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# Knowledge into Action: The Bahá'í Imperative to Serve Humanity

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Although the Bahá'í community is at the beginning of its understanding of how to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to heal the ills of the world, exciting learning has taken place regarding the development of patterns of community life and the application of Bahá'í principles to provide relief to the suffering of humanity. Still in a stage of infancy, experiments in Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development, or "social action," have been reinforced by recent encouragement from the Universal House of Justice to engage in social action as a natural outgrowth of the maturation of community life and grassroots expressions of need. It is an exciting time to be a part of the Bahá'í community, as we are at the beginning of our learning regarding the implementation of social action as a tool for the well-being of society. This article examines the history of

experience and evolution in thinking regarding social action in the Bahá'í community, focuses on the Tahirih Justice Center's experience as one example of such learning, and critically examines the culture of service we must embody as a Bahá'í community.

## A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY OF SOCIAL ACTION IN THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

Without action nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual Kingdom. It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world. Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute! This is the work of a true Bahá'í, and this is what is expected of him. If we strive to do all this, then are we true Bahá'ís, but if we neglect it, we are not followers of the Light, and we have no right to the name. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 80)

**'ABDU'L-BAHÁ**

Led by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, the Bahá'í Community has a long history of engagement in social action and, from the earliest days of the Faith, was distinguished by it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Perfect Exemplar for Bahá'ís, ministered to the poor on a daily basis and was known throughout the world for his many acts of service and extreme generosity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá would give away the clothes He was wearing to a homeless person He passed by, would give money to those who sought His help, would bathe and feed those who were too weak to do so for themselves, and treated all—from various classes, races, and levels of education—with the same degree of love and respect. His name, which means the "Servant of God," reflects His actions.

So extreme was His commitment to charity that He prioritized the company of the poor over that of the rich. In one example, during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trip to New York in 1912, He was invited to the homes of many socially prominent New Yorkers but refused their offers, saying, "I have work with the poor and not with the rich. I love all with heart and soul yet I am not here to visit the homes of the rich." When Andrew Carnegie pressed him to come, He relented, but only with much cajoling (Ward 186).

'Abdu'l-Bahá was also strategic in His acts of charity. In one example, in the early 1900s, 'Abdu'l-Bahá bought

some land in a community in Jordan known as 'Adasiyyih. It was fertile farming land. He asked Bahá'ís from Yazd, who knew about farming, to settle on this property in 'Adasiyyih and develop it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá taught the friends to grow nourishing vegetables and asked them to focus, in particular, on corn. They produced high quantities of food, which they stored in pits built by the Romans many years earlier on the same land.

World War I broke out and began to engulf the world. The Ottoman Empire was embattled, and the war came to Palestine where 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived. The community was ravished by famine. 'Abdu'l-Bahá brought food from the Bahá'í farming communities in Jordan and fed the starving people of Haifa, 'Akká, and the adjacent neighborhoods in the famine years of 1914 to 1918.

Lady Bloomfield recalls, "We learned that when the British marched into Haifa there was some difficulty about the commissariat. The officer in command went to consult the Master. 'I have corn,' was the reply. 'But for the army?' said the astonished soldier. 'I have corn for the British Army,' said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He truly walked the Mystic way with practical feet" (210).

In more recent years, the Bahá'í community has experimented with social action and gleaned some important lessons.

1983 TO 1993

In a message dated 20 October 1983, the House of Justice asked for “systematic attention” to social and economic development, following mass enrollments in the 1970s. It was in that year that they announced the establishment of the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) at the Bahá'í World Centre to “promote and coordinate the activities of the friends” in this field. “The ensuing ten years constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and hesitation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks” (Office of Social and Economic Development, “Social Action” section i).

A number of valuable efforts emerged during this time of experimentation, including the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India. Founded in 1985 as a Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development project under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, the institute is now an independent vocational school that provides programs for women and that has an impressive track record for the promotion of literacy and skills among a community with great needs.

In 1992, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States established the Mottahedeh Development Services (MDS) to

promote social and economic development. At first, MDS focused on obtaining grants and establishing model projects. In the late 1990s, its focus shifted to providing training, information, and materials that could be used to assist the Bahá'í community in its development of service activities. While its materials are still in circulation and provide helpful guidance, MDS is now no longer in existence.

1993 TO 2001

In September 1993, the Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development issued a document, approved by the Universal House of Justice, to orient and guide the work in this arena. Another important document was also issued in August 1994 that focused on the development of institutional capacity. Both documents drew on the community's experience and elaborated on several features common to successful efforts.

Central to the vision was the critical nature of capacity-building and the idea that activities should start on a modest scale, growing in complexity only as human resources increase. Also included was the recognition that, as Bahá'í-inspired organizations grow, they should be cautious about burdening Bahá'í institutions.

An increasing number of believers [are] . . . creating organizations dedicated to the application

of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings to the analysis and resolution of important social and economic issues. The House of Justice . . . cautions the friends that in establishing such organizations they should exercise care not to become a burden on the institutions or unduly divert the contributions of the believers from the essential and primary tasks of supporting the Funds of the Faith and the activities of the institutions. It also expects them to conduct their affairs according to Bahá'í moral and ethical principles. (Office of Social and Economic Development, "Evolution of Institutional Capacity" n.pag.)

