

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

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28 November 2023

To the Bahá'ís of the World

10 Dearly loved Friends,

11 On 27 November 2021, in the middle of the still, dark night, nearly six hundred
12 representatives of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils gathered,
13 together with members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre,
14 as well as the staff at the Bahá'í World Centre, to commemorate with due solemnity, in the
15 precincts of His Holy Shrine, the centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Throughout that
16 night, with the turn of the globe, Bahá'í communities worldwide also gathered in reverent
17 devotion, in neighbourhoods and villages, towns and cities, to pay homage to a Figure without
18 parallel in religious history, and in contemplation of the century of achievement that He
19 Himself had set in motion.

20

21 This community—the people of Bahá, ardent lovers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—now millions
22 strong, has today spread to some one hundred thousand localities in 235 countries and
23 territories. It has emerged from obscurity to occupy its place on the world stage. It has raised a
24 network of thousands of institutions, from the grassroots to the international level, uniting
25 divers peoples in the common purpose of giving expression to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for
26 spiritual transformation and social progress. In many a region, its pattern of building vibrant
27 local communities has embraced thousands—and in some, tens of thousands—of souls. In such
28 settings, a new way of life is taking shape, distinguished by its devotional character; the
29 commitment of youth to education and service; purposeful conversation among families,
30 friends, and acquaintances on themes of spiritual and social import; and collective endeavours
31 for material and social progress. The Sacred Writings of the Faith have been translated into
32 more than eight hundred languages. The raising of national and local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs
33 heralds the appearance of thousands of future centres dedicated to worship and service. The
34 world spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith has been established across the twin holy
35 cities of 'Akká and Haifa. And despite the community's current, all too obvious limitations
36 when viewed in relation to its ideals and highest aspirations—as well as the distance separating
37 it from the attainment of its ultimate objective, the realization of the oneness of humankind—its
38 resources, its institutional capacity, its ability to sustain systematic growth and development, its
39 engagement with like-minded institutions, and its involvement in and constructive influence on
40 society stand at an unprecedented height of historical achievement.

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42 How far has the Faith come from that moment, a century ago, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá
43 departed from this world! At dawn on that woeful day, the news of His passing spread across
44 the city of Haifa, consuming the hearts with grief. Thousands gathered for His funeral: young
45 and old, high and low, distinguished officials and the masses—Jews and Muslims, Druze and
46 Christians, as well as Bahá'ís—a gathering the like of which the city had never witnessed. In
47 the eyes of the world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been a champion of universal peace and the oneness of
48 humanity, a defender of the oppressed and promoter of justice. To the people of both 'Akká and

49 Haifa, He was a loving father and friend, a wise counsellor and a refuge for all in need. At His
50 funeral they poured out fervent expressions of love and lamentation.

51

52 Naturally, however, it was the Bahá'ís who most keenly felt His loss. He was the
53 precious gift bestowed by the Manifestation of God to guide and protect them, the Centre and
54 Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, the perfect Exemplar of His
55 teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal. Over
56 the span of His life, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laboured tirelessly in service to Bahá'u'lláh, fulfilling, in its
57 entirety, His Father's sacred trust. He faithfully nurtured and protected the precious seed that
58 had been planted. He sheltered the Cause in the cradle of its birth and, guiding its spread in the
59 West, established there the cradle of its administration. He set firm the footsteps of the
60 believers and raised up a cohort of champions and saints. With His own hands, He interred the
61 holy remains of the Báb in the mausoleum He raised on Mount Carmel, devotedly tended the
62 twin Holy Shrines, and laid the foundations of the Faith's world administrative centre. He
63 safeguarded the Faith from its avowed enemies, internal and external. He revealed the precious
64 Charter for sharing Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with all peoples across the globe, as well as the
65 Charter that called into being and set in motion the processes of the Administrative Order. His
66 life spanned the entire period of the Heroic Age inaugurated by the declaration of the Báb; His
67 ascension ushered in a new Age whose features were as yet unknown to the believers. What
68 was to befall His loved ones? Without Him, without His continual guidance, the future seemed
69 uncertain and bleak.

