

**Participating in the Discourses of Society:
Explored through the experience of the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs' efforts to
contribute to the national discourse on racial justice and unity in America**

This document is a companion to the three-part webinar series presented by the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs (OPA), an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, exploring the Bahá'í community's approach to participating in the discourses of society through the lens of OPA's efforts to contribute to the national discourse on racial justice and unity in America. This compilation is a starting point and by no means representative of the full scope of resources one could use to deepen understanding on this area of activity.

The first section comprises selections from messages of the Universal House of Justice related to participating in the discourses of society that will, it is hoped, assist Local Spiritual Assemblies to deepen their understanding of this area as one of three lines of action outlined by the House of Justice in the framework for action guiding the efforts of the Bahá'í community globally. The second section offers talks, books, and articles from various sources that may be useful to Local Assemblies in both deepening understanding around this line of action and exploring some examples of a Bahá'í contribution to various discourses of society. The third section offers relevant guidance from the House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, as well as from other resources, regarding racism in the United States.

I – Relevant guidance from the Universal House of Justice regarding participating in the discourses of society

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has extolled "two calls" to "success and prosperity" that can be heard from the "heights of the happiness of mankind". One is the call of "civilization", of "progress of the material world". It comprises the "laws", "regulations", "arts and sciences" through which humanity develops. The other is the "soul-stirring call of God", on which depends the eternal happiness of humanity. "This second call", the Master has explained, "is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God." As you continue to labour in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.

From the Riḍván 2008 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

2. In our Riḍván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labour at the level of the cluster, they would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are

engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. 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. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them....

Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourse of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

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. 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.

From the Ridván 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

3. Over the next few years, Bahá'ís around the world will joyously call to mind the many episodes associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historic journey. But this anniversary is more than a time for commemoration. The words uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse. We should, therefore, reflect not only upon what the Master achieved and set in motion but also on the work that remains undone to which He has summoned us.

From the August 29, 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

4. The overall direction of the process of learning that the Bahá'í community is pursuing is guided by a series of global plans, the provisions of which are established by the Universal House of Justice. Capacity building is the watchword of these plans: they aim at enabling the protagonists of collective effort to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighbourhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches.

From the March 2, 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran

5. The suffering borne by the faithful in Iran, particularly in the decades since the most recent wave of persecutions began, has spurred their brothers and sisters in other countries to come to their defence. From among the invaluable endowments which, as a consequence of that endurance, the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired, we mention one in this connection: an impressive network of specialized agencies at the national level that has proven capable of systematically developing relations with governments and organizations of civil society. Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. At the grassroots, involvement in this kind of endeavour builds naturally, through the same organic approach that characterizes the steady increase of the friends' engagement in social action, and no special attempt to stimulate it is necessary. At the national level, however, it is more often becoming the focus of attention for these same dedicated agencies already functioning in dozens of national communities, and it is proceeding according to the familiar and fruitful pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this

domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.

From the Ridván 2013 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

6. The House of Justice has observed that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society within clusters where the process of growth rises in intensity and at the national level, on topics selected by the National Assembly. At the same time, it noted that there are “a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations”. Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. In this respect, it may be useful to give consideration to insights that have contributed to the community's progress: the relationship between study and action, the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity, the challenge of fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service, the dynamics of organic development, the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity, the coherence required among all areas of endeavour, and sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions. Perhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.

From the July 24, 2013 letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada

7. A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and

activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

From the December 29, 2015 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors

8. In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived. Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

From the December 29, 2015 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors

9. As the work of community building intensifies, the friends are using the new capacities they have developed to improve conditions in the society around them, their enthusiasm kindled by their study of the divine teachings. Short-term projects have soared in number, formal programmes have expanded their reach, and there are now more Bahá'í-inspired development organizations engaged in education, health, agriculture, and other areas. From the resulting transformation visible in the individual and collective lives of peoples may be discerned the unmistakable stirrings of the society-building power of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. No wonder, then, that it is from such instances of social action—whether simple or complex, of fixed duration or long sustained—that the Offices of the Bahá'í

International Community are increasingly taking inspiration in their efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society. This is another important field of endeavour for the Faith that has advanced well. At the national level, contributions to discourse that are meaningful to that society—the equality of men and women, migration and integration, the role of youth in social transformation, and religious coexistence, among others—are being made with growing confidence, proficiency, and insight. And wherever they live, work, or study, believers of all ages and backgrounds are making valued contributions to particular discourses, bringing to the attention of those around them a principled perspective shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation.

