten the advent of the day which, as prophesied by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, will witness the entry by troops of peoples of divers nations and races into the Bahá'í world," a process that, in turn, would be a "prelude to that long-awaited hour" of a "a mass conversion on the part of these same nations and races" (*Citadel* 117).

The stage of entry by troops began during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, when in various countries in Africa, individuals began to embrace the Faith by scores, then hundreds; the process spread to other countries

and grew to thousands and tens of thousands. The main challenge that immediately presented itself was how to ensure that the process of consolidation could keep pace with expansion so new believers could be deepened and begin to serve, children and youth could be educated, Assemblies could be formed, administrative processes could become well established, the pattern of community life might flourish, and teaching could continue.

Some years earlier the Guardian emphasized that the community must “maintain a proper balance between these two essential aspects of its development.” “Every outward thrust into new fields,” he writes, “every multiplication of Bahá'í institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development” (*Antipodes* 246). Soon after its establishment, the House of Justice in its first Plan, the Nine Year Plan, emphasized the same critical task, observing that “[e]xpansion and consolidation are twin processes that must go hand in hand” (*Messages* par. 18.6).

The struggle to achieve this elusive balance, upon which the ability to sustain large-scale growth depends, continued over five Plans and three decades until 1996. By that time, two patterns of growth and development within local communities were fairly evident in the Bahá'í world. One consisted of small but well-established communities, generally inward looking, with most activities organized for the believers themselves. The second consisted of campaigns of teaching among receptive populations and resulted in the enrollment of large numbers, with a constant struggle to find effective methods to deepen and build community among more than a small number of individuals.

At the start of the Four Year Plan, therefore, the House of Justice focused the community on learning to become more systematic in its approach to expansion and consolidation, thereby requiring a different mode of functioning and a different way of thinking about capacity building. By 2005, the House of Justice observed, “Persistent questions of how to sustain the process of growth, of how to achieve a balance between expansion and consolidation, that have engaged the Bahá'í community for nearly half a century found clear answers in the experiences shared from

diverse clusters on all continents” (*Turning Point* par. 37.2). Although there is still much to be learned, there are now nearly two hundred clusters in the world where a hundred or more capable individuals are able to engage the ever-increasing participation of some thousand and more in a vibrant, expanding pattern of community life.

Another example of the organic nature of the development of the Cause is evident in the emergence of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*.³ This distinctive edifice or institution in Bahá'u'lláh's vision for community life is centered on the essentials of collective worship and service to humanity that are vital to the world's regeneration. The establishment of the first House of Worship in 'Ishqábád in the early 1900s inspired a similar project by the Bahá'ís of North America, which was eventually followed by the establishment of additional continental temples in Uganda, Australia, Germany, Panama, Samoa, and India, and a final one soon to be completed in Chile.

The concept of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, however, is not confined only to formal structures but extends to collective worship for all Bahá'í communities. “The *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is of great import,” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá writes; “At least once per week, it should become the gathering-place of the chosen friends who have discovered the secrets and become the intimates of mysteries. It may assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become even as a sheltering paradise, an exalted meadow, and a garden of delight.”⁴ Thus, the effort of constructing formal Houses of Worship at the continental level has been complemented by a much broader effort in local communities worldwide. This grassroots endeavor has accelerated in the recent series of Plans by multiplying devotional gatherings, open to all, as an integral part of the community-building process. The aim is to bring collective devotional life to every Bahá'í and to as many people from the wider society as possible by carrying out “acts

3. *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is an Arabic term meaning roughly “Dawning-place of the worship of God.” More generally referred to as a Bahá'í House of Worship, the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is open to people of all religions.

4. Unpublished tablet of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá to individual Bahá'ís in Hamadan. Provisional translation.

of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character” (Ridván 2008).

These two thrusts, a top-down and bottom-up approach for the development of collective worship, unfolding for more than a century, are now becoming entwined in a new stage of organic development. At Ridván 2001, the House of Justice stated that a “feature of the Fifth Epoch will be the enrichment of the devotional life of the community through the raising up of national Houses of Worship, as circumstances in national communities permit” and “in relation to the advancement of the process of entry by troops within countries” that “will unfold throughout successive stages of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan” (*Turning Point* par. 25.9). In the 2012 Ridván message, the House of Justice announced that two national *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* were to be built along with local temples in five clusters across the world.

