

# The National Convention

Compilation prepared by the  
Research Department of the Universal House of Justice  
Dec 1992

## Table of Contents

### Statement on National Convention

- 1 **The National Spiritual Assembly**
- 2 **Relationship of the National Spiritual Assembly with the Bahá'í Community**
- 3 **Purposes of the National Convention**
- 4 **General Guidelines for the Functioning of the National Convention**
- 5 **The Nature and Purpose of Consultation at a National Convention**
- 6 **Creating the Milieu for Effective Consultation**
  - 6.1 **Mutual Responsibilities**
  - 6.2 **Contribution of the National Spiritual Assembly**
  - 6.3 **Contribution of the Delegates**
- 7 **Concluding Remarks**

### References

## The National Convention

A Statement prepared by the Research Department of the  
Universal House of Justice

December 1992

A number of issues have been raised recently about the Bahá'í National Convention, its conduct, and the important functions it serves within the Bahá'í community. To appreciate the significance of this unique institution at which the National Spiritual Assembly is elected, and to provide a context for discussing the purposes of the Convention and their effective implementation, it is useful to reflect briefly on the station of the National Assembly, its relationship with the Bahá'í community, and a number of principles fundamental to the operation of the Administrative Order. For ease of reference the excerpts cited in this statement have been assembled in the attached compilation.

### 1. The National Spiritual Assembly

The National Spiritual Assembly, designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament as the "secondary House of Justice",<sup>1</sup> is the supreme Bahá'í administrative authority in each land. The National Assembly is characterized by Shoghi Effendi as "the trusted guardian and the mainspring of the manifold activities and interests of every national community in the Bahá'í world".<sup>2</sup> He states that these Assemblies

constitute the electoral bodies in the formation of the International House of Justice, and are

empowered to direct, unify, co-ordinate and stimulate the activities of individuals as well as local Assemblies within their jurisdiction.<sup>3</sup>

The Guardian underlines their “indispensability” and “unique significance” and the challenging and “delicate” task confronting “the assembled delegates whose function it is to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause!”<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Relationship of the National Spiritual Assembly with the Bahá'í Community**

The letters of the Guardian contain a wealth of advice concerning the attitudes and behaviours that are to characterize the relationship of the National Assembly to the Bahá'í community. For example, Shoghi Effendi, while acknowledging the importance of administrative efficiency, also points to the need for the Spiritual Assemblies to develop cordial relations with their co-workers. He therefore calls upon the members of the National Spiritual Assembly to

utilize their highly responsible position, not only for the wise and efficient conduct of the affairs of the Cause, but also for the extension and deepening of the spirit of cordiality and whole-hearted and mutual support in their co-operation with the body of their co-workers throughout the land.<sup>5</sup>

The Guardian identifies the “most outstanding and sacred duties” of the National Assembly, assigning priority to those that require the members “to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve”. He stresses the importance of open and frank communication, of the need for the Assembly

to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant member of the Bahá'í Family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the spirit of individual initiative and enterprise, and fortify the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all Local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.<sup>6</sup>

So important is such communication that Shoghi Effendi calls upon the National Assembly to maintain consultation beyond the period of the Convention with the “entire body of the believers through the Local Spiritual Assemblies”.<sup>7</sup> He affirms that this contact between the members of the National Spiritual Assembly and the individual believers is of “immense value to the Cause, as it serves to promote, more than any other means, intelligent co-operation, fellowship and understanding among the friends”.<sup>8</sup>

## **3. Purposes of the National Convention**

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on his behalf, specifies that the Bahá'í Convention has a

twofold function of electing the body of the National Spiritual Assembly, and of offering any constructive suggestions in regard to the general administration of the Cause...<sup>9</sup>

It is useful to consider these functions within the context of the overall objectives of the Bahá'í Administrative Order as enunciated by the beloved Guardian. Shoghi Effendi writes:

The administrative machinery of the Cause ... should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the co-ordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá'í community.<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of statements in the letters of the Guardian which, when taken together, enhance our understanding of the purpose of the National Convention. For example, Shoghi Effendi indicates that this important gathering poses both “a challenge to the individual” and “a collective responsibility”. He explains that:

The one seeks to reinforce the motive power of our spiritual activities, the second aims at

raising the standard of administrative efficiency so vitally needed at this advanced stage of our work.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to the functions of the Convention, the Guardian, in a letter written on his behalf, cautioned the friends against considering the Administration simply as “an aim in itself” and against failing “to grasp the spiritual and moral development which is its purpose to achieve”. He referred to the “main and essential purpose” of the Convention as follows:

The Convention meetings are not intended to be purely administrative. Their main and essential purpose is to enable the assembled delegates and friends to have a deeper and broader vision of the Cause through an increase in the spirit of unity and of whole-hearted co-operation.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the potential outcomes of the Bahá'í Convention, Shoghi Effendi points to “the unique functions it fulfils in promoting harmony and goodwill, in removing misunderstandings and in enhancing the prestige of the Cause”.<sup>13</sup> He draws attention to the “tremendous impetus” to the execution of the plans of the Faith which results from the “consultation and mingling of the friends” at Convention,<sup>14</sup> and to the valuable role of the delegates in carrying back to their fellow-believers “a very real awareness of the work in hand and the needs of the hour”.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. General Guidelines for the Functioning of the National Convention**

Two "cardinal principles of Bahá'í Administration" underpin the operation of the National Convention, namely:

...the supreme and unchallengeable authority of the National Spiritual Assembly in national affairs ... working within the limits imposed by the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, and the untrammelled freedom of the Convention delegates to advise, deliberate on the actions, and appoint the successors of their National Assembly.<sup>16</sup>

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, affirms that the Annual Convention "is vested with definite rights and prerogatives, and has special exclusive functions which are defined and safeguarded by the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws".<sup>17</sup> Article VIII of the Model Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of a National Spiritual Assembly, published in “The Bahá'í World” volumes, presents the essential elements which govern the election, functions and authority of a National Bahá'í Convention, the body which constitutes the electoral college for the National Spiritual Assembly of a country. With regard to issues that are not covered in the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, the Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, indicates that “all other matters are of secondary importance and are left to the judgement of each National Assembly”.<sup>18</sup>

Over the years, national Bahá'í communities have evolved procedures which are followed at their National Conventions and which vary according to the size of the Convention and the conditions of the country in which it is held. “A Procedure for the Conduct of the Annual Bahá'í Convention”, published in “The Bahá'í World”, sets out the elements of a typical procedure.

#### **5. The Nature and Purpose of Consultation at a National Convention**

Shoghi Effendi distinguishes between the National Bahá'í Convention and the operation of an “ordinary parliament”, and stresses the uniqueness of the Bahá'í system of administration, whose “bedrock” is “consultation, frank and unfettered”.<sup>19</sup> He specifies “a full, frank and unhampered consultation between the National Assembly and the assembled delegates” as “the essential method” by which Conventions should be conducted.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of consultation at the National Bahá'í Convention is threefold: to arrive at full and complete knowledge of the current conditions, problems and possibilities of the Faith in the country; to give the incoming National Assembly the benefit of the collective wisdom, guidance and constructive suggestions of the assembled delegates; and to contribute to the unity, in spirit and action, of the entire Bahá'í community.

As to the nature of the consultation carried on at the Annual Convention, letters written by and on behalf of the Universal House of Justice provide a number of useful elucidations. For example, the House of Justice encourages the delegates to focus their deliberations on the “national work of the Cause rather than purely local matters”.<sup>21</sup> It calls attention to a similarity between the Nineteen Day Feast and National Contentions, in that

a relatively large number of believers engage in consultation with the principal and ultimate objectives of producing joint recommendations for consideration by the Spiritual Assembly.<sup>22</sup>

It affirms that, in addition to offering formal recommendations which are discussed and voted upon, the delegates as individuals are free to make suggestions and proposals to the National Assembly. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, calls for balance, stating:

It is important to remember, however, that the National Convention is not a conference, it is a consultative institution of the Faith; therefore, consultation and formal voting on recommendations should not be ruled out altogether. There may, for example, be disagreement among the delegates on certain proposals put forward, and it would be fruitful for the matter to be discussed and voted upon so that the National Spiritual Assembly will know the recommendation of the Convention as a whole on those issues.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, in the record of the consultation, the House of Justice advises that a “distinction should be made ... between recommendations of the entire Convention and those which are merely the proposals of individual delegates”.<sup>24</sup> And, it explains that the decisions that emerge from the consultations at Convention pertain to “whether or not to make a specific recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly”.<sup>25</sup>

## **6. Creating the Milieu for Effective Consultation**

### **6.1 Mutual Responsibilities**

While the National Spiritual Assembly and the delegates have clearly designated functions in relation to the Convention, they also share a number of important responsibilities which have implications for the creation and maintenance of a milieu conducive to effective consultation and the advancement of the Cause in a country. Shoghi Effendi sets out the standards which must govern the behaviour of the assembled delegates and the members of the National Assembly, as follows:

...they should endeavour, first and foremost, to exemplify, in an increasing degree, to all Bahá'ís and to the world at large, the high ideals of fellowship and service which Bahá'u'lláh and the beloved Master have repeatedly set before them. They can claim the admiration, the support and, eventually, the allegiance of their fellow-countrymen only by their strict regard for the dignity, the welfare, and the unity of the Cause of God, by their zeal, their disinterestedness, and constancy in the service of mankind, and by demonstrating, through their words and deeds, the need and practicability of the lofty principles which the Movement has proclaimed to the world.<sup>26</sup>

The Guardian also assigns them “collective responsibility” for “raising the standard of administrative efficiency”, so vital to the work of the Cause.<sup>27</sup>

Details of specific functions of the National Spiritual Assembly and the delegates are set out in the letters of Shoghi Effendi and in the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws. The implementation of these functions calls for the exercise of co-operation and collaboration by both the delegates and the National Spiritual Assembly, and can serve to foster effective consultation. For example, the beloved Guardian states that the delegates should serve as “an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly”. Likewise, the members of the incoming National Assembly must “unfold to the eyes of the delegates ... their plans, their hopes, and their cares” and must “seek and have the utmost regard, individually as well as collectively, for the advice, the considered opinion and the true sentiments of the assembled delegates”.<sup>28</sup>

## **6.2 Contribution of the National Spiritual Assembly**

A National Spiritual Assembly can take a number of actions to support the efforts of the delegates and to enhance the quality of consultation at the Convention. These relate, for example, to the preparation of the agenda and the annual report, the involvement of Assembly members in the deliberations, and the encouragement of the delegates to attend the Convention.

With regard to the preparation of the agenda, Article VIII, Section 9 of the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of a National Spiritual Assembly states that the National Assembly has the responsibility for the preparation of the agenda. The agenda sets out the general order of business to be taken up at the Annual Convention, including the various matters of national Bahá'í importance which the National Spiritual Assembly feels demand the attention of the delegates. The By-Laws further state that any matter pertaining to the Bahá'í Faith introduced by any of the delegates may upon motion and vote be taken up as part of the Convention deliberations.

In working within these guidelines, it is clear that there is scope for a degree of collaboration. For example, prior to Convention, a National Assembly could invite the delegates to recommend items for inclusion in the agenda.

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, sets out the parameters which guide the formulation of the agenda. He states that the agenda "should be arranged so as to permit the greatest possible freedom of expression on the part of the assembled delegates" and at the same time, the National Assembly is instructed to provide "as clear and concise a picture of the year's accomplishments, needs and events ... as possible". The picture presented by the Assembly enables "full discussion" by the delegates to take place.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the Guardian underlines the importance of familiarizing the delegates with "the various matters that will have to be considered in the current year" and he stresses the value of providing, as far as possible, for "all matters requiring immediate decision" to be "fully and publicly considered" during the Convention.<sup>30</sup>