From the Ridván 2018 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

10. The friends are also developing their capacity for engaging those around them, regardless of creed, culture, class, or ethnicity, in conversations about how to bring about spiritual and material well-being through systematic application of the divine teachings. One gratifying result of this growing capacity is the community's increased ability to make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society; in certain countries, leaders and thinkers striving to address the challenges confronting their societies increasingly show appreciation for the perspectives offered by Bahá'ís. These contributions articulate insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, draw on the experience being generated by the believers around the world, and aim to elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing. Further, the ideas and lines of reasoning advanced by Bahá'ís are reinforced by their practice of consultation. Sensitized as they are to the importance of harmony and the fruitlessness of conflict, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh seek to cultivate those conditions that are most conducive to the emergence of unity in any setting. We are heartened to see the believers expanding their efforts to participate in the discourse of society—especially those friends who, in their professional capacity, are able to contribute to discourse directly related to peace.

From the January 18, 2019 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

11. When society is in such difficulty and distress, the responsibility of the Bahá'ís to make a constructive contribution to human affairs becomes more pronounced. This is a moment when distinct but interrelated lines of action converge upon a single point, when the call to service rings aloud. The individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—inseparable protagonists in the advancement of civilization—are in a position to demonstrate the distinctive features of the Bahá'í way of life, characterized by increased maturity in the discharge of their responsibilities and in their relationships with each other. They are summoned to a fuller expression of the Faith's society-building powers. Agencies and projects dedicated to social action may have to adapt their approaches in order to meet expanded needs; efforts to do this are sure to infuse ongoing programmes with deeper meaning and purpose. Further, Bahá'í contributions to discourses newly prevalent in society are generating heightened interest, and there is a responsibility to be discharged here too. At a time when the urgency of attaining higher levels of unity, founded on the incontestable

truth of humanity's oneness, is becoming apparent to larger and larger numbers, society stands in need of clear voices that can articulate the spiritual principles that underlie such an aspiration.

You are of course ever conscious that your responsibilities reach beyond those of administering the affairs of the community and channelling its energies towards the fulfilment of noble goals: you seek to raise awareness of those spiritual forces that are available to every confirmed believer and which must be marshalled at the hour of need. It is these forces which endow the community with resilience, ensure its integrity, and keep it focused on its divine mission to serve humanity and elevate its vision of the future.

From the May 9, 2020 letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies

12. In a recent letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice explained to your National Assembly that the scope of the Five Year Plan offers ample opportunities for believers to address the social concerns of their communities and society as a whole. The Plan's activities for sustained growth and community building lie at the heart of a broad scheme for social transformation. The friends are called to three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action: community-building efforts in clusters; projects and activities for social action; and involvement in the discourses of society, whether in neighborhoods or in personal or professional associations. An assessment of the efforts of Bahá'ís across the United States will reveal that there is already an army of believers working in all strata of society to promote the Bahá'í teachings and combat the spiritual and social ills afflicting their country. As the learning process that has proven to be so effective in the expansion and consolidation work worldwide is increasingly employed in all endeavors, the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to apply Bahá'u'lláh's healing remedy to achieve profound and lasting change will become ever more pronounced, assisting the nation along the path of its destiny.

From an April 27, 2017 letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual

13. While eschewing partisan political activity, Bahá'ís are to vigorously engage in constructive public discourse and in a wide range of social endeavours aimed at the betterment of the world and the progress of their respective nations. They undertake such activities with humility, discernment and respect for prevailing laws and social conditions, in a spirit of learning and in collaboration with like-minded groups and individuals, fully confident in the power inherent in the principle of unity in diversity and in the efficacy of mutual aid and cooperation.