During this time, several Bahá'í-inspired organizations were established independent of Bahá'í institutions. In 1999, the Mona Foundation was founded to support grassroots educational initiatives to raise the status of women and girls worldwide. The Foundation provides funds to nonprofit organizations primarily outside of the United States that advance these principles. In 1997, the Tahirih Justice Center was founded to provide free legal protection for women and girls fleeing human rights abuses. A United States-based organization, Tahirih utilizes U.S. law to protect women and girls from around the world facing many forms of violence.

#### 2001 TO 2010

In 2001, the Universal House of Justice instituted worldwide the "cluster"—an organizational means of combining human resources within communities—and the "institute process" as a means of training those resources and implementing shared concerns within the community into specific patterns of action.<sup>1</sup> Through these concepts, the Bahá'í community developed a neighborhood focus and an understanding of the critical importance of having in place the life of a community (including devotionals, study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups).

In the decade that followed, social action was increasingly viewed within the context of a cluster. While in many Bahá'í communities there was less of an emphasis by Bahá'í institutions on creating new social and economic development projects during this time, as creating a healthy community life was a central theme and focus of the institute process, the work by Bahá'í organizations dedicated to specific forms of social and economic development still continued. Important to the ongoing support of Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development (SED) projects was the annual

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1 See, Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors.

Rabbani Trust conference in Orlando, Florida, which gathered practitioners from around the world to share ideas and further their understanding of the Bahá'í guidance in this area.<sup>2</sup>

## 2010 TO PRESENT

The Ridván statement issued by the Universal House of Justice in 2010 gave the Bahá'í community a renewed charge to focus on social action and new guidance. Still in the shadows of this historic document, which gave pivotal guidance on how to move forward in the realm of service to humanity, we are now at a historic moment in the Bahá'í community's response.

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<sup>2</sup> The Rabbani Trust Conference on Social and Economic Development took place annually in Orlando, Florida, from 1993–2012. After consultations between the Rabbani Trust and the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, it was determined that these conferences would end. Specifically, in a letter issued in March 2013, the Rabbani Trust explained, “Our emerging understanding of the way in which social action is born from the grassroots and flourishes as part of a coherent process suggested to us that the model of an annual national conference may no longer be the best means of advancing learning about social action as the Faith moves forward” ([www.rabbanitrust.org](http://www.rabbanitrust.org), last visited on 31 July 2014).

## IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED AS A BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY ON HOW TO ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTION

### PREREQUISITES TO ENGAGING IN SOCIAL ACTION

We have learned many things as a Bahá'í community about how to effectively engage in social action. One thing we know is that not everyone should be doing it. There is a certain level of maturity, competence, and community preparedness that is needed in advance. Very concretely, we are told that among the prerequisites for social action are well-established core activities and sufficient human resources:

Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 2010)

#### IMPORTANCE OF BEING DISTINGUISHED FROM OTHER CHARITIES

We also know that Bahá'í-inspired social action initiatives must be distinguished by their Bahá'í-inspired nature and not simply become one more among the many worthy charities that already exist in the world. Social action, in a Bahá'í context, is a deliberate effort to apply Bahá'í principles to a social problem. Its application thus requires an informed understanding of the social issue and an approach mindful of spiritual solutions rooted in the Bahá'í Faith.

Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message 2010*)

Related to this principle is the fact that the Bahá'í community's resources are too few and our time is too limited to simply replicate charitable efforts that are common in society. There are many other people in the world who can do that. Bahá'ís, however, have a unique gift to contribute. We

are armed with the Divine teachings designed for the specific ills afflicting humanity today. In fact, we are warned, "It is clear and evident that without these teachings, progress and advancement for mankind are in no wise possible." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, "Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet" 3) The Universal House of Justice further clarifies:

The Faith of God is the sole source of salvation for mankind today. The true cause of the ills of humanity is its disunity. No matter how perfect may be the machinery devised by the leaders of men for the political unity of the world, it will still not provide the antidote to the poison sapping the vigour of present-day society. These ills can be cured only through the instrumentality of God's Faith. There are many well-wishers of mankind who devote their efforts to relief work and charity and to the material well-being of man, but only Bahá'ís can do the work which God most wants done. When we devote ourselves to the work of the Faith we are doing a work which is the greatest aid and only refuge for a needy and divided world. (*Messages 163*).



HUMILITY PREVAILING IN ALL  
INTERACTIONS

Even while we understand the potency of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and its unique source of Divine guidance for the ills of our time, we also must be modest in acknowledging our minimal understanding of how to apply spiritual solutions to social problems. We are armed with the power of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings but have yet to learn precisely how to incorporate this guidance incrementally into coherent structures. To state this dilemma metaphorically, it is as if we have been given a powerful medicine, but we have not yet honed our skills to know in what dosage, at what time, for what ailment, and in what combination of other remedies this medicine should be applied. Neither have we fully understood the medicine itself, still underutilizing all of its potent properties. Only with more experience and experimentation will we acquire this expertise.

Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard

against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 2010)

Our humility in approaching social action comes not only from our lack of experience and understanding about how to apply spiritual solutions to social problems but also from the fact that Bahá'ís do not have a monopoly on the impact of and ideas derived from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. From the moment the Divine Revelation for this era in human history was uttered, the world was impacted and the order of the planet was renewed. New ideas were diffused and old ideas became questioned. All of those on earth have been affected, whether they realize it or not and whether they are Bahá'í or not.