The Universal House of Justice stresses the importance of making "as much time as possible ... available for the delegates to consult" and draws attention to the desirability of circulating in advance written reports to the delegates and of keeping "any introductions of subjects or presentation of matters to the Convention ... as brief as possible to allow the greatest amount of time for consultation".<sup>31</sup>

The Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, underlines the benefits that derive from a National Assembly's presentation of its perceptions of the status and needs of the community in the annual report:

...when the National Spiritual Assembly takes the delegates into its confidence in this way, and consults thoroughly and lovingly on the important matters before the Bahá'í community, these consultations and the considered resolutions which are passed by vote of the assembled delegates can be of great value to the Assembly in its subsequent deliberations throughout the Bahá'í year.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, concerning making known the results of the Assembly's subsequent deliberations, the House of Justice states:

It is highly desirable that the National Assembly publish, for the information of the whole community, the recommendations that are passed by the Convention and the decisions that the National Assembly subsequently makes in relation to them.<sup>33</sup>

The participation of the members of the National Spiritual Assembly and the delegates in the Annual Convention is linked to fruitful consultation. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, states that "the members of both the incoming and the outgoing Assemblies should be given the full right to participate in the Convention discussions", and he affirms that

the exercise of such a right by the members of the National Spiritual Assembly will enable them to consult more fully with the assembled delegates, to exchange fully and frankly with them their views, and to consider collectively the interests, needs and

requirements of the Cause. This, he believes, is one of the primary functions of the Convention.<sup>34</sup>

A letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice affirms that the members of the National Assembly “are present as individual participants in the consultations”.<sup>35</sup> They are free, therefore, to express their personal views. Clearly, however, the manner in which the member expresses his or her view is of importance. In this regard, a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi concerning the participation of believers in the consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast contains guidance which is also pertinent to this issue. While championing the individual's right to self-expression, the Guardian established the following limits:

But in the exercise of such rights he should refrain from any such remarks or actions as would tend to belittle the significance and undermine the authority of the Assembly itself, as an institution established by Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>36</sup>

With regard to the encouragement of the delegates to attend Convention, the Universal House of Justice has assigned the National Spiritual Assembly the task of ensuring that:

...the delegates are lovingly made aware of their sacred responsibilities to attend, to consult and to vote. Admittedly, it is preferable that the delegates attend the sessions of the Convention in person so they may take an active part in all of its proceedings and acquaint their fellow-workers on their return with an account of the accomplishments, decisions and plans of their national community.<sup>37</sup>

To implement this mandate, National Spiritual Assemblies may well consider whether circumstances are such as to render it advantageous to hold

special preparatory sessions in conjunction with the National Convention to deepen the delegates on the purpose and function of the National Convention and the sacred character of Bahá'í elections.<sup>38</sup>

And, in this regard, the Assemblies are encouraged to seek the assistance of the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Board members.

### **6.3 Contribution of the Delegates**

In the exercise of their function as “an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body”,<sup>39</sup> the delegates have an important contribution to make to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to effective consultation. For example, when offering advice and constructive recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly, the delegates are called upon to “approach their task with ... detachment and ... concentrate their attention on the most important... issues”.<sup>40</sup> Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, states that the concentration on “problems of a purely secondary importance” will result in the meetings of the Convention being “somewhat lacking in spiritual force”.<sup>41</sup> Further, since the National Convention is a national Bahá'í institution, the delegates must needs give attention to the interests of the Cause throughout the nation, rather than limiting their focus only to the needs of the region from which a particular delegate has been elected.