70

71 Devastated by the news of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, His grandson Shoghi Effendi
72 hastened from his studies in England to the Holy Land, where he received a second stunning
73 blow. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had appointed him as the Guardian and Head of the Faith, entrusting the
74 Bahá'í world to his care. In grief and agony, but sustained by the unfailing solicitude of
75 Bahá'u'lláh's beloved daughter Bahíyyih Khánum, Shoghi Effendi donned the heavy mantle of
76 his office and began to assess the conditions and prospects of the fledgling community.

77

78 The announcement of Shoghi Effendi's appointment as the Guardian was received with
79 relief, gratitude, and declarations of fealty by the body of the believers. The anguish of their
80 separation from the Master was assuaged by the assurances in His Will and Testament that He
81 had not left them alone. A disloyal few, however, challenged 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chosen heir and,
82 motivated by their own ambitions and ego, rose against him. Their betrayal at that critical
83 moment of transition was compounded by the fresh machinations of the avowed opponents of
84 the Master. Yet, although hard-pressed by such heartache and trials, and in the face of other
85 formidable obstacles, Shoghi Effendi began to mobilize the members of the widely scattered
86 Bahá'í communities to begin the monumental task of laying the foundations of the
87 Administrative Order. Individuals previously galvanized by the unique personality of 'Abdu'l-
88 Bahá gradually began to coordinate their efforts in a common enterprise under the patient yet
89 resolute guidance of the Guardian.

90

91 As the Bahá'ís began to take on their new responsibilities, Shoghi Effendi impressed
92 upon them how rudimentary was their grasp, as yet, of the sacred Revelation in their possession
93 and how daunting the challenges before them. "How vast is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh!
94 How great the magnitude of His blessings showered upon humanity in this day!" he wrote.
95 "And yet, how poor, how inadequate our conception of their significance and glory! This
96 generation stands too close to so colossal a Revelation to appreciate, in their full measure, the
97 infinite possibilities of His Faith, the unprecedented character of His Cause, and the mysterious
98 dispensations of His Providence." "The contents of the Will of the Master are far too much for

99 the present generation to comprehend”, his secretary wrote on his behalf. “It needs at least a
100 century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed.” To
101 comprehend the nature and dimensions of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order, he
102 explained, “We must trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice, to
103 obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications.”
104

105 The present moment, following, as it does, the completion of a full century of “actual
106 working”, offers a propitious vantage point from which to garner new insights. And so we have
107 chosen the occasion of this anniversary to pause to reflect with you on the wisdom enshrined in
108 the provisions of the Will and Testament, to trace the course of the Faith's unfoldment and
109 observe the coherence of the stages of its organic development, to discern the possibilities
110 inherent in the processes driving its progress, and to appreciate its promise for the decades
111 ahead as its power to reshape society is increasingly made manifest in the world through the
112 growing impact of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation.
113

114 *Translating what is written into reality and action*
115

116 Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is to usher in a new stage in human development—the organic and
117 spiritual unity of the peoples and nations of the world—signalizing thereby the coming of age
118 of the human race and characterized, in the fullness of time, by the emergence of a world
119 civilization and culture. To this end, He revealed His teachings for the inner and outer
120 transformation of human life. “Every verse which this Pen hath revealed is a bright and shining
121 portal that discloseth the glories of a saintly and pious life, of pure and stainless deeds”, He
122 stated. And in countless Tablets He, the Divine Physician, diagnosed the ills afflicting
123 humanity and set forth His healing remedy for “the elevation, the advancement, the education,
124 the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth”. Bahá'u'lláh explained that
125 “The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one
126 land or one people only.” “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding”, He
127 wrote, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.... Blessed and
128 happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.”
129

130 The task of building a mature, peaceful, just, and united world is a vast undertaking in
131 which every people and nation must be able to participate. The Bahá'í community welcomes
132 all to join in this endeavour as protagonists in a spiritual enterprise that can overcome the forces
133 of disintegration eroding the old social order and give tangible form to an integrative process
134 that will lead to the unfoldment of a new order in its stead. The Formative Age is that critical
135 period in the Faith's development in which the friends increasingly come to appreciate the
136 mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them, deepen their understanding of the meaning
137 and implications of His revealed Word, and systematically cultivate capacity—their own and
138 that of others—in order to put into practice His teachings for the betterment of the world.
139