This course of action will open far-reaching possibilities for learning about how the elements of worship and service so eloquently described by Shoghi Effendi will combine to shape the spiritual and material life of humanity: “For it is assuredly upon the consciousness of the efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, reinforced on one hand by spiritual communion with His Spirit, and on the other by the intelligent application and the faithful execution of the principles and laws He revealed, that the salvation of a world in travail must ultimately depend” (*Bahá’í Administration* 186).

RELATIONSHIPS AMONG INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, AND INSTITUTIONS

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the charter “which called into being, outlined the features and set in motion the processes” of the administrative order (*God Passes By* 325), introduced potentialities for reordering the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions that are now increasingly evident as the Cause progresses. In past ages, different societies and political ideologies have had various conceptions of these entities and their relationships. Bahá’u’lláh’s new world order, based

on the principle of the oneness of humanity, will emerge as individuals, communities, and institutions learn how to collaborate and interact according to new laws and ordinances, using new approaches, methods, and instruments, in an evolving process that will take humankind from an age of adolescence to an age of maturity. As the processes of learning and organic development previously discussed unfold within the Faith, these relationships will take shape; will become more effective, powerful, and distinctive; and will evolve until they reflect Bahá'u'lláh's intended purpose for society. The House of Justice has explained that the "relationships that bind" these three protagonists "are undergoing profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree" (28 December 2010).

In introducing the administration at the start of the Formative Age, Shoghi Effendi had to assist the friends to overcome their misunderstandings and misgivings and to grasp and put into practice its precepts. Because numbers were small and the concept of administration was new, the initial focus was naturally on the relationship between individuals and institutions. Numerous passages from Shoghi Effendi and letters written on his behalf reflect the struggle by individuals and nascent institutions to learn to cooperate in implementing the most rudimentary elements of the administration.

He explains, "The Guardian feels very strongly that everywhere, throughout the entire Bahá'í world, the believers have got to master and follow the principles of their divinely laid down Administrative Order. They will never solve their problems by departing from the correct procedure" (*Dawn* 129). "The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly," a letter written on his behalf explains. "The two must learn to co-operate, and to realize that only through such a cooperation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function" (qtd. in *Compilations* 2 254). "The Bahá'ís," another letter cautions, "must learn to forget personalities and to overcome the desire—so natural in people—to take sides and

fight about it" (*Divine Guidance* 152). Individuals are "fully entitled to address criticisms to their Assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the Assembly, local or national, but then they must whole-heartedly accept the advice or decision of the Assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Bahá'í administration" (*Antipodes* 226). Members of institutions "should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection" (*Bahá'í Administration* 64). They must, he states, "set aside their own inclinations, personal interests, likes and dislikes, and regard only the welfare of the Cause and the well-being of the friends" (*Unfolding Destiny* 14). Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi notes, "The beloved Master pointed out over and over again that unity and love among the friends promotes harmony and the rapid spread of the Faith, and that when these are sacrificed and disputes, anger and violent criticism take their place, the Cause cannot move forward" (*Antipodes* 230).

Each believer bears the responsibility to act like a true Bahá'í, demonstrating support for the institutions in order to establish the pattern of the administration. Throughout the struggles to learn about the proper relations among individuals and institutions, the Guardian emphasizes patience and unity in the face of mistakes, misunderstandings, and outbreaks of contention:

There is only one remedy for this: to study the administration, to obey the Assemblies, and each believer seek to perfect his own character as a Bahá'í. We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weaknesses of others, if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength. The Bahá'ís everywhere, when the administration is first established,

find it very difficult to adjust themselves. They have to learn to obey, even when the assembly may be wrong, for the sake of unity. They have to sacrifice their personalities, to a certain extent, in order that the community life may grow and develop as a whole. These things are difficult—but we must realize that they will lead us to a very much greater, more perfect, way of life when the Faith is properly established according to the administration (qtd. in *Compilations 2* 112).

If one of the friends is dissatisfied over the local situation he should nevertheless co-operate with his Spiritual Assembly and do all he can to help it. He can pray for it, he can show through his own deeds a noble Bahá'í example. The system is perfect, but if the instruments are imperfect we must still uphold the system, knowing God will watch over and protect His Cause, and that such conditions are only temporary and will pass away as the Cause grows and the Bahá'ís mature.

