

The National Spiritual Assembly is pleased to share with you a transcript of the talk given by a Counselor member of the International Teaching Center, Dr. Penny Walker, in Houston, Texas, on February 12, 2002.

MS. WALKER: Thank you very much. I asked Gene (Andrews) to be brief. I don't know if that quite qualifies as brief, but thank you very much. I particularly wanted to thank the Spiritual Assembly of Houston for arranging this meeting for us this evening and this very beautiful setting. Also to thank them, because last night Dr. Andrews and I were able to have a very excellent consultation with the Local Assembly and discuss many elements of the Five Year Plan. We found it to be very stimulating and I'm sure I don't have to tell you that it's a very hard-working Assembly, very open and ready to move forward with all the elements of the Five Year Plan that we're working on. As Dr. Andrews mentioned, I've just come from Panama and we had a conference there of all the Auxiliary Board members for Central America, the Caribbean and the northern countries of South America. When many of them found out that I was coming up here to Texas and then on to the United States, they kept telling me please, will you take our greetings to the friends in North America. So I bring you very warm and loving greetings from a large conference of Auxiliary Board members in Panama.

Of the 16 conferences that we have worldwide, that we're participating in, really over about a three-month period, seven of them are in the areas of the Temples--the Houses of Worship--are being held in those cities. We felt that that was an important thing to try to arrange because of the special spiritual feeling and dynamic power that would emanate from the Temples, and those have been wonderful conferences. I was able to attend the one in New Delhi, India, and of course, have a chance to go to that Temple. The Indian friends were very interested in knowing if they were going to be the biggest conference, because any time you go to India for anything, they want to make sure they're the biggest, you know, the biggest community, the biggest temple, the biggest conference. So I said they had competition in Panama, but maybe in fact the Indians again were the biggest.

One of the things also was that Dr. Andrews suggested I might visit this area, -- You see, I had some time between the conference in Panama and the conference coming up in Wilmette, so I wanted to have a chance to visit some parts of the United States. Although I come back to the United States very often to visit family, I haven't lived here for many years, so it's very good to keep in touch with the friends here and know what you're doing out in the field and how things are progressing. He mentioned the Houston area because I understand it's the largest Bahá'í community in the southern region and it has a lot of very interesting programs going on. I jumped at this because I also happen to have family in this area. I think I'll tell you that they are Tammy and George Goff, because in case in a few days you happen to say to someone in the community, "Gee, too bad about that boring talk," I'd better tell you who my cousins are, so you don't say it to the wrong person. (laughter)

This is the first conference in some time actually, the first meeting that I'm speaking at where we haven't had translators, interpreters. In both India and in Panama we had simultaneous translation going on. In India the conference was basically in English, but we also had translation in Hindi and Tamil and in Panama we had simultaneous translation going on in Spanish and French. Now, since we do travel a fair amount, as Dr. Andrews mentioned, we often have translators. Usually, in fact, we don't have the high tech set-up that we had in these conferences. We usually have someone standing right next to us translating. That sometimes can be an interesting experience in itself. I once was speaking in India and I had a

translator and I would say something and then he would follow on with the translation and it would seem to go on a bit longer and then there'd be this peal of laughter and I'd think that's interesting. Afterwards I asked him about it and he said, "Well, I just added a few of my own stories." (laughter)

The other side of that is we had a Bahá'í friend, a traveling teacher visiting us in Kathmandu, and she had just come from East Asia where she had had a translator and had had an interesting experience. He was standing next to her and she happened to be the kind of speaker that liked to tell different stories and jokes. She would tell a story, but she didn't feel she was getting any response. So she tried again and he'd translate for her, but nothing. So she whispered to him—"I don't seem to be getting much of a response." Anyway, she decided she'd try one more anecdote and then get into the body of her talk. So she told the little story and then the translator said some words and all of a sudden all this laughter came up. She felt quite pleased and carried on with her talk. At the end she said to him—"You know, at the end finally we got a little response. Was it something you said? What did you say?" He looked at her a little bit sheepishly and said—"I said, I think she made a joke, please laugh." (laughter) So these are some of the experiences we have had with translators. I assume that in Texas it's all the same language right? I mean we're managing in English. I hope so.

The International Teaching Centre has the privilege of meeting with the Universal House of Justice on an official basis. In other words, with an agenda, all day meetings three times a year. Then we have other meetings throughout the year or small group meetings. We were able to have a meeting before we made plans for the agendas and the program for these Auxiliary Board conferences around the world, and we discussed with the House of Justice some of our thoughts because we wanted to get the input of the members. One thing that was suggested to us, which in fact has been something that we're mentioning at all these conferences, is that the House of Justice wanted us to talk a little bit about the world situation. In light of this-- basically in light of the fact that the friends understand, of course, that our Writings have prepared us for the conflicts and ordeals and the convulsions that mankind has to undergo. And that wherever we go, to reassure the friends and to remind them what Shoghi Effendi said should be the effect of these crises on our lives and on our work--that is, that they should cause us to intensify our teaching work, to devote our energy ever more so to the work of the Cause. This was something that the House of Justice wanted us to just share with the conferences around the world and I wanted to share with you.