140 From the beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi guided the Bahá'ís in their efforts to
141 gain a deeper understanding of their mission, which would define their identity and purpose.
142 He explicated for them the meaning of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, His vision for humanity, the
143 history of the Cause, the processes reshaping society, and the part the Bahá'ís must play in
144 contributing to the advancement of humankind. He outlined the nature of the development of
145 the Bahá'í community so the friends would appreciate that it would undergo many
146 transformations, often unexpected, over decades and centuries. He also described the dialectic
147 of crisis and victory, preparing them for the tortuous path they must traverse. He called upon
148 the Bahá'ís to refine their characters and hone their minds to meet the challenges of building a

149 new world. He urged them not to despair when encountering the problems of a nascent and
150 rapidly evolving community or the privations and the deteriorating milieu of a tumultuous age,
151 reminding them that the full expression of the promises of Bahá'u'lláh lay in the future. He
152 explained that the Bahá'ís were to be as a leaven—a permeating and vivifying influence—that
153 could inspire others to arise and overcome entrenched patterns of divisiveness, conflict, and
154 contest for power, so that the highest aspirations of humanity could ultimately be achieved.

155
156 While consolidating these broad areas of understanding, the Guardian also guided the
157 believers, step by step, to learn how to effectively establish the structural basis of the
158 Administrative Order and systematically share Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with others. He
159 patiently directed their efforts by gradually clarifying the nature, principles, and procedures
160 which characterize that Order, while raising their capacity for teaching the Faith, individually
161 and collectively. On each vital matter, he would provide direction and the believers would
162 consult and strive to apply his guidance, sharing their experiences with him and raising
163 questions when they faced perplexing problems and difficulties. Then, taking into
164 consideration the accumulating experience, the Guardian would offer additional guidance and
165 elaborate the concepts and principles that would enable the friends to adjust their action as
166 needed, until their efforts proved effective and could be applied more broadly. In their response
167 to his guidance, the friends demonstrated an unwavering faith in the truth of the revealed Word,
168 an unfaltering trust in his vision and infallible wisdom, and an unshakeable resolve to transform
169 the various aspects of their lives according to the pattern set out in the Teachings. In this way, a
170 capacity for learning how to apply the Teachings was gradually cultivated within the
171 community. The efficacy of this approach was demonstrated most vividly at the climax of his
172 ministry, when the Bahá'í world combined its forces for the unprecedented achievements of the
173 Ten Year Spiritual Crusade.

174
175 The efforts of Shoghi Effendi to set the believers on a path of learning were further
176 extended, after his passing, under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. By the final
177 years of the first century of the Formative Age, the essential aspects of a process of learning that
178 was in a fledgling state at the beginning of that century were consciously grasped and
179 systematically implemented by Bahá'ís worldwide across the full range of their endeavours.

180
181 Today the Bahá'í community is distinguished by a mode of operation characterized by
182 study, consultation, action, and reflection. It is steadily increasing its capacity to apply the
183 Teachings in a variety of social spaces and to collaborate with those in the wider society who
184 share a yearning to revitalize the material and spiritual foundations of the social order. In the
185 transformative alembic of these spaces, to the extent possible, individuals and communities
186 become protagonists of their own development, an embrace of the oneness of humanity
187 banishes prejudice and otherness, the spiritual dimension of human life is fostered through
188 adherence to principle and strengthening of the community's devotional character, and the
189 capacity for learning is developed and directed towards personal and social transformation. The
190 effort to understand the implications of what Bahá'u'lláh has revealed and to apply His healing
191 remedy has now become more explicit, more deliberate, and an indelible part of Bahá'í culture.
192 The conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots
193 to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age.
194 This process will increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual
195 in the years ahead, as the Bahá'í world takes on ever-greater challenges and releases in ever-
196 greater measures the Faith's society-building power.