He urges you not to lose heart, and never to stop serving the Faith. No matter what the attitude of others may be, it cannot exonerate you from showing the right attitude; your duty is to God, and you should rest assured in the end He will solve all these problems. (*Community* 16–17)

The Bahá'í administration is only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living. As yet the believers are only first beginning to grasp and practice it properly. So we must have patience if at times it seems a little self-conscious and rigid in its workings. It is because we are learning something very difficult but very wonderful—how to live together as a community of Bahá'ís, according to the glorious teachings. (qtd. in *Guidance* 42)

In recent years, the Universal House of Justice has further elucidated our understanding of the relationships among individuals and institutions, while adding emphasis on the community. The Four Year Plan, beginning

in 1996, focused on a single aim, a significant advance in the process of entry by troops, which was to be “achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community,” described as “the three constituent participants in the upbuilding of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh.” “It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depend,” writes the House of Justice. While “the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.” Finally, the House of Justice observes, “The community, as distinguished from the individual and the institutions, assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size,” while noting that “Bahá'ís everywhere are at the very beginning of the process of community building” (*Turning Point* par. 4.17–25). In expounding upon this evolving set of relationships, the House of Justice states,

The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. (28 December 2010)

In the past decade, as the processes of the Plan have accelerated and the bonds and patterns of action uniting individuals, communities, and institutions have evolved and grown richer and more intricate, the House of Justice has explored facets of these relationships that build upon and transcend the patterns of engagement manifest in the early decades of the

Formative Age. For example, the interaction between the Counsellors and National Assemblies, “an evolving relationship that becomes richer as the two institutions face the challenge of building Bahá’í communities and witness with pride the onward march of the Faith” (*Counsellors* 15), was expanded in areas of mutual responsibility, as described in the document *The Institution of the Counsellors* and in other correspondence. The ongoing and distinctive conversation, “grounded in allegiance to Bahá’u’lláh and safeguarded by firmness in His Covenant” that “increasingly transcends the habits of speech characteristic of an age preoccupied with trivial or misdirected interests,” and that links individuals, communities, and institutions across the country with the National Spiritual Assembly in the setting of the National Convention, was explored in a letter from the House of Justice (16 May 2013). Even the effort required by the individual to live up to the standard of Bahá’í law takes on a very different character when it moves beyond a misplaced emphasis on institutions and sanctions to examine the responsibilities and relations of the three protagonists.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá’í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individu-

als. Nor are they vindictive and judgmental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education (19 April 2013, and see 23 April 2013).

As the individuals, communities and institutions further develop in light of the conceptions set forth in Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, the society-building implications of this evolving set of relationships become ever more manifest. The House of Justice states:

Animating the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. Just as the appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through the complex association of countless cells, whose organization in tissues and organs allows for the realization of distinctive capacities, so can civilization be seen as the outcome of a set of interactions among closely integrated, diverse components which have transcended the narrow purpose of tending to their own existence. And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race. In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channeled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action. (3 March 2013)

SOCIETY-BUILDING POWER

In a letter titled “The Unfoldment of World Civilization” published in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, Shoghi Effendi speaks of the “society-building power” of the Faith. In referring to the community of the Most Great Name, he states,

Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can mature and develop. It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá’í Community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society. For this process is actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.

In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anemic and lost their virtue, this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive, has been taking shape, is crystallizing into institutions, is mobilizing its forces, and is preparing for the spiritual conquest and the complete redemption of mankind. Though the society which incarnates its ideals be small, and its direct and tangible benefits as yet inconsiderable, yet the potentialities with which it has been endowed, and through which it is destined to regenerate the individual and rebuild a broken world, are incalculable. (*World Order* 195)

What must it have meant for the Bahá’í community of the West to receive this letter in 1936 that declared unambiguously the Faith’s “society-building power” and its potentialities “to regenerate the individual and rebuild a broken world”? One can well imagine what many local communities were like at the time. Outside of Iran, the numbers of believers

were so small they barely constituted communities at all—indeed, only a portion could establish a Local Assembly. Imagine such small groups of people gathered in a home to study the message. Looking around the room, well aware of their own shortcomings and the challenges they faced to carry out even the most basic requirements of Bahá'í life, these early believers might understandably have asked with some sense of disbelief, “Does this refer to us? Do we have society-building power?” Of course, the Guardian’s statement was accepted on faith, as the friends were certain of the power of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation, but at that period of time, such a capacity was surely very difficult to imagine. Yet, now, as we near the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the signs of this emergent capacity are increasingly evident, especially in the work of social action and involvement in the discourses of society.