You know that every week we go to the Holy Shrines. One week we go to the Shrine of the Báb and the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the next week we go to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí. And we pray for the friends, the Bahá'í friends around the world, for the success of their work and the Five Year Plan. Often we pray for special activities and programs that are going on in different countries. We pray for many friends who send in their names for resolution of difficulties, for guidance, for blessings. We pray for healing for many people and we read all these names out loud in the Shrine as we face the Threshold. And I just wanted you to know that you are always in our hearts and you are always in our prayers, and that everything you are doing is so appreciated by the Universal House of Justice. When we travel, they ask us to take and extend their love and greetings to the friends.

Now, one thing, -- I'm sure you're so familiar with all of the writings from *Citadel of Faith* and other places where Shoghi Effendi described how things would unfold, but he wrote one thing that was very interesting. He described what would make the Faith grow more rapidly, that more people will come in more swiftly because of two factors. One of those was

the disintegration of society, he said, and the suffering that it would bring in its wake. He wrote that this would actually prepare the hearts to receive the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The other thing which you may remember he said, -- the other factor that would contribute to more people coming in more swiftly is the maturity of the Bahá'ís within their communities. I think that means we're supposed to act like Bahá'ís. Those are the two factors he mentioned and those are the two things that we see at work around us in the world today.

Now, when the House of Justice said to urge the friends that these are the times to intensify the teaching work, to focus on the work of the Cause, we should keep in mind that as we go about this teaching work and the Five Year Plan, that we are really united in our purpose. It is the Covenant that keeps us united in our purpose. In order to achieve anything successful, you have to be unified in your purpose and this is the wonderful thing about the Bahá'í world community. I can give you an example. Some years ago a woman, -- this was when I was living in Nepal, -- came up to me. She was a very outstanding Nepalese woman who was the leading figure in women's affairs in the country and had been invited to so many UN conferences and was a very prominent person. She came up to me because she knew I was a Bahá'í and she said, "You know, I've gone to so many UN conferences and to the Beijing Summit and the Earth Summit and everything and I'm always meeting Bahá'ís. The most amazing thing to me is that all the Bahá'ís seem to know what their agenda is in this day. They all seem to know what they're about and what they're going to do."

This is the most remarkable thing and people recognize it when they come in contact with Bahá'ís, this unity of purpose. The unity of vision that we have we get through the Plans of the Faith, starting with the vision that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave us in the Tablets of the Divine Plan and moving through the successive global Plans of the Faith and now in our Five Year Plan. That is the framework for our united action.

I brought this [holds up U.S. Five Year Plan] because we have the global Plan from the House of Justice and then you have your national plan. Sometimes we get these documents--like we get the 9 January letter from the House of Justice which gives the whole heart of the Plan, and then we get our national plan, which is derived from that global Plan--we read them through and we sort of put them aside. Do you know where your copies are? --because these are the documents we have to refer to throughout this Plan to give us our guidance and the framework for whatever we're doing. This is how we achieve united action and how we achieve our goals.

Now, I think that most of you, when we received the very exciting announcement that we had entered a new epoch, probably looked up in your books the history of the epochs and how we got to the fifth epoch and what signified the third epoch and the fourth epoch and so on. I won't review all that with you; I'm sure you're very expert on it, but it's very interesting to study that if you haven't studied it because Shoghi Effendi explains some very important principles underlying the unfoldment of the successive stages of the Faith through these epochs. He said for one thing that each new epoch gives a new impetus to the progress of the Faith and gives, in particular he said, a new impetus to the two fundamental processes that characterize the Formative Age--the construction of the Administrative Order of the Faith, which is the embryo of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and also the unfoldment of the Divine Plan in successive stages. Each new epoch gives a new impetus to our work and I think we've already felt this to a certain extent. We certainly feel it in Haifa and we really perceive it, because we are able to read the reports that come in. And, as Dr. Andrews said, we've had a chance to do

some travel and we really see the new vitality, the new spirit, and the new sense of urgency and almost intensity of the friends in responding to the challenges of the Five Year Plan.