197

198 In his efforts to assist the friends in their understanding of the development of the Faith
199 and their associated responsibilities, Shoghi Effendi referred to “the triple impulse generated
200 through the revelation of the Tablet of Carmel by Bahá'u'lláh and the Will and Testament as
201 well as the Tablets of the Divine Plan bequeathed by the Centre of His Covenant—the three
202 Charters which have set in motion three distinct processes, the first operating in the Holy Land
203 for the development of the institutions of the Faith at its World Centre and the other two,
204 throughout the rest of the Bahá'í world, for its propagation and the establishment of its
205 Administrative Order”. The processes associated with each of these Divine Charters are
206 interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The Administrative Order is the chief instrument for
207 the prosecution of the Divine Plan, while the Plan is the most potent agency for the
208 development of the Faith’s administrative structure. Advances at the World Centre, the heart
209 and nerve centre of the administration, exert a pronounced influence on the body of the
210 worldwide community and are in turn affected by its vitality. The Bahá'í world constantly
211 evolves and develops organically as individuals, communities, and institutions strive to
212 translate into reality the truths of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation. Now, at the end of the first century
213 of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world is able to apprehend more fully the implications
214 inherent in these immortal Charters for the development of the Faith. And because it has
215 increased its understanding of the process in which it is engaged, it can better appreciate its own
216 experience over the past century and can act more effectively to achieve Bahá'u'lláh’s intended
217 purpose for humanity in the decades and centuries that lie ahead.

218

219 *The perpetuation of the Covenant*

220

221 To preserve the unity of His Faith, maintain the integrity and flexibility of His teachings,
222 and guarantee the progress of all humanity, Bahá'u'lláh established a Covenant with His
223 followers that is unique in the annals of religious history for its authority and its explicit and
224 comprehensive nature. In His Most Holy Book and in the Book of His Covenant, as well as in
225 other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh instructed that after His passing the friends should turn to ‘Abdu’l-
226 Bahá, the Centre of that Covenant, to guide the affairs of the Faith. In His Will and Testament,
227 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá perpetuated the Covenant by laying down the provisions for the Administrative
228 Order ordained in Bahá'u'lláh’s Writings, thereby ensuring the continuation of authority and
229 leadership through the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice,
230 as well as a sound relationship between individuals and institutions within the Faith.

231

232 History has amply demonstrated that religion can serve either as a powerful instrument
233 for cooperation to propel the advancement of civilization, or as a source of conflict that yields
234 incalculable harm. The unifying and civilizing power of religion begins to decline as the
235 followers come to disagree on the meaning and application of the divine teachings, and the
236 community of the faithful eventually becomes divided into contending sects and
237 denominations. The purpose of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation is to establish the oneness of
238 humanity and unite all peoples, and this last and highest stage in the evolution of society cannot
239 be achieved if the Bahá'í Faith succumbs to the malady of sectarianism and the dilution of the
240 divine Message witnessed in the past. If Bahá'ís “cannot unite around one point”, ‘Abdu’l-
241 Bahá observes, “how will they be able to bring about the unity of mankind?” And He affirms:
242 “Today the dynamic power of the world of existence is the power of the Covenant which like
243 unto an artery pulsateth in the body of the contingent world and protecteth Bahá'í unity.”

244

245 Foremost among the achievements of the past century is the victory of the Covenant,
246 which both protected the Faith from division and propelled it to embrace and contribute to the
247 empowerment of all peoples and nations. Bahá'u'lláh’s penetrating question that lies at the

248 heart of religion—“Where shalt thou secure the cord of thy faith and fasten the tie of thine
249 obedience?”—takes on a new and vital significance for those who recognize Him as the
250 Manifestation of God for this Day. It is a call for firmness in the Covenant. The response of
251 the Bahá'í community has been unyielding adherence to the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will
252 and Testament. Unlike relationships of worldly power in which a sovereign entity compels
253 obedience, the relationship between the Manifestation of God and the believers, and between
254 the authority designated by the Covenant and the community, is governed by conscious
255 knowledge and love. In recognizing Bahá’u’lláh, a believer enters voluntarily into His
256 Covenant as an act of free conscience and, out of love for Him, remains steadfast in adherence
257 to its requirements. At the close of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world has
258 come to more fully understand and act upon the provisions of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant, and a
259 distinctive set of relationships has been established among the believers that unify and direct
260 their energies in pursuit of their sacred mission. This achievement, like so many others, was the
261 fruit of crises overcome.