Until 1983, the friends everywhere outside of Iran were advised, owing to the fewness of their numbers, to concentrate their work on the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. A letter written on behalf of the Guardian explains, “[O]ur contributions to the Faith are the surest way of lifting once and for all time the burden of hunger and misery from mankind, for it is only through the system of Bahá'u'lláh—Divine in origin—that the world can be gotten on its feet and want, fear, hunger, war, etc., be eliminated.” Others “cannot contribute to our work or do it for us; so really our first obligation is to support our own teaching work, as this will lead to the healing of the nations” (qtd. in *Guidance* 192). And, on 19 November 1974, the House of Justice similarly writes, “[W]e have the divinely given remedy for the real ills of mankind; no one else is doing or can do this most important work, and if we divert our energy and our funds into fields in which others are already doing more than we can hope to do, we shall be delaying the diffusion of the Divine Message which is the most important task of all” (*Messages* par. 151.5). In 1983, after some six decades of systematic effort in the Formative Age, the House of Justice was able to write,

From the beginning of His stupendous mission, Bahá'u'lláh urged upon the attention of nations the necessity of ordering human affairs

in such a way as to bring into being a world unified in all the essential aspects of its life. In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the “progress of the world” and the “development of nations” as being among the ordinances of God for this day.

. . . Now, after all the years of constant teaching activity, the Community of The Greatest Name has grown to the stage at which the processes of this development must be incorporated into its regular pursuits. . . . (*Messages* par. 379.2–3)

Since that time, initiatives for social and economic development have been a regular part of the activities of the Bahá'í world; the learning of three decades is summarized in documents such as *For the Betterment of the World* and “Social Action,” prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre. Across the world, Bahá'í activities for development take place at three levels of complexity. One involves thousands of grassroots initiatives of varying duration in which the Bahá'ís attempt to apply the Teachings to address local problems. Another involves hundreds of sustained projects, including a large number of schools. Finally, scores of Bahá'í-inspired development organizations have emerged and are increasingly concerned with more complex challenges.

Also in the 1980s, the House of Justice began to emphasize a greater involvement in the life of society, a specific objective of the Six Year Plan. Such an effort has its roots in Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers and the public engagement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in notable ways, such as His Tablet to The Hague. The community carried this effort further during the ministry of the Guardian, including associating the Bahá'í international community with the United Nations. More recently, the House of Justice has extended this effort in terms of participation in the discourses of society at various levels of involvement:

There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national lev-

els, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them. (Ridván 2010)

At the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC)⁵ engages governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in thinking about the different problems that are faced by the world, such as the advancement of women. Rather than promoting its own particular agenda on a topic, the BIC is able to assume a disinterested position in an effort to strengthen unity of thought and action among all those who are concerned about the issue. The BIC accomplishes this through a process of consultation, action, and reflection. Because it has learned how to work with others in the search for solutions, the influence of the BIC has grown and has been noted in the wider society. Furthermore, over the years, many Bahá'í national communities have engaged peoples, organizations, and governments in a range of topics such as world peace, the equality of women and men, communal harmony, moral education, the elimination of racial prejudice, and the environment. Recently the Bahá'í World Centre established the Office of Public Discourse in order to assist National Assemblies to increase capacity within their national communities for greater involvement in such social discourses. And where growth has intensified in clusters, the friends have gradually developed capacity and a degree of success in engaging others in fruitful interactions.

Thus, despite admittedly nascent and tentative influence in the face of the enormous problems confronting humanity, the society-building power

5. The NGO that has been representing the Bahá'í community at the United Nations since 1948.

of the Faith has, in this first century of the Formative Age, emerged from the realm of potentiality into practice. A decade ago, for example, the program for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth was not much more than a concept that emerged from exploration of a few literacy projects. It has now spread to communities worldwide, involving some 125,000 junior youth in more than 13,000 groups across some 2,000 clusters, supported by a network of 48 learning sites that work directly with more than 400 clusters and 150 regional institutes.

A steady stream of reports indicate the extensive impact on the lives of junior youth and the youth who serve as animators, as well as on parents, families, communities, and leaders of thought. Transformed by a new vision of themselves as builders of a unified world, young people in diverse parts of the world have engaged problems such as tribalism, prejudice, fundamentalism, and consumerism. As noted in the Ridván 2014 message, in the Tanna cluster of Vanuatu, where a local House of Worship will soon rise, junior youth groups have participated in a variety of activities for social action, including constructing a fish pond, raising poultry, and acquiring carpentry skills to contribute to home-building. Parents, after some initial reluctance, have grown to appreciate the impact of the program on youth and junior youth in changing their character, contributing to the strengthening of family life, and focusing the purpose of their lives so as to avoid alcohol, fighting, and other destructive habits in which they were previously ensnared. The program has even contributed to the prominence and influence of the Local Assembly. News of its value has spread, and other villages have appealed for inclusion of their own young people.