The other thing that Shoghi Effendi mentioned and this is in *Citadel of Faith*, he said that we cannot discern the character of the circumstances that determine the nature and succession of epochs or how they will unfold. He said we cannot discern it. He said later, that it depends on two things—“the timing and the nature of the tasks.” The timing and the nature of the tasks. This is what we saw and if you look back at the messages--there is the Ridvan 2000 message and then the 16 January message from the House of Justice that announced the fifth epoch--it was really quite a revelation to me to read these and see how the Universal House of Justice followed in that exact pattern. It shouldn't be any surprise, but it was quite revealing for me, because the House of Justice had pointed in the 2000 message to many signs of the progress and achievement in the Bahá'í world--the successful implementation of the training institutes around the world, the construction of the buildings on the Arc, and they talked about the development of the institutions of the Faith. They also talked about the fact that the internal processes of consolidation and maturation were becoming more synchronized with the processes leading toward world peace. All of these signs were there. Then the House of Justice wrote in the 16 January message that, in fact, it was what they had observed in the conference of the Counsellors from around the world and the consultations and how everyone was of one mind, that all of these indications crystallized in a recognizable reality--that we had entered a new epoch. The House of Justice went on to say that it should bring the followers of Bahá'u'lláh real joy, all of us, to realize that our Faith had reached “so important a point [in its maturation] at so crucial a time,” which again exactly expressed what Shoghi Effendi had said, was the nature of the task and the timing. This is how we have reached this fifth epoch. This is the process that took place.

As you study the Plans leading up to the fifth epoch and this Five Year Plan, the global teaching Plan, one thing that you can see is how this has been an evolving process and how each Plan has built on the previous one. It shouldn't be surprising to us when we look at this process to see that some of the things we are doing now, some of the approaches we are using are different from what we did in the Nine Year Plan, because this has been a learning process, and one of the things we have learned something about is growth, and I'd like to speak a little bit about that.

We've learned that real growth, sustained growth is not explosive. It's something steady and systematic. We've also seen a change in our approach to growth. That is, for many years in many of the previous Plans prior to the Four Year Plan, our approach to growth was one of diffusion, dispersal, we scattered all over, and what we tried to achieve was to have as many new localities, many new Assemblies, many new languages. This was very important. These were wonderful achievements. If we hadn't done that, we wouldn't be the second most widespread religion in the world according to the Britannica yearbook.

But now the approach is different. It's not one of diffusion and dispersal. That's not to say that there aren't going to be new areas opened up, but if you look at the Ridvan 2001 message, it even says that it's not-- that the approach is penetration--penetration of a cluster so that we increase and have a substantial increase in the number of avowed and devoted supporters of the Cause. This is somewhat of a shift. Of course, this whole process is being guided by the Universal House of Justice. This is the wonderful aspect of having this progressive guidance from the Universal House of Justice that gives us the framework and the approach that the Faith needs at this point, at this time given our situation and given the

circumstances of the world at large. This requires some change in our thinking, some change in our attitudes about what it means to grow as Bahá'í communities, even as how we function as Bahá'í communities. One of the things possibly that our previous experience led us to think—through this dispersal—is that we became somewhat satisfied with small communities. We kind of got used to small communities, and that creates its own kind of mentality.

What the House of Justice is saying now is that large communities with a greater number of human resources create a certain dynamic for growth, and that's why we are working cluster by cluster to increase the number of human resources, trained human resources in a cluster and it changes the dynamics for growth. For the first time in maybe some time what we're really saying is big is beautiful. So you don't have to feel guilty you're in a big community. You don't have to feel you should be somewhere else. A big community has a lot of potential. We're looking at city communities and working with them to look at their communities in the same way the House of Justice has said to look at whole countries—that is, dividing them up geographically into clusters and using that division to know what strategies you want to use to move those clusters forward. A city, a large city, has to do the same thing. It has to look at its city and geographically divide it into sectors as a way to know what to do when, to know what to do where and when. Certain priorities have to be set and then you know what is lacking in different areas, what is required in different areas, what are the strategies to apply to move the process along this kind of continuum of growth.

The House of Justice said in the 9 January message, when we look at our communities within a state or within a region, one of the things that's really important as a foundation for growth is to have a vigorous institute process. If you've looked at the prerequisites for getting to an advanced stage where you're ready to launch what they call an intensive program of growth, you have to have a vigorous institute process.

The training institute process that we launched during the Four Year Plan and what the House of Justice said was the greatest single legacy in expansion and consolidation of the Four Year Plan, was that network of over 300 training institutes around the world. The training institute process has had a terrific impact on individuals and communities around the world. The stories really abound on the influence that it has had on individual lives and raising up more committed and capable believers in all parts of the world and also in communities and changing the spirit of the community and giving people confidence to take up individual initiatives and becoming more involved in the teaching work and, in general, in the whole development of community life.

The thing about the training institute process, which the House of Justice mentioned several times of course, in the messages about the Five Year Plan is that it will remain, — it is with us. It is here to stay. It's not something we tried and we thought okay, we've done it. It's something that's with us for the next twenty years, until the end of the first century of the Formative Age and beyond. What we're working on is not just a curriculum or not just trying a course here and a course there. We're setting up a whole system. We're setting up a whole system, and it's something that we learned over many years and many Plans that we were lacking. We had a lot of things going for us and we were doing a lot of things, but we had a certain gap. We didn't have a system in place that could handle large numbers of believers, because in fact, we have had entry by troops in other parts of the world, in different parts of the world. It's not that we've never experienced it; it's just that we weren't able to retain it, to sustain that kind of growth.