I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent



world and the heavenly kingdom, entities of a new creation, and revealing, in the unseen realms, the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness.... No sooner had that Revelation been unveiled to men's eyes than the signs of universal discord appeared among the peoples of the world, and commotion seized the dwellers of earth and heaven, and the foundations of all things were shaken. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 295)

The influence of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh on the thoughts and ideas of people throughout the world is palpable. Numerous Bahá'í principles are being applied by people who are not Bahá'í, and it is becoming clear to society that the time is ripe for the application of the message of Bahá'u'lláh, even if they are unaware of its source. For example, people may not know why they are attracted to consultation as a form of decision-making and are applying it strategically within corporations and other institutions, but they are applying it nonetheless. People may not know why most of humanity has now accepted that the notion of the superiority of one race over another is an absurd one, but they embrace the acceptance regardless. People may not know why we now find violence against women problematic, when in earlier times it was the norm, but we renounce it still. Bahá'í concepts and principles are radiating

throughout humanity, and the power of the Revelation is beyond the inadequacies of our efforts or expertise as a Bahá'í community. In fact, some may be applying them more skillfully than individual Bahá'ís.

Consistent with our understanding that humility is a foundation for our engagement in social action, our interactions with communities being served must be from a posture of learning and respect, not from the imposition of one norm over another. And yet, historic patterns of colonialism and notions of superiority of a more "advanced culture" over another disturbingly continue today in many development efforts. The view that those who are economically well off and educated should bestow their resources and ideas on those less fortunate is unacceptable in a Bahá'í context and is becoming widely questioned in the world of international development and foreign aid.

Bahá'í-inspired social action recognizes the incredible potential of every human being and encourages the building of capacity within a community, not just handing out material resources to them. "Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another" (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message* 2010).

This observation does not imply that a group of people with means and experience should not be interested in helping or willing to help out another, but to be effective, this engagement must reflect a spirit of humility and a sincere interest in mutual understanding and support. When one is engaged in service, the one serving often benefits quite as much as the one being served. This equality of position is reflected in the Bahá'í concept of social action, a perspective that challenges common notions of superiority that are so often unconsciously promoted in much charitable work. Underlying this approach is the Bahá'í principle of the unity of humankind.

**O CHILDREN OF MEN!**

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* Arabic n. 68)

**SMALL EFFORTS GROWING ORGANICALLY**

For our social action initiatives to be long lasting, we have learned that it is best to start small, growing organically as the effort is proven effective, as expertise improves, and as local resources increase over time. Initiatives must grow systematically, but from the grassroots. In this connection, the Universal House of Justice observes: “The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops” (Ridván Message 2010). In the context of this message, OSED states, “The way that such a [Bahá'í-inspired] organization emerges from the life of a region and contributes to its progress is of paramount importance. The establishment cannot be haphazard, nor can its creation proceed solely from the longing of two or three individuals to fulfil a personal, albeit altruistic, desire.” (“Social Action” section iv)

A mindful approach to grassroots, organic growth also helps avoid the pitfalls of initiatives that are overly dependent on a single source—whether a single personality or a single source of financial assistance. With a diverse range of individuals and revenue sources, a project is more likely to thrive and continue, even when key

individual leaders disengage or when one of the critical funding resources dries up.

This concept of organic growth is particularly important to the financial sustainability of a Bahá'í-inspired organization. With organic growth, an initiative is more likely to achieve diversity in revenue and, over time, to build a broad base of support. Organic growth also helps ensure that commitments made are realistic, time-tested, and calibrated against an initiative's ongoing potential for financial sustainability beyond the initial infusion of startup capital. There are examples in the Bahá'í community's social and economic development efforts, including Landegg University,<sup>3</sup> where dependence on a sole source of dominant funding has proven unsustainable.

#### SOCIAL ACTION CANNOT BE WITH THE INTENTION TO TEACH THE FAITH

While engaging in social action may help enhance the reputation of the Faith or allow opportunities for society at large to learn more about it, we are given clear guidance that teaching the Faith cannot be the reason we engage in social action. It should be clear to those involved as well as to those

being served, that there is no ulterior motive. In fact, as Bahá'ís we are strongly warned that the motivation to be of service to humanity must be the animating purpose and that there should never be commingling of the purity of this intention with the entirely separate desire to teach the Faith.

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message 2010*)

The sincere desire to be of service in a community, without regard to whether that community may become interested in the Faith, is a distinguishing feature among Bahá'í-inspired initiatives. It is not uncommon for religiously inspired charities to commingle proselytizing and ministries with charitable endeavors in a way that may make the recipient of their services feel pressured to convert. In fact, missionary efforts throughout much of the developing world have often been

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3 Landegg University (1992-2003) was established in Switzerland and closed, in part, because its revenue model, which relied heavily on an individual donor, proved unsustainable over time.

characterized by these mixed motives, and this dissembling has given rise to resentment toward religion in much of the world.

#### IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING FROM WELL-ESTABLISHED BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED ORGANIZATIONS

Finally, the House of Justice urges us to not “reinvent the wheel.” There have been a number of Bahá'í-inspired social actions initiatives, which offer a range of experiences. Some have succeeded; some have failed. Some have modified their course and dramatically changed their governing structure or mission. Others have grown organically over time from a clear original intention. We can derive many valuable lessons from all these efforts:

A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. . . . 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. (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message* 2010)

It is in the spirit of learning from another Bahá'í-inspired social action initiative's experience that I turn now to the learnings offered by the Tahirih Justice Center.

#### THE TAHIRIH JUSTICE CENTER

##### MISSION AND PROGRAMS

The mission of the Tahirih Justice Center (Tahirih) is to protect courageous immigrant women and girls who refuse to be victims of violence. Utilizing the U.S. legal system, Tahirih is a national nonprofit organization that supports women and girls from around the world, who have decided to stand up against their oppression, with holistic, free legal services and advocacy in courts, communities, and Congress. Tahirih protects women and girls who seek safeguards from human rights abuses, including domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, honor crimes, and forced marriage.

Tahirih is a Bahá'í-inspired organization founded on the belief that the achievement of full equality between women and men is necessary for society to progress. Since its inception in 1997, it has assisted over 15,000 women and girls in obtaining justice. It currently has approximately fifty full-time staff, including attorneys, social workers, advocates, and other support staff, working out of offices in the Washington, DC, area; Houston,

Texas; and Baltimore, Maryland. The impact of its efforts is multiplied by a network of over twelve hundred attorneys from over two hundred large law firms who donate their time and legal skills to help Tahirih's clients. Tahirih also partners with physicians, psychologists, translators, and other professionals to service its clients. Through leveraging these professional volunteer services, valued at \$13 million in 2013, Tahirih turns every dollar donated to the organization into \$4.50 of impact. In 2013, its cash and in-kind revenue was approximately \$17 million. Tahirih maintains a 99% success rate in the cases it litigates, even while it takes on cutting-edge, legally complex cases viewed as "unwinnable" by other attorneys.

Strategically committed to both short-term and long-term protection of women and girls from violence, Tahirih utilizes a three-pronged approach to enable individuals to transform their lives, help communities reframe the issue of violence against women in their cultural context, and facilitate change in public policies and the law. Specifically, Tahirih provides the following:

1. *Lifesaving free legal and social services*, which enable low-income immigrant women and children to attain the rights to which they are entitled under U.S. law, to secure legal protection for themselves and their families, and to equip them with the resources

they need to reclaim and rebuild their lives;

2. *Public education, outreach, training, and one-on-one technical assistance*, which equips professionals (including law enforcement, social service providers, lawyers, clergy, health workers, etc.) and communities with a greater ability to respond to the unique needs of immigrant survivors of gender-based violence; and

3. *Public policy advocacy*, which elevates the voices of its clients to foster nonpartisan dialogue and laws that advance systemic protections for the safety, well-being, and human rights of vulnerable women and children.

A national leader in public discourse and advocacy regarding violence against immigrant women, Tahirih has authored groundbreaking legislation to protect so-called mail-order brides from the international marriage broker industry and other laws to protect those fleeing gender-based persecution. Additionally, Tahirih is a thought leader in the United States on violence against immigrant women, leading several national coalitions and collaborating with over seven hundred like-minded organizations on issues including forced and child marriage, female genital mutilation, and human trafficking. The organization regularly receives calls from the media, and its staff have appeared in a variety

of important news outlets, including the New York Times, BBC, CNN, Fox News, and National Public Radio.

Tahirih's institutional sustainability is ensured by a supportive governing Board of Directors and a comprehensive fundraising strategy. The Board of Directors is comprised of individuals who are distinguished in their fields and bring wisdom, reputation, skills, resources, and connections to support the organization.<sup>4</sup> They provide strategic guidance and bring resources to the organization but do not engage in day-to-day management of its affairs. Tahirih's fundraising strategy depends on professional fundraising staff and generates a diverse mix of charitable donations from individuals, foundations, corporations, and the U.S. government.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining revenue diversity has allowed Tahirih to weather decreases in funding from one source, where the same occurrence has forced colleague organizations to close their doors. While Tahirih receives charitable support from individual Bahá'ís, it is not funded by Bahá'í institutions. In fact, approximately 90% of its funding comes from non-Bahá'ís.

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4 At the time this article was written, Tahirih's board of directors had executives from PepsiCo, Visa, Shell, and Capital One, as well as partners from respected law firms and other philanthropists.

5 At the time this article was written, Tahirih's revenue was from approximately 38% foundations, 27% government, 20% individuals, and 13% corporations

About seven years ago, Tahirih began receiving recognition and awards for its innovative programs and sound management practices.<sup>6</sup> After deliberate thought and best practices research, Tahirih began a process of replicating the institution. It first piloted expansion in Houston, Texas, in 2009. With that office's success and the replication model refined, Tahirih then opened its Baltimore, Maryland, office and is now in a strategic process for further replication with a goal to having a total of five service offices in the United States by 2018.