Another example of the society-building power evident in burgeoning efforts for social action is found in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, where a capacity for the establishment of community schools is growing within a network of nearly two dozen Bahá'í-inspired agencies, currently involving more than 400 primary schools, 1,200 teachers, and 22,000 students in 153 clusters in 21 countries. In the Central African Republic, before recent challenges with civil war, the process had grown under the direction of the Ahdieh Foundation to the point at which some of the Bahá'í-inspired

community schools were able to perform better than government schools, and opportunities for greater collaboration in a dialogue about education with the official agencies emerged. And in the video *Frontiers of Learning*, this society-building power is evident in the most advanced clusters in the world in addressing profound cultural problems such as the inequality of men and women, the early marriage of girls, and the impact of the caste system in India. In cluster after cluster, there is growing testimony from inside and outside the Bahá'í community of a transformation of young people that enables them to throw off the shackles of prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and conformity, thereby helping them to see the possibility for a different way of life and become empowered to find their own role in contributing to the betterment of the world.

Among the aims of the Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, are to eradicate the causes of war and raise the banner of the Most Great Peace; to eliminate racial, national, religious, sectarian, or political prejudices; to forget personal interests and work for the betterment of the world; and to establish the oneness of humanity. How many the challenges Bahá'ís must learn to address in order to assist humanity in its current plight to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's high aims! We feeble ones are only at the beginning of this conscious process of learning, struggling with the most basic processes of our expansion and consolidation in order to eventually become large and capable enough to have an impact of these more profound and intractable problems of humanity. Yet, generation after generation will build on what has already been accomplished to meet ever more complex challenges, until, in the centuries ahead, the society-building power of the Cause will ultimately contribute to the birth and efflorescence of a new world order.

NAVIGATING THE PITFALLS OF THE PRESENT AND OF FUTURE CENTURIES

In reflecting upon the insights derived over the course of the first century of the Formative Age, a clearer understanding emerges of what it means to be a Bahá'í, the mission that Bahá'u'lláh intends for His community, the aims of the Divine Plan, the nature of Bahá'í administration and the manner in which it evolves and unfolds, and how the Bahá'í communi-

ty grows and develops in order that its society-building power may contribute to the gradual and inevitable emergence of a new civilization. The six points previously discussed are only a personal perspective and are not intended to be exhaustive, yet each holds profound implications for the progress of the Faith in centuries to come. Future stages of the organic unfoldment of the Faith under the guidance of the House of Justice will undoubtedly involve significant changes that cause a rethinking of personal understandings about the Teachings and the administrative order. This is in no way a movement away from, but a movement toward, what Bahá'u'lláh intends—a deeper insight into the meaning of the revealed Word and an increased ability to translate it into reality and action.

In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh again and again refers to the concept of idle fancies and vain imaginings. “Idle fancies have debarred men from the Horizon of Certitude, and vain imaginings withheld them from the Choice Sealed Wine” (*Epistle 44*), He states. He is referring to the conception of the things in our own mind, how we understand reality, what we understand the world to be, and what we choose to do—as opposed to what He understands the world to be and what He wishes us to do. “Those words uttered by the Luminaries of Truth must needs be pondered, and should their significance be not grasped, enlightenment should be sought from the Trustees of the depositories of Knowledge, that these may expound their meaning, and unravel their mystery” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 181), Bahá'u'lláh explains. “For it behooveth no man to interpret the holy words according to his own imperfect understanding, nor, having found them to be contrary to his inclination and desires, to reject and repudiate their truth.” And thus He admonishes, “Abandon the things current amongst you and adopt that which the faithful Counsellor biddeth you” (*Tablets* 71).