Now the situation has changed. Last year they brought in something like 8,000 believers in Bangladesh. Within four weeks 50% of them were already involved in the institute process. There's a whole shift, we know now, because the institute was in place. It had four regional branches; it had study circles in many of the districts. We didn't have a way to do this. We have to be prepared. On the one hand, the training institute is preparing us for conditions that are coming, because we're advancing the process of entry by troops. If we're advancing the process that means the process is already in place, we're advancing it. So we have to be prepared as the numbers come in; and secondly, it also is really, as I said earlier, giving a new spirit and really revitalizing the teaching work in so many parts of the world.

I want to tell you just a brief story. This kind of ties in with what I was talking about at the beginning with the world situation. One thing that the House of Justice said in one message-- I think it was about 1998--it said that sometimes the Major Plan of God can delay or obstruct, you might say hold up the Minor Plan of God, the Plan that we are working on, the one that depends on us. But we shouldn't worry about it, we shouldn't be unduly troubled, because everything is moving along and, as the House of Justice said in one place, that events will be "driving humanity inexorably toward world peace and unity." "Inexorably" is a very good word. It means impossible to stop. It's just impossible to stop.

I can tell you one place where the Major Plan had an effect and that was of course in Afghanistan. Several years ago we had a small community in Kabul in Afghanistan and several years ago the Afghan believers had to leave Afghanistan when the Taliban rule came in and they settled in Pakistan. Also, many other thousands of Afghans came into Pakistan, as you know, and some teaching work started among the Afghans. We have several hundred Bahá'ís now among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and they've been there for some years. Not so long ago--it was just in recent months, at the request of the Universal House of Justice, two Counsellors conducted what we call institute campaigns among these Afghan refugees, a selected group of them. They have had an institute process among the Afghan refugees. In fact, they have their own you might say administrative structure parallel to the structure in Pakistan. This is all in preparation. They've been working on this for the last few years. Anyway, there were at least thirty Afghan Bahá'ís that had already gone through books one, two and three of their institute series and they decided to run a campaign in Rawalpindi and a campaign in Peshawar. And to make a long story short, at the end of these two campaigns, they now have a very beautiful pyramid, what we call a pyramid of human resources. They have out of a community of 500, nearly 200 at the base of the pyramid who have completed Book one of the series, and they have 60 who have completed all seven books, who have gone through the whole sequence and are trained tutors. They come from all different ethnic groups, they come from all different geographic regions of the country and they're all ready to go back.

The Minor Plan is back in swing and looking ahead to the future of Afghanistan. And I hope you will say prayers for the Afghan believers and for the re-establishment of the Faith in Afghanistan, because we are ready and this time we're prepared and we have really devoted and well-trained souls now who are ready to serve and can't wait to start study circles and devotional gatherings and children's classes and lay the foundation of the community there.

As I said, the institute process is an instrument. It's an instrument to help us achieve entry by troops and help us to sustain the growth process as well. The success of the institute process can be seen in a place like India, but that's an example that a lot of people know. I mean you know that 60,000 believers in India have already gone through at least one institute course and 20% of those have gone on to the next level and they're moving right along. So

often people say don't tell me about India and Bangladesh, I live in North America. Let me tell you about France. France is an interesting place. It hasn't been an easy place to teach the Faith or for the Faith to grow. France now has over 75 study circles throughout France and there is a new spirit in France and they have non-Bahá'ís in their study circles and the reports coming out of France--the reports coming out of Europe--are some of the most encouraging reports for a long time. And they approached the institute process at the start with a certain reluctance—anyway, the remarkable thing and the most exciting thing is how once they got into it, how they have had such great success in putting their believers through this process. The youth--they have so many youth that are very involved in the institute and have become tutors and teachers of children's class in different parts of Europe, so this is definitely giving a new dynamic to the whole community.

Now, as I said, there are certain things as we look over the history of the Plans of the Faith, certain things that were changing in our approach. This is through the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The Four Year Plan was a kind of turning point. Certain experiences from the Four Year Plan are going to stick with us. One of these you might call an attitude or an approach that the House of Justice has reiterated is going to continue to be our orientation--for us to be in a learning process, to feel that we're part of a learning process. And what does this mean to us? It's talking about individuals, it's talking about communities, it's talking about institutions--Local Assemblies, National Assemblies--to approach things in a learning process.

First of all, what the House of Justice has explained is that it suggests that that learning process should take place within the framework of the guidance of the Plan, not in some other framework, but in the framework of the guidance of the Plan. That's our frame of reference for the learning process. When we say we're in a learning process, it means that we're striving to be flexible, we're striving to be open minded, we're open to the experiences and the learning of others also. We're a part of a collective learning process around the world, that's why we like to share stories about what other people have experienced and what things they're achieving. We do say this earth is one country—right? --and mankind its citizens. I think that applies to the Bahá'ís, too. Learning requires patience, it requires detachment. These are all the qualities for being a learner and that's what we're trying to do. It also is based on a process, which has been referred to in earlier messages, of consultation, action and then reflection. We usually had a lot of consultation, maybe a little bit more than we needed. We had action, right, but we were a little bit weak on the reflection, really assessing periodically what worked, what didn't work, how we would modify, what kinds of obstacles we needed to remove, what other things we might try. This has to be part of our learning process.