## HISTORY

The Tahirih Justice Center was founded in 1997, following my involvement, while still a law student, in a high-profile case that changed asylum law in the United States. The case was that of Fauziya Kassindja, a seventeen-year-old girl who fled Togo

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6 Tahirih and its management leadership have received the following awards: Goldman Sachs Top 100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs; Newsweek Magazine's Top 150 Fearless Women; DVF's People's Choice Award; Washington Post Award for Non-Profit Management; Meyer Exponent Award for Excellence in Non-Profit Management; Excellence in Chief Executive Leadership (EXCEL) Award; Charity Navigator's Four Star rating; and Catalogue for Philanthropy's Top Charity designation.



in fear of a forced, polygamous marriage and female genital mutilation. Following the highly publicized litigation of her case to the highest appellate immigration court in the United States, Fauziya was ultimately granted asylum. The decision set national precedent by recognizing, for the first time in U.S. law, gender-based persecution as grounds for asylum. After receiving numerous calls for assistance from other women like Fauziya, for whom there were no organizations established, I used my portion of the proceeds from a book Fauziya and I co-authored, *Do They Hear You When You Cry* (Delacorte Press, 1998), to establish the Tahirih Justice Center.

While I am certainly the “mother” of the Tahirih Justice Center, the organization has many other “parents.” In the early years, there was a core of individuals who labored days, nights, and weekends to write grant proposals, set up databases, develop websites, manage staff, and serve our clients. Those who were a part of the “core” changed over time as the needs of the organization changed, but Tahirih has never been without many committed owners of the efforts. The organization has been blessed to have many involved who care deeply for Tahirih’s mission and its well-being.

I was twenty-three years old when I started the organization, and I followed the advice of some wise mentors who reminded me that I just might not know exactly what I was

doing. I had not yet learned how to be a lawyer (having one precedent-setting case is more appropriately chalked up to an anomaly than to a honed skillset). I did not know how to manage people. I had no idea how to fundraise or govern a nonprofit. And I did not have sufficient relationships or networks to leverage on behalf of the organization. In short, I had a lot to learn from others.

So, for the first five years of the organization’s existence, I stayed out of Tahirih’s day-to-day operations. I worked first as an attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice and then at a corporate law firm named Arnold & Porter. Tahirih hired full-time staff; I served on the board of directors and helped raise money. Only when Tahirih was at an institutional crossroads—we had grown too big to function as a “startup” and were not big enough to have yet developed the institutional infrastructure for sustainability—did I join the staff. I did so reluctantly, first as an unpaid Year of Service volunteer. My law firm gave me a year’s leave of absence and provided me a financial safety net.

After the first year of my being at Tahirih, many changes took place. The changes were not painless. We were going through a stage that all nonprofits face, and some do not survive. We had to systematize and institutionalize policies, processes, and procedures. We had to be guided by program priorities, not personalities.



We had to be deliberate about tracking our metrics, assessing our effectiveness, maintaining quality, and raising money. Staff changed, processes were improved, and programs were documented. Funders noticed us, and we began to raise money. I stayed and have been there since 2001. Of course, I am well aware that there will be a time when the organization outgrows my leadership capacity and expertise, but for now, I will stay, so long as I can be of service.

#### TAHIRIH'S BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED NATURE

As Tahirih grew as an organization and Bahá'ís became a minority on staff,<sup>7</sup> its board attracted more people of capacity in the community at large and we were faced with the need to define more clearly who we were as a Bahá'í-inspired organization. Our "Bahá'í-ness" could no longer be dependent on the individuals who happened to be on staff or on the board. What being "Bahá'í-inspired" meant at the Tahirih Justice Center could no longer be presumed based on some unspoken understanding among those

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7 It has been difficult to recruit Bahá'ís with the skills necessary for positions required at Tahirih. This is partly due to the fact that, in the United States, Bahá'í-inspired organizations do not have access to the necessary mechanisms to communicate broadly to the Bahá'í community

who were Bahá'ís. We had to define it. Clearly.

There came a particularly acute moment when the organization had to examine its Bahá'í-inspired nature. In 2003, most of its staff were not Bahá'ís, and some felt resentful that we were not more transparent about what being Bahá'í-inspired meant. Justifiably, staff remarked that, whether through experience or assumption, they had some idea of what working for a Christian or Jewish organization might mean, but they had no reference for what working for a Bahá'í-inspired organization should look like. Similarly, a few funders, who found out that we were Bahá'í-inspired after they had given us a grant, raised questions and expressed concern that they had not known before that we were Bahá'í-inspired. The fact that we were not more upfront about being Bahá'í-inspired was interpreted as being cagy or secretive, rather than as an effort not to impose our beliefs on others. It became clear that, given the unfamiliarity of the Bahá'í Faith to many, we needed to be explicit and even overly transparent about our Bahá'í-inspired nature in order to avoid misunderstanding.

#### *What Being Bahá'í-inspired Looks Like at Tahirih*

Recognizing the need to better define who we were as a Bahá'í-inspired organization, we scheduled a weekend-long retreat for the board of directors.

During this retreat, the board would develop a clear policy on the matter. In preparation, I reached out to other Bahá'í-inspired organizations and the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre to ask for guidance and gather comparative experiences. I was disappointed to find that there was very little anyone could offer in the way of advice or information. The reason for this lack of information was simple: at that time, there was no other Bahá'í-inspired organization that had mostly non-Bahá'í board and staff members but that also had an overtly Bahá'í-inspired identity. In short, we discovered we were entering uncharted territory.