Our responsibility as Bahá'ís, then, is to weigh our personal conceptions and ideas to determine to what extent they are derived from contending viewpoints and forces that operate within the wider society—the society in which we were raised that leaves its imprint on us. We must also strive to transcend the perceptions of our own limited consciousness, even in regard to such matters as our personal understanding of the meaning and practice of the Teachings. For our capacity to truly understand what Bahá'u'lláh intends is, at any moment, circumscribed. Shoghi Effendi

reminds us that “[a]n exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust is for obvious reasons the beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds” (*World Order* 100). Therefore we cannot claim that we personally understand absolutely what Bahá'u'lláh says, nor can we insist that the Faith must move along the path of our own understanding. We cannot allow our imperfect opinions to become idle fancies and vain imaginings that prevent us from growing in understanding as we “trust to time, and the guidance of God’s Universal House of Justice” (*Bahá'í Administration* 62).

It is easy to perceive the mistakes and shortcomings of the believers of an earlier age. How obviously wrong it was to reject the idea of need for an administrative order or the leadership of the Guardian. Looking back, we can realize how shortsighted were those who could have grasped the immortal crown of Knight of Bahá'u'lláh in the first year of the Ten Year Crusade, yet failed to arise. How foolish were those who accepted the ridiculous claim of Mason Remey. But it is much harder to perceive the mistakes and limited understandings of the present day, whether it is an inability to grasp the vision and possibilities of the current stage of the Divine Plan or the evolution of the administration, or the implications of Bahá'u'lláh’s Teachings for a future society.

In 1924, Shoghi Effendi wrote two messages that shed light on this profound and most fundamental responsibility facing every Bahá'í. One message was written at a time when Shoghi Effendi withdrew from the Holy Land for an extended period. He wrote to the Bahá'í world and poured out his heart. The letter was addressed “For the attention of all the Bahá'ís of the world in both the East and the West without exception.”⁶ He says, “At this time, when this poor unfortunate one is absent from the Holy Land, burning in the fires of grief and bereavement, and in the secluded corner to which I have retired—remote and isolated from friend and stranger alike—my heart is so surging with emotion, and my spirit in such a state

6. Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the world in both the East and the West, January 1924; published in *Tawqí‘át-i-Mubárahíh 1922-26*, pp. 184–94. Provisional translation

of turmoil, that, straightway picking up my pen, I am resolved, putting my whole trust in God, to declare and communicate to the generality of the Bahá'ís in all lands my true feelings, and by means of these few words, each letter of which proceeds and springs from a wounded sensibility and a broken heart, to remonstrate, acutely pained and abashed as I am to do so, with the friends of both the East and the West."

Shoghi Effendi was at that time overwhelmed by the loss of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; he dearly missed Him. And he was suffering from the attacks of the Covenant-breakers who again arose with various plots against the Faith. But these were not the reasons for his departure at that time. Instead, what weighed upon him was the response of the sincere Bahá'ís to their duties. He writes, "That, however, which has chiefly given rise, and primarily contributed, to the anxiety and despondency of this downcast servant; aggregated the distress and anguish of this Most Great Calamity; induced me, regretfully, to compose this letter; and engender diverse problems . . . , is none other than the lack of true fellowship and co-operation among His loved ones." In particular, he notes the "signs of disunity; of negligence and neglect; of a lack of co-operation; of carelessness; of rivalry; and a grievance about the contents and purport of the messages received"; indeed, "grievance about the contents and purport of the messages received" from the Guardian himself!

Shoghi Effendi had given the faithful believers the new instruments of the administrative order. They needed to arise and put the administration into effect, in the most efficacious and efficient way, in order to apply the healing remedy of the Teachings. But what happened instead, was that these devoted friends, whether intentionally or largely as a result of immaturity, misused these instruments. Those elected as members of Assemblies made decisions that served their own inclinations and interests, while those not elected complained about the administration, criticized their Assemblies, and ignored the decisions and directions. In the face of such debilitating conditions, the Guardian decided, "Since . . . it is not possible for me to attend to important matters, I have, therefore, of necessity chosen to remove myself to a secluded corner. . . ." He not return until "the sweet breath of fellowship and amity, of concord and unity is

wafted abroad, and reaches the nostrils of this yearning and expectant exile. . . .” Without this, he concludes, “there has never been, nor ever shall there be, any hope.”