Two other elements that I think are very important in the learning process, and these as I said, are things that apply to all the three constituents of the Plan, as the House of Justice said--the individual, the community and the institutions. An important attitude, I guess you would say, is that you can't be afraid of making mistakes. This is something very important. Institutions have to be willing to let the believers make some mistakes, take responsibility and make some mistakes. You have to be patient with yourselves if you make mistakes, because otherwise we can't learn. Anyone that's been a teacher and has worked with students knows how much you learn from your mistakes, and so we have a responsibility, particularly those of us who serve on Local Assemblies, those of us who are Board members or assistants to Auxiliary Board members, to remove that fear of making mistakes or fear of failing at something. That's not conducive to a learning environment or to a learning process.

Another thing that's not conducive is negative criticism. I don't have to tell you that. I think that should be obvious. Sometimes it becomes almost part of a culture. Criticism in some places, negative criticism is a social pastime. Nothing satisfies. Nothing is quite good enough. That's just really the reverse of the attitude that Bahá'ís should have. I can tell you I'll never forget many years ago -- This really gives away my age, but I don't know how many of you attended the youth conference in Wilmette in 1970. Of course, I was a child participant, but it was a wonderful conference and Rú? íyyih Khánum was there and she spoke about the fact that we really didn't have an idea of what the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would look like, what it would be like. She said that we couldn't really appreciate this until we had a better idea of the different voices from the different communities from around the world and we had a sense of the contribution they were going to make to the world community, not just in terms of ideas and plans, but in terms of their special qualities, their special characteristics. This is something I think that's a wonderful thing to think about, because as you travel the world you really do see the different qualities and characteristics that people are bringing to the Faith.

I happened to live in a country for over twenty years where people did not complain. Complaining was not part of their culture. It's a very nice atmosphere, I will tell you. Yet, they were one of the poorest countries in the world, one of the five poorest countries. They had nothing and they never complained. So it was a cultural characteristic. It was also considered unattractive to criticize other people.

There are other cultures that have such a profound sense of reverence and respect. Mr. Nakhjavani gave us a verbal report, a verbal presentation of his recent trip to Africa and there were so many moving stories of the response of the believers there, in terms of really giving us a sense of the wonderful characteristics that they bring to the World Order, to our world community. He described one little incident which I thought was lovely, and that was that he was meeting with the friends in Ethiopia. He went to meet with them and they stood up and then he told them to sit down and he started his remarks. He said--the first thing I want to do before I speak to you is that I have a brief message written by the Universal House of Justice that I would like to read to you. And after he said that, they all stood up. All they heard was he said I have a message to read to you from the Universal House of Justice and they all stood up. They said how could we be seated when we have a message to us from the Universal House of Justice? This is that sense of respect, that sense of reverence and that sense of protocol or whatever you want to call it, but these are these wonderful characteristics that different people will bring to the World Order of Baha'u'llah.

Going back to the learning process, this thing about criticism is something that we have to unlearn. It's something that is prevalent in certain places in the world--and not just in "developed" countries --where criticism is sort of part of the culture. Certain things we have to unlearn and certain things we have to gain from our other Bahá'í brothers and sisters. This is how we're creating the world culture. The learning process is something that we're taking with us into the Five Year Plan and we're taking it all the way throughout the next twenty years.

Another thing is focus. Something that we've learned is focus. We've always had so many different things that we wanted to do, so many different things we've done. We're constantly busy. The House of Justice gave us the idea of focus when it told us to focus on setting up the training institutes around the world and we did it. In fact, the House of Justice actually said it surpassed their expectations what we were able to achieve in that four-year period, but it was through focus, and they're asking us in the Five Year Plan again to focus. To focus on certain measures that they say are indispensable to large-scale expansion and



consolidation, to focus on the things that we know contribute to growth, that promote growth. There are a lot of different things that can be done, but are they contributing to the promotion of growth?

We know if we look at some of the different kinds of activities we've sponsored or participated in and if we really honestly consult about them, reflect on them and assess them, we can say we really haven't had much luck with that approach. One of them probably is public meetings. We haven't had a whole lot of success with public meetings in most parts of the world. That doesn't mean we'll never have another public meeting, but it does mean that that's probably not where we should be concentrating our energies. That's why the House of Justice gives us other lines of action to focus on in the Five Year Plan.