I was nervous. Most of the board members were not Bahá'ís, and the fate of our Bahá'í identity was in their hands. As always, however, Bahá'u'lláh has a plan for those who strive to serve, and as it turned out, our circumstances were well designed for precisely the result we needed.

During the board retreat weekend, Bahá'í board members deepened on the Bahá'í Writings, reflected, and consulted. Non-Bahá'í board members were sprawled on the floor reading copies of *Lights of Divine Guidance*, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and *The Advent of Divine Justice*. We pondered how being Bahá'í-inspired would guide our values, our policies, and our programs. Just when we thought we were done, a non-Bahá'í board member said, “Now we have a great policy written, but

what will we do to make sure that people are reminded of it and that it is enforced?” At his insistence, we decided to close for *Naw-Rúz* and institute human resources policies and processes to ensure that our hiring, orientation, annual review, and departure processes would reinforce our Bahá'í-inspired nature. Emboldened by the non-Bahá'í board members who encouraged us to be unapologetic and completely transparent about our Bahá'í-inspired nature, we emerged with much improved clarity about who we were and what principles would distinguish our service.

Tahirih's board of directors decided that being Bahá'í-inspired meant that we would deliberately apply and orient staff on the following Bahá'í principles: the equality of men and women, justice, unity in diversity, the oneness of humanity, consultation as a decision-making tool, noninvolvement in partisan politics, dedication to excellence, engaging in work in a spirit of service to humanity, and the realization that men have to be an integral part of achieving equality for women and men.

Now all the staff understand our Bahá'í identity and are expected to uphold these principles in their work. In their annual evaluation process, staff are assessed on their adherence to these core values. There is also a clear understanding at Tahirih that no staff member should feel pressured to become Bahá'í, or be constrained

in their private lives to abide by those standards and practices that are binding on Bahá'ís. Our mission is simply to elevate the status of women and to promote justice, not to teach the Faith.

When we hire staff or recruit board members, they must be fully supportive of and enthusiastic about our Bahá'í-inspired nature. Furthermore, their values must align with those principles we define as critical. During their interview, prospective staff receive a brochure that explains our Bahá'í-inspired nature. When joining the organization, everyone goes through a half-day orientation explaining who the historic figure of Tahirih is, the basics of the Bahá'í Faith,<sup>8</sup> how being Bahá'í-inspired is defined and implemented at Tahirih, and what Bahá'í-inspired performance standards they will be held to.<sup>9</sup>

Tahirih's staff regularly evaluate their programs for compliance with Bahá'í principles. For example, we do

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8 While we were clear that no one should feel pressured to become Bahá'ís by working at Tahirih, we recognized that it was important for everyone on staff to have at least a basic understanding of the Bahá'í Faith. This was inspired by one too many occurrences of staff, who had not otherwise investigated for themselves, believing that Tahirih was our prophet.

9 For example, Tahirih evaluates staff in their annual evaluations on their consultation skills, their nonpartisanship, whether they backbite, etc.

not support legislation that takes positions on abortion rights, gay marriage, or the legalization of prostitution—all of which are partisan political issues in which the Bahá'í Faith does not engage. Even while we may refrain from positions on these issues, we are unquestionably supportive of all people's right to be free from persecution.

At our annual gala, we say a Bahá'í prayer to open the event. Prayer is also permitted at Tahirih and at deepenings during lunch that occur periodically, but these are initiated by individual staff and not imposed by the organization.

During Tahirih-sponsored events, we do not pay for alcohol, but where non-Bahá'ís are hosting the event or where alcohol is donated, its consumption is permissible. Alcohol is not permitted on Tahirih property, and staff members may not drink while at work-related meetings or events; Tahirih's policy on alcohol resulted from a long discussion, which also involved intensive deepening on the subject of the operations of businesses co-owned by Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís.

We are open and obvious about our Bahá'í-inspired nature. It is always mentioned in our published materials, prominent on our website, in the first paragraph of our grant proposals, and in our job announcements. Since taking this transparent approach, we have avoided misunderstanding or suspicion about our Bahá'í-inspired nature. It was only when we were

silent on the subject that problems and misperception arose.<sup>10</sup>

*Why Be Transparent about Our Bahá'í-inspired Nature?*

Many Bahá'í-inspired organizations are in the process of defining their identity. While the essential nature of an organization, its cultural context and societal reality, must guide its decision on the subject, the Tahirih Justice Center's learning in developing its approach to being a Bahá'í-inspired organization may be instructive.

Religiously inspired charities are common in the United States. In fact, according to the philanthropy research organization Jumpstart Labs, 73% of American charitable giving goes to organizations with religious ties: 41% to religious congregations, and 32% to religiously inspired nonprofit organizations. Foundations, community organizations, and educational institutions fully expect religious affiliation and often have it themselves. Doing good work that is inspired by one's faith and values is a cultural American norm.