From a January 22, 2010 letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual

14. Another area to which the Bahá'í community has been giving a progressively greater share of attention is participation in discourses which have a significant bearing on the well-being of humanity. Its efforts in this regard have been directed towards engaging in conversations in a widening range of spaces at the international and national levels, working shoulder to

shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals, seeking, where possible, to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built. A number of these discourses, such as those on the role of religion in society, religious coexistence, and freedom of religion or belief, directly address the imperative of overcoming the challenge of religious prejudice. *From a December 27, 2017 letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual*

II – Talks, Books, Articles Related to Participating in the Discourses of Society:

- [Talk by Mr. Shahriar Razavi](#), member of the Universal House of Justice, on Bahá'í participation in the discourses of society, delivered at the 2015 Association for Bahá'í Studies Conference.
- [Talk by Dr. Farzam Arbab](#), former member of the Universal House of Justice, regarding the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, given at the 2016 Association for Bahá'í Studies Conference.
- [The Bahá'í World](#) publication: This website makes available a selection of thoughtful essays and long-form articles on a range of subjects of interest to the wider public, conveying advancements in Bahá'í thought and action and reflecting the Faith's purpose in the world.
- Cameron, Geoffrey and Schewel, Benjamin (editors): [Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition](#): Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought, 2018.
- Arbab, Haleh: Learning to Read Social Reality in the Light of the Revelation: Twenty-Five Years of Contributing to the Discourse of Ethics in Business:
 - [Article](#) in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 25:3, pages 27-40, 2015
 - [Talk](#) delivered at the 2014 Association for Bahá'í Studies Conference
- Faith and Race Dialogues discussion papers prepared by the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs between 2018 and 2019:
 - [Introduction and Discussion Parameters](#)
 - [Justice and Unity](#)
 - [History](#)
 - [Participation](#)
 - [Liberation](#)
- Illumine America Podcast produced by the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, accessible on the following platforms: [Apple Podcast](#), [Soundcloud](#), and [Medium](#).
- Gender, Peace and Security Discussion Series hosted by the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs:
 - [“Developing New Dynamics of Power”](#): A discussion honoring the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration of Women's Rights and the 20th anniversary of United National Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, hosted by the US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs. Three prominent practitioners, Kathleen Kuehnast, Layli Miller-Muro, and Michael Penn, offer rich insights drawing on their work and the reconceptualization of power evoked in this statement: [Developing New Dynamics of Power to Transform Social Structures](#), submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to the 64th Commission on the Status of Women.

- [“Womanism, Racial Justice, and Women, Peace and Security,”](#) presented by Layli Maparyan.
- Bahai.chat: Racial Justice Series Part 3: [The Nature of Participation in Movements Toward Social Change](#): Hosted by professor Layli Maparyan and multidisciplinary artist Masud Olufani. Panel includes May Lample and PJ Andrews from the US Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs and their guests, Laura Horwitz from the Tzedek Lab and Matt Birkhold, founder of Visionary Organizing Lab.

III – Relevant guidance and resources regarding racism in the United States

- [The Advent of Divine Justice](#), a letter written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of North America, dated December 25, 1938.
 - This seminal text “made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá’í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, ‘stand out as preeminent and vital’: rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice.” In deepening one’s understanding of the nature of racism in the United States, we recommend a close study of the Guardian’s “trenchant analysis anticipating the ultimate eradication of this evil tendency from the lives and the hearts of their fellow citizens” offered in this text, which can be viewed [here](#).
- [July 22, 2020 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the United States](#) regarding racial prejudice and the American Bahá’í community’s distinctive contribution to its eradication.
- [Compilation on Achieving Race Unity](#): Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Race Unity (1996–2020).
- [June 19, 2020 statement to the American nation](#) from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, “[Forging a Path to Racial Justice](#).”
- [Compilation on America and the Five Year Plan and Race Unity](#). A series of messages from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States to the American Bahá’í community related to the state of the nation and our collective efforts to eliminate racism.
- [Race Unity Action website](#) prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly.
- [Talk by Mr. Paul Lample](#), member of the Universal House of Justice, given at the Bahá’í National Center, on identity.