One other thing I'd like to mention about the Five Year Plan is, -- and again this is a lesson that I would say that we've learned in the last several years, the last five years, was the importance of being systematic. Now, I've been to some places where people have said systematic, that sounds so unspiritual. Systematic, systematization, etc. I'll tell you, you cannot read through the writings of the Guardian, through the *Messages to America*, through *Bahá'í Administration* and not see first of all his use of the word and also how systematic he was. At the time of the Ten Year Crusade the Guardian, what he did, when you look at his map, was that he clustered the world. We're just now catching up to that. We're taking that as an approach with our national communities, but he clustered the world. When he identified where the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh had to go to virgin territories, there were many, for example, in different parts of Canada. That's how he divided it into clusters and he saw the areas that had to have pioneers. So this is all very much in the spirit and in the style that the Guardian established for us and now we're going to use it as a way to systematize our teaching.

The House of Justice said that in the Four Year Plan we learned how to systematize human resource development and in the Five Year Plan we're learning how to systematize teaching. Now, how do the clusters help us do that? Well, at a national level, what they are, -- what the clusters are doing by dividing up geographically is that for the first time we get a real vision of the growth process in our country--where things stand and where they have to go. Having served on a National Assembly in a country, I can tell you that, -- I mentioned this to the friends last night in Assembly meeting--that, like you, we were always very busy. We had so much going on, we had a lot of activities, we had projects going here and there, we had campaigns here, we had people traveling to this area. The traveling teachers would come and we'd say where do you want to go? We had a lot going on, but actually when you look at it, it was not systematic. In fact, it was rather helter skelter. It was not strategic.

By clustering and then identifying characteristics of those clusters, knowing where they stand, knowing where there are no Bahá'ís, knowing where they have some Bahá'ís but rather weak development of the Faith, where they have stronger communities, where they have a lot of human resources, where they have many study circles, devotional gatherings and so on going on, where they're really ready to launch intensive growth, -- The whole idea of this is that we know what strategies to apply to these different clusters. We know what to do, where and when to move these areas of our state or of our country across the growth continuum. It is very exciting for national communities when they get that vision, where they really see for the first time where they are and what they have to do, because you set priorities. You don't work at every place at once. You have to set priorities of the areas you're going to work on and move forward.

What the Teaching Centre has been encouraging as we've been traveling around the world is to build on strength--in a sense, to really work with the areas of the greatest potential and to give them an infusion of trained human resources so that they are ready to move into a stage of intensive growth. This is really a wonderful tool. That's what the whole clustering process is, a kind of planning tool and it also takes the plans down to the level of several communities. They benefit from one another because you can only go so far with one community. It's very hard to create a dynamic of growth when you have nine people administering fifteen other people. The idea of a cluster is you build up a different dynamic--you work together, you plan together. And it's already happening in many places.

I just wanted to give you an example of a city cluster like Houston, say it's an urban cluster, so it happens to be one cluster. This is in Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur. It's actually quite a good example, because Kuala Lumpur, -- the Malaysian community itself-- is a very well developed community; it's a large community with many deepened believers, very well-functioning institutions at the local level as well. Kuala Lumpur is a kind of powerhouse community and they have already had people that have gone through many levels of the institute process and so on. So a Counsellor went to visit them and they had their first kind of cluster meeting and they decided to set some goals. Now the House of Justice told us, you see, that the planning process has changed. We used to make a list of all kinds of goals and for a long period of time. Now the House of Justice says a simple plan, no elaborate plan, a short-term plan--a few lines of action which you can develop and expand upon and come back in three months and see how you're doing. When they met, the Local Assembly was talking with the Counsellor and said that they had two devotional gatherings going on in Kuala Lumpur and could probably increase to five. The Counsellor said let's not say anything, you know, don't you start the process, let's hear what the friends have to say, and so they asked how many friends would like to start devotional gatherings in their homes and fifteen hands went up. So they said all right, because part of the process in the cluster meeting is you prepare a calendar for the next few months, and they put these activities on the calendar.

Well, of those fifteen devotional gatherings, after three or four months, ten of them were going very well; five had sort of fallen by the wayside, but that was twice as many as the Local Assembly would have suggested could have been done, because now the planning is based on the availability of human resources, letting the human resources arise and take the initiative. This is very important. This is the kind of shift in our approach and it calls for a certain flexibility; it also calls for a certain openness and again the importance of reflection, coming back in a few months, sharing experiences, seeing how we need to modify, seeing where more things could be developed, and this is what is already under way in different parts of the world and I'm sure is beginning to happen here too and you'll see more of this. It's a very exciting planning process. The House of Justice says it takes the planning process to the grass roots level and fosters the spirit of participation. It's everybody. It's not just members of institutions. It's people from the groups, isolated believers, other believers in the community and you make up the plan together for your cluster. This is really the sort of the framework we're working on and the tool that the House of Justice has given us.