After expressing his confidence that the friends would respond favorably, he then raised their vision about the nature of their work. By building Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, he explains, eventually the House of Justice would be established. “When the Universal House of Justice shall have stepped forth from the realm of hope into that of visible fulfilment,” the “recipient of the bounties of God and His inspiration,” it will “proceed to devise and carry out important undertakings, world-wide activities and the establishment of glorious institutions,” so that “[b]y this means the renown of the Cause of God will become world-wide and its light will illumine the whole earth.”⁷

The second letter, also written in 1924, is published in *Bahá'í Administration*. The Guardian begins by acknowledging signs of difficulty among some members of the community to correctly understand and respond to his instructions to establish and ensure the proper functioning of the administration. He writes, “I have learned with feelings of sadness and surprise that some vague sense of apprehension, a strange misconception of its immediate purpose and methods, is slowly gaining ground, steadily affecting its wholesome growth and vigorous development throughout the continent.” And he continues,

Though such signs should appear from time to time, and however unrepresentative they be of the vast and growing mass of its convinced and zealous supporters, the world over, what, I wonder, could have caused this uneasiness of mind? Are such misgivings possible, though on the part of but a few, in the face of the remarkable manifestations of so remarkable a movement? To what extent do they form a part of those mental tests and trials destined at various times by the Almighty to stir and reinvigorate the body of His Cause, and how far are they traceable to our imperfect state of understanding, to our weaknesses and failings?

7. Though from the same letter, this particular passage is an authorized translation published in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, p. 329, no. 741.

That the Cause of God should, in the days to come, witness many a challenging hour and pass through critical stages in preparation for the glories of its promised ascendancy in the new world has been, time and again, undeniably affirmed by our departed Master, and is abundantly proved to us all by its heroic past and turbulent history. And yet, if it is the lot of the chosen ones of God, the people of Bahá, to face adversity and suffer tribulation before achieving ultimate victory, are we to believe that whatever befalls us is divinely ordained, and in no wise the result of our faint-heartedness and negligence? (*Bahá'í Administration* 60)

And then Shoghi Effendi laid out the duty of the believers, in a manner that applies equally to every new stage of the organic unfoldment of the Faith:

What, let us ask ourselves, should be our attitude as we stand under the all-seeing eye of our vigilant Master, gazing at a sad spectacle so utterly remote from the spirit which He breathed into the world? Are we to follow in the wake of the wayward and the despairing? Are we to allow our vision of so unique, so enduring, so precious a Cause to be clouded by the stain and dust of worldly happenings, which, no matter how glittering and far-reaching in their immediate effects, are but the fleeting shadows of an imperfect world? Are we to be carried away by the flood of hollow and conflicting ideas, or are we to stand, unsubdued and unblemished, upon the everlasting rock of God's Divine Instructions? Shall we not equip ourselves with a clear and full understanding of their purpose and implications for the age we live in, and with an unconquerable resolve arise to utilize them, intelligently and with scrupulous fidelity, for the enlightenment and the promotion of the good of all mankind?

Humanity, torn with dissension and burning with hate, is crying at this hour for a fuller measure of that love which is born of God, that love which in the last resort will prove the one solvent of its incalculable difficulties and problems. . . .

And as we make an effort to demonstrate that love to the world may

we also clear our minds of any lingering trace of unhappy misunderstandings that might obscure our clear conception of the exact purpose and methods of this new world order, so challenging and complex, yet so consummate and wise. We are called upon by our beloved Master in His Will and Testament not only to adopt it unreservedly, but to unveil its merit to all the world. To attempt to estimate its full value, and grasp its exact significance after so short a time since its inception would be premature and presumptuous on our part. We must trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications. But one word of warning must be uttered in this connection. Let us be on our guard lest we measure too strictly the Divine Plan with the standard of men. I am not prepared to state that it agrees in principle or in method with the prevailing notions now uppermost in men's minds, nor that it should conform with those imperfect, precarious, and expedient measures feverishly resorted to by agitated humanity. Are we to doubt that the ways of God are not necessarily the ways of man? Is not faith but another word for implicit obedience, whole-hearted allegiance, uncompromising adherence to that which we believe is the revealed and express will of God, however perplexing it might first appear, however at variance with the shadowy views, the impotent doctrines, the crude theories, the idle imaginings, the fashionable conceptions of a transient and troublous age? If we are to falter or hesitate, if our love for Him should fail to direct us and keep us within His path, if we desert Divine and emphatic principles, what hope can we any more cherish for healing the ills and sicknesses of this world? (*Bahá'í Administration* 60–63)

The challenge for each generation of believers is to orient itself to the two centers of authoritative guidance, the Book and the House of Justice, that their footsteps in the path of service may be firm, whatever the challenges of the age in which they live, until the Teachings take root in the hearts of the people of the world and in the structures of a new social order.

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