It is understandable that Bahá'ís who bear the psychological scars of

persecution, who are worried about imposing their faith on others, or who are subconsciously fearful about the unknown reaction to a Faith not widely understood may recoil at the idea of being overt about their relation to the Bahá'í Faith. Additionally, fears about causing resentment in others where there is not a clear separation in motivation between being of service and teaching the Faith is warranted. I would maintain, however, that if the purpose in a charitable activity is purely to be of service, for that activity to be religiously inspired (at least in the United States) would be culturally acceptable. Furthermore, while the Bahá'í Faith may not be entirely familiar to American society, being a Bahá'í-inspired organization provides an opportunity for informing the public about the Faith.

Another reason to be transparent about our Bahá'í-inspired roots is to give credit to the source of our guiding principles. For example, I often reference 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings regarding humanity as two wings of a bird when explaining the importance of the equality of women and men, and it would be disingenuous not to credit its source.<sup>11</sup> Tahirih's emphasis

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10 Additionally, we have not been refused funding (that I am aware of) because of being Bahá'í-inspired. (If we have, better that it happened early on, than those funders learn later and feel misled and resentful.)

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11 "And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of women and men. The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing

on consultation, nonpartisanship, and the equality of women and men are not ideas that an individual can claim; they are inspired by guidance in the Bahá'í teachings and scripture.

Finally, transparency about good works that are inspired by the Bahá'í Faith will help enhance the reputation of the Bahá'í global community and allow us to be known by our service to humanity, as was 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself:

It is primarily through the potency of noble deeds and character, rather than by the power of exposition and proofs, that the friends of God should demonstrate to the world that what has been promised by God is bound to happen, that it is already taking place and that the divine glad-tidings are clear, evident and complete. For unless some illustrious souls step forth into the arena of service and shine out resplendent in the assemblage of men, the task of vindicating the truth of this Cause before the eyes of enlightened people would be formidable indeed. However, if the friends become embodiments of virtue

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remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 301)

and good character, words and arguments will be superfluous. Their very deeds will well serve as eloquent testimony, and their noble conduct will ensure the preservation, integrity and glory of the Cause of God." (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* Vol II 1)

Likewise, where religions in the past have often been known primarily through lofty goals and noble thoughts, we as Bahá'ís are admonished to distinguish ourselves through our deeds:

O SON OF MY HANDMAID!  
Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds. In this wise We counsel you in this holy and resplendent tablet. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* Persian n. 76)

Indeed, we have been directly encouraged to attract the attention of society through our philanthropy and charity by Shoghi Effendi: "In philanthropic enterprises and acts of charity, in promotion of the general welfare and furtherance of the public

good including that of every group without any exceptions whatever, let the beloved of God attract the favourable attention of all, and lead all the rest" (qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* Vol. I 297).

If the philanthropy and charity of Bahá'ís is concealed, it will be difficult to "attract the favourable attention" encouraged by the Universal House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeated in various public gatherings, the virtues of the Faith are best extolled by the aid we provide to humanity:

Let your actions cry aloud to the world that you are indeed Bahá'ís, for it is actions that speak to the world and are the cause of the progress of humanity. If we are true Bahá'ís speech is not needed. Our actions will help on the world, will spread civilization, will help the progress of science, and cause the arts to develop. Without action nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual Kingdom. It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world. Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the

poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute! This is the work of a true Bahá'í, and this is what is expected of him. If we strive to do all this, then are we true Bahá'ís, but if we neglect it, we are not followers of the Light, and we have no right to the name. God, who sees all hearts, knows how far our lives are the fulfilment of our words. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 80)

The Tahirih Justice Center, along with the Bahá'í community at large, is still figuring out precisely how we accomplish these lofty aspirations. While we have arrived at our organizational decisions regarding our Bahá'í-inspired nature after much deliberation and reflection, it is entirely possible (in fact it is probable) that at some point in the future we will look back and wish we had done some things differently. There is certainly no one "right way" to be a Bahá'í-inspired organization. Unfortunately, we do not yet possess enough experience as a Bahá'í community to have sufficient comparative and tested case studies from which to glean best practices.

Although social action in the Bahá'í community is still in a state of infancy, we have an obligation to push through this stage of immaturity and learn from and grow our efforts to

be of service to society. We have an obligation to apply Bahá'u'lláh's healing medicine to the ailing world of humanity. And, we have a lot of work to do.

MOVING FORWARD  
AS A BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY  
ENGAGED IN SOCIAL ACTION

While there is much we have learned as a Bahá'í community about social action, there is still much we have to learn. It is inspiring to watch the maturation of the Bahá'í community and the growing commitment of so many to apply Bahá'u'lláh's principles to the complex issues of our time, but it is also intimidating to view the long road ahead. While there are many hurdles to overcome and learning to obtain as a Bahá'í community in order to fully develop our engagement in social action, one issue particularly stands out: the need to develop a culture of service and charity.

In my subjective experience, we are not yet used to service and charity as a way of life in the Bahá'í community. It may not be commonplace for Bahá'í communities, or for many individual Bahá'ís, to engage in regular community service or charitable giving beyond the Bahá'í community or the Bahá'í funds. Some of this inexperience and even reluctance is understandable: we are extremely busy, still maturing, and we may not feel particularly well resourced as a community overall.

Underlying all social action, however, must be a culture of service and charity. It is clear, both by the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the guidance in the Bahá'í Writings, that this culture will one day permeate our lives. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi remind us of the centrality of service and charity in our daily lives.