Now, another thing we're learning about in the Five Year Plan besides being more systematic in our teaching to advance the process of entry by troops is we're learning how to involve non-Bahá'ís in our activities. You know we really got, that is, I think we got some inkling of this at the time of the May events. I don't know if any of you were there at the time of the inauguration of the Terraces in the Holy Land. I'm sure many of you have seen, possibly on video, some of those events. Why do I say that? What's the relationship? Well, for those

events, particularly for the main event of the inauguration there were hundreds of non-Bahá'ís invited to that event by the Universal House of Justice. The next morning was the ascent of the Terraces, really a tremendously sacred act and the House of Justice had that and allowed for that to be filmed by television cameras and was broadcast around the world and was on Israeli television again and again. It was open to the world. This was a sacred act--that ascent of the Terraces by the Bahá'ís present.

In the past the House of Justice has often written and has said to us that we want to show ourselves as a model community. We want to develop the Bahá'í way of life and then ask people to come and look at what we have to offer. But I think that is changing. Now they're saying--come inside, not look from the outside, but come inside. And this is why in the 9 January message, the House of Justice, when it mentions three fundamental activities--study circles, children's classes and devotional gatherings--it says open to all inhabitants of the locality. So we have to learn how to do that.

For a long time we've had this Bahá'í community here and the outside world is there and there's been a little tunnel kind of connecting us, and that tunnel we call firesides. Well that's not enough. Now we've got all these other channels that we have to start opening up. You know, Rú? íyyih Khánum some years ago, she said that we have everything in place in the Bahá'í world. She said we're all over the world; we have the framework of our Administrative Order. She said we've got to bring the people in. Why aren't we bringing the people in? She said can they not see the door? Is the door not there for them, are we blocking the doors? This is what she said. So the House of Justice said we're opening up the doors. This is a new approach to teaching. This is a new approach to enrollment in a sense.

I remember when we met with the House of Justice before the formulation of the Five Year Plan, a couple of the members, when we talked about these activities, said that in a sense the teaching work and enrollments could be very much the way people became Bahá'ís in Iran. They said people will send their children to classes, they'll study the Holy Word with us, they'll attend our devotional gatherings and they will be absorbed into a community life. That sharp distinction of Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í will not be so much there. They will be absorbed into a community life and they will not be able to live without Bahá'u'lláh or without the Bahá'ís and that's how we'll bring in Bahá'ís. So those doors have got to be open and this is going to be a learning process. We have to learn how to find ways to invite the friends in. All these three things are very interrelated.

I'll tell you just from my own experience, stories I get from my friends in Nepal that they have a children's class, the majority of the children, -- one of their centrally located classes, -- they have several, but in one of the centrally located ones, the majority of the children are non-Bahá'ís. At a closing ceremony they invited the parents to attend and see the programs and the parents were so happy with the activities. Well, they then announced at that program that at the same time on those Saturdays when they have the children's class, that they were going to have a study circle to study the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, about prayer, the nature of the soul, life and death. What it is, is Ruhi Institute Book one, "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit." Several of those parents said they would love to come and that's how they started a study circle of non-Bahá'ís. These are parents that are very good to invite to the devotional gatherings. The children's classes, all of these things, particularly the children's classes, are wonderful teaching vehicles, but they're also a service.

In the Ri? v?n Message of 2000 when the Universal House of Justice called our attention to the importance, the imperative need for an improvement in children's education, it told us that we had a responsibility to the children of the world. We do it as a service also, because the children of the world need this and the parents will appreciate it and it will attract the parents to the Faith. It will also prepare a new generation of Bah?is. This is the wisdom, this is the beauty of the guidance of the House of Justice in the Five Year Plan that told us that these activities are essential and they will contribute to growth. They'll produce growth and they'll sustain growth. So we have to work at them and also they will allow for a lot of participation.

For a long time, I think, in our communities people felt that service meant serving on a committee or on an Assembly or somehow you weren't serving, but to open up your home to have a devotional gathering or to open up your home to have a study circle or to help out with the children's classes, these are all very important services and we need to bring more people into this process. As more people have opportunities to serve, we will also keep people in the Faith, because sometimes people feel on the outside and that's how they drift away. This takes our sensitivity and our commitment to finding ways to involve people and to encourage them and stimulate them to take on individual initiatives within the context of the Plan.

Talking about individual initiative, I'll just tell you a little story and then I'll try not to go on for too long, but most of you, your eyes are still open, so . . . -- (laughter) One story came in from Ecuador that I thought was very interesting. It was that one believer there was trying to think of how he could start a devotional gathering or what he would do, how he could invite non-Bah?is and so on. What happened in his neighborhood is that a woman passed away, a woman died. He did not know her. In fact, he didn't know the family, but he had heard from one of the neighbors, and so he went to visit the family and he said--I would like to have in my home in memory of your wife and mother, prayers and readings from the Bah?i Faith, a memorial gathering. Well, in most cultures, a memorial gathering has a very special significance and particularly you know, in a lot of Third World countries there's so much associated with the whole passing of the soul and all the cultural traditions that go along with it. Much to his surprise, the next day when he had opened his home for prayers and readings for this departed soul, forty people showed up from the neighborhood. And they were so moved by the Bah?i Writings.