Shoghi Effendi calls upon the National Spiritual Assembly to uphold the “untrammelled freedom”<sup>42</sup> of the Convention delegates to advise and deliberate on the actions of the National Assembly, and he outlines the parameters within which this is to be achieved:

The unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice, and the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.<sup>43</sup>

It is apparent that the exercise of such freedom takes place within the framework of the complex of spiritual and moral principles which govern the practice of consultation. Hence, while the delegates are encouraged to “unburden their hearts, state their grievances, disclose their views, and explain their motives”,<sup>44</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá counsels all who engage in consultation to “proceed with the utmost

devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation” and He cautions that “stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden”.<sup>45</sup>

While the freedom of the delegates is an important principle, this freedom is not necessarily violated if limits are placed on the length of time and the frequency with which an individual delegate participates in the consultation. There is nothing in the Teachings to preclude the establishment of these types of limits. Article VIII, Section 8 of the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of a National Spiritual Assembly indicates that the delegates have the right to make decisions concerning the organization of the Convention. Hence, the delegates are free to initiate a motion to limit the extent of an individual's participation. In the absence of a motion, the chairman of the Convention could also set such limits, in the interests of providing opportunities for all delegates to participate. In addition, the Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, has clarified that:

It is up to the chairman, when necessary, to keep before the Convention the purpose of consultation at the Annual Convention and to exercise a certain amount of control over the proceedings, while not infringing on the freedom of delegates to take part in discussion and to initiate motions. Any delegate may raise any issue for consultation, but it is for the Convention to decide whether it wishes to consult on it.<sup>46</sup>

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

The functioning of the National Bahá'í Convention will undoubtedly improve as the believers strive to obtain a deeper appreciation of the significance and purposes of the National Convention and of the station of the institution it is called upon to elect, and as they endeavour both to manifest, to a greater degree, the spiritual qualities and skills necessary for productive consultation, and to acquire a national perspective on the work of the Cause. Its development, over time, will also be further enhanced by the efforts of the National Spiritual Assembly and the delegates to create a co-operative atmosphere where a frank and mutual exchange of views is encouraged and appreciated and where a common vision of the needs and opportunities of the Faith in the land can be achieved.

## REFERENCES

Note: The number in brackets following each reference corresponds to the number of the extract in the attached compilation.

1. "Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 14. [1]
2. Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 11 June 1934 written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly. [12]
3. "God Passes By" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 332. [9]
4. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), pp. 87-88. [5]
5. *ibid.*, p. 80. [4]
6. From a letter dated 18 October 1927 to a National Spiritual Assembly, cf. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", pp. 143-44. [8]
7. From a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [16]
8. From a letter dated 4 December 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [18]
9. From a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [16]
10. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", p. 109. [7]
11. *ibid.*, p. 87. [5]
12. From a letter dated 25 July 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [13]
13. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", p. 91. [6]
14. From a letter dated 22 March 1946 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [20]
15. From a letter dated 1 March 1951 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [22]
16. From a letter dated 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [14]
17. From a letter dated 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [15]
18. From a letter dated 24 May 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. [26]
19. Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 18 November written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly. [11]
20. Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 13 April 1927 written on his behalf to a Local Spiritual Assembly. [10]
21. From a memorandum dated 29 June 1973 from the Universal House of Justice to the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land. [25]
22. From a letter dated 26 July 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [27]
23. From a letter dated 19 June 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [30]
24. *ibid.* [30]
25. From a letter dated 26 October 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. [28]
26. From a letter dated 26 November 1923 to a National Spiritual Assembly, cf. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", p. 53. [3]
27. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", p. 87. [5]
28. *ibid.*, p. 79. [4]
29. From a letter dated 29 October 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [21]
30. "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", pp. 79-80. [4]
31. From a letter dated 6 July 1971 from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [24]

32. From a letter dated 24 May 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [29]
33. From a letter dated 16 April 1992 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [33]
34. From a letter dated 25 December 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [17]
35. From a letter dated 26 October 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. [28]
36. From a letter dated 8 March 1940 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [19]
37. From a letter dated 9 April 1970 from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [23]
38. From a letter dated 31 January 1989 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to selected National Spiritual Assemblies. [31]
39. “Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932”, p. 79. [4]
40. From a letter dated 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [14]
41. From a letter dated 25 July 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. [13]
42. From a letter dated 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly. [14]
43. “Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932”, p. 87. [5]
44. Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 13 April 1927 written on his behalf to a Local Spiritual Assembly. [10]
45. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in “Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932”, p. 22. [2]
46. From a letter dated 7 July 1991 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. [32]