Charity is pleasing and praiseworthy in the sight of God and is regarded as a prince among goodly deeds. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 71)

Summon ye, then, the people to God, and invite humanity to follow the example of the Company on high. Be ye loving fathers to the orphan, and a refuge to the helpless, and a treasury for the poor, and a cure for the ailing. Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged. Think ye at all times of rendering some service to every member of the human race. Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way. Be ye sincerely kind, not in appearance only. Let each one of God's loved ones centre his attention on this: to be the Lord's mercy to man; to be the Lord's grace. Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him.



Let him improve the character of each and all, and reorient the minds of men. In this way, the light of divine guidance will shine forth, and the blessings of God will cradle all mankind: for love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 3)

Bahá'í charity is of the very essence in the Teachings, and should therefore be developed in every Bahá'í community. Charitable institutions such as orphanages, free schools and hospitals for the poor, constitute an indispensable part of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. It is the responsibility of every local Bahá'í community to insure the welfare of its poor and needy members, through whatever means possible. (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 120)

We are called upon to advocate for those in need, in addition to serving them directly. With a mindfulness of the suffering of others, as well as a grassroots understanding of their issues, we are also admonished to raise awareness among those who are privileged about the suffering of their fellow citizens:

O CHILDREN OF DUST! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead

them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth. To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* Persian n.49)

For some Bahá'ís, there may be a perception that there is a conflict between giving to the Bahá'í Fund and giving charitably. To reconcile this conflict, it is important to note that we are guided in the Writings to separately and concurrently give to Huqúqu'lláh, the Bahá'í Fund, and to the poor. These are three separate paths for the use of wealth, and each path has an entirely distinct spiritual consequence. The Huqúqu'lláh is the “Right of God,” and its payment is an obligation for all Bahá'ís.<sup>12</sup> Giving to the Bahá'í Fund is a privilege bestowed solely on Bahá'ís and is critical for the development of the Faith. But charitable giving has spiritual benefits and purposes distinct from giving either to the Bahá'í Fund or Huqúqu'lláh.

In fact, we are cautioned that “wealth is praiseworthy in the highest

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12 “This fund is used for the promotion of the Faith of God and its interests as well as for various philanthropic purposes. The offering of the Huqúqu'lláh is a spiritual obligation, the fulfilment of which has been left to the conscience of each Bahá'í” (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* n.125 218).

degree,” but only if several requirements are met. The first requirement is that the wealth be “acquired by an individual’s own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry.” The second requirement is that it “be expended for philanthropic purposes” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 24). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes on to say,

Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise. (24)

But while charitable giving is a means for the acceptance of wealth, it is also the source for acquiring great personal satisfaction and a sense of well-being.

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 2–3)

In addition, the Writings inform us that being charitable can produce spiritual benefits that accrue to our development in the next life, after our death. “If a wealthy man at the time of his death bequeaths a gift to the poor and miserable, and gives a part of his wealth to be spent for them, perhaps this action may be the cause of his pardon and forgiveness, and of his progress in the Divine Kingdom” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 231).

Finally, we are encouraged to give charitably as a spiritual gift to our parents for the hardships they endured in rearing us and in recognition of the

likelihood that they have not been able to witness the fruits of their labors.

Also a father and mother endure the greatest troubles and hardships for their children; and often when the children have reached the age of maturity, the parents pass on to the other world. Rarely does it happen that a father and mother in this world see the reward of the care and trouble they have undergone for their children. Therefore, children, in return for this care and trouble, must show forth charity and beneficence, and must implore pardon and forgiveness for their parents. So you ought, in return for the love and kindness shown you by your father, to give to the poor for his sake, with greatest submission and humility implore pardon and remission of sins, and ask for the supreme mercy. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 231–32)

In short, the obligation to give charitably for the well-being of those in need is a clear admonition in the Bahá'í Faith. There are spiritual benefits, both in this life and the next that accrue, but, in the final analysis, it is the desire to be of service in itself that should inspire our charitable actions. The culture of service and the spirit of philanthropy that we are called to create as Bahá'ís is an incredibly lofty goal. We are called on to center our

lives on service to others, so much so that our personal needs and desires should become subordinated to that service:

That is to say, man must become evanescent in God. Must forget his own selfish conditions that he may thus arise to the station of sacrifice. It should be to such a degree that if he sleep, it should not be for pleasure, but to rest the body in order to do better, to speak better, to explain more beautifully, to serve the servants of God and to prove the truths. When he remains awake, he should seek to be attentive, serve the Cause of God and sacrifice his own stations for those of God. When he attains to this station, the confirmations of the Holy Spirit will surely reach him, and man with this power can withstand all who inhabit the earth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 384)

For us to strive to attain this standard and approach the example established by 'Abdu'l-Bahá will likely take many years to achieve as a Bahá'í community. The difficulty of this accomplishment, however, should not deter us—it is the journey of effort to which we must be committed. The Divine Revelation within whose shadows we are living, and the divine precepts that we have been given, require nothing less. The fact that we may falter or

make mistakes along the way should never deter us: "Service to humanity is service to God. Let the love and light of the Kingdom radiate through you until all who look upon you shall be illumined by its reflection. Be as stars, brilliant and sparkling in the loftiness of their heavenly station. Do you appreciate the Day in which you live?" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 8).

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