Now, just think about it. You know the prayers we have, you know the readings we have. We keep them all to ourselves. These neighbors were so moved by these that at the end when he said that he was planning to have regular devotional gatherings at his house, most of those people came back to the devotional gatherings. What happened ultimately -- I won't go through the whole story -- it was like a chain reaction of events in that community. This is an absolutely a true story. I didn't just create this on my drive over here! But it's so remarkable. What happened out of that was a study circle was formed, the family that had lost their mother, -- well eventually the widower--the husband--and his children all became Bah?i. The one older youth was so on fire with his interaction and experience with the Faith that he became trained as a tutor. He personally started a study circle for junior youth. This whole community has just caught on fire and been transformed. By what? By one individual initiative--reaching out to non-Bah?is--so it's really remarkable.

The thing is we have to find our own path of service in the Five Year Plan, but there's so much open to us and we know that God is preparing the hearts for us. We have a pool of seekers. The national media campaign is creating a pool of seekers. Are we systematic? Are we able to respond? Certainly, with the Major Plan of God, a pool of seekers is being created.

In several countries of the world, church attendance after the events of September 11 has dramatically gone up. People are reaching out for some spiritual nourishment and sustenance. In England it's increased by 50%. It may not last, you see, because they'll again experience a certain disillusionment, but there was that immediate reaction, there was that immediate need and this is part of our responsibility. In fact, the Major Plan is almost getting a bit ahead of us, you might say. We've got some catching up to do.

Some years ago the House of Justice wrote a letter to all national assemblies and in that it made a very interesting statement. It said that the mighty ones of the world had rejected the call of Bahá'u'lláh and it was up to us to carry forward and build His World Order. Then it wrote, "service to God and His Cause is at the heart of the life of every true believer." Service to God and His Cause is at the heart of the life of every true believer. The most important thing that we can do and keep in the forefront of our minds in this time in all of our areas of service, whatever path we choose, is to make teaching a priority. It's to engage in giving the Message. We can do a lot of things, but to just think about ourselves, bring ourselves to an accounting at the end of the day, and ask, "Are we engaged in giving the Message?" Are we doing everything else but giving the Message, but sharing the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh? And try to bring this to the front of our consciousness and at the center of our service and of our life for the Cause. This is very important.

Now, I think already in some parts of the country we do get very encouraging reports, from different parts of the United States. They are getting responses, they're getting more people reaching out to the Bahá'ís, showing up at different kinds of gatherings and meetings and study circles. I saw that lovely videotape of the people who had responded to the 1-800 number and had become Bahá'ís, and many of them referred to the wonderful firesides they had gone to, the wonderful study circles they had participated in. This is going to increase. For sure, this is going to increase, and one of the things that we have to also be prepared for and prepared with is to welcome them into a loving community. I'm sure this is what we all felt. Just think back. This was such an important part of our becoming Bahá'ís and our really becoming active servants of the Faith. It was that love and that warmth that we felt in the Bahá'í community, that spirit that helps to recreate you and commit you to carrying forward the work of the Faith and in spreading this Message. And that's very, very important.

You know, it always interested me in the Tablets of the Divine Plan how in that one part where 'Abdu'l-Bahá is talking about the conditions for an apostle of Bahá'u'lláh and he talks about the Covenant and teaching and traveling to all parts, and then he says "fellowship, fellowship, love, love, unity, unity." I always thought it interesting how 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that twice, each word twice, you know. He must have felt it was very important; he repeated it twice. I think this is something that we have to really think about friends.

We signed on to a Faith that said prefer others to yourselves. We are ready to die for this Faith. I'm sure if any of you were faced with tremendous sort of tests you're ready to do all, to give your all for this Faith. Are you ready to give up your most cherished ideas, your pet projects, your ideas that you feel are the only way to do it? These are sometimes the things that block our progress, that disturb our unity because we refuse to give up; we insist on our way; we insist on our ideas. It's just not so important. As in one letter from the Guardian written through his secretary, he said surely we must be able to forget all these little minor things when we consider the condition of humanity outside. Fellowship, fellowship, love, love, unity, unity. We call ourselves the friends. Let us act like friends with one another. Let us be friends to one another. Everybody wants that. Everyone will be banging on our door.

The other thing is that we've talked about a lot of things--there are a lot of challenging tasks, but there are a lot of victories taking place; there are victories right at hand all around us. Remember that when you hear of achievements in Papua New Guinea, or you hear of achievements in Cote d'Ivoire, they're not their achievements, they're our achievements, they're our victories. It's a very exciting time that we are living in. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in one place, "How thankful we must be for having been made in this day the recipients of so overwhelming a favor! Would that we had 10,000 lives that we might lay them down in thanksgiving . . .!"

Thank you, friends. (applause)