262
263 The existence of the Covenant does not mean that no one will ever attempt to divide the
264 Faith, cause damage to it, or retard its progress. But it does guarantee that every such attempt is
265 foredoomed to fail. Following the passing of Bahá’u’lláh, some ambitious individuals,
266 including the brothers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, tried to usurp the authority granted to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá by
267 Bahá’u’lláh and sowed seeds of doubt within the community, testing and at times misleading
268 those who wavered. Shoghi Effendi, during his own ministry, was attacked not only by those
269 who had broken the Covenant and opposed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but also by some within the
270 community who rejected the validity of the Administrative Order and questioned the authority
271 of the Guardianship. Years later, when Shoghi Effendi passed away, a new attack upon the
272 Covenant emerged when one profoundly misguided individual, despite having served for many
273 years as a Hand of the Cause of God, made an unfounded and futile attempt to claim the
274 Guardianship for himself, in spite of the clear conditions set forth in the Will and Testament.
275 After the election of the Universal House of Justice, it too became a target of the active
276 opponents of the Cause. In more recent decades, a few from within the community, presenting
277 themselves as more knowledgeable than others, fruitlessly sought to reinterpret the Bahá'í
278 teachings pertaining to the provisions of the Covenant in order to cast doubt on the authority of
279 the House of Justice and to claim certain prerogatives, in the absence of a living Guardian, that
280 would enable them to drive the affairs of the Faith in a direction of their own choosing.

281
282 Over a century, then, the Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh and perpetuated by
283 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was attacked in various ways by internal and external opponents, but ultimately
284 to no avail. While, each time, some individuals were misled or became disaffected, the attacks
285 failed to divert or redefine the Cause or to make a permanent breach in the community. In each
286 instance, by turning to the designated centre of authority at the time—‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the
287 Guardian, or the Universal House of Justice—questions were answered and problems resolved.
288 As the body of believers grew in its understanding of and firmness in the Covenant, it learned
289 to become impervious to the types of attacks and misrepresentations that, in an earlier era, had
290 threatened the Faith’s very existence and purpose. The integrity of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh
291 remains ever secure.

292
293 Every generation of Bahá'ís, however great their spiritual perception, will inevitably have
294 a circumscribed comprehension of the full implications of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, owing to the
295 limitations of their own historical circumstances and the particular stage of the Faith’s organic
296 development. In the Heroic Age of the Faith, for example, the believers had to navigate what
297 they surely experienced at times as a bewildering and revolutionary series of transitions from

298 the Dispensation of the Báb to that of Bahá'u'lláh, and then to the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—
299 all of which, with hindsight and the illumination provided by Shoghi Effendi, are now easily
300 comprehended as sequential acts in a single, divinely unfolding drama. So too, today, after the
301 tireless labours of the community over a full century, the first of the Formative Age, it is
302 possible to grasp more completely the significance, purpose, and inviolability of the
303 Covenant—that priceless bequest of Bahá'u'lláh to His followers. The hard-won understanding
304 of the nature of the Covenant and the firmness that such insight engenders and sustains will
305 continue to be essential for unity and progress over the course of the Dispensation.

306

307 It is now evident and firmly established that Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant provides for two
308 authoritative centres. The first is the Book: the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, along with the body
309 of works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that constitute authoritative interpretation and
310 explication of the Creative Word. With the passing of Shoghi Effendi, more than a century of
311 the extension of that authoritative centre came to a close. Yet the existence of the Book ensures
312 that the Revelation is available to every believer, indeed to all humanity, unadulterated by
313 human misinterpretations or accretions.

314

315 The second authoritative centre is the Universal House of Justice, which, as the Sacred
316 Writings affirm, is under the care and unerring guidance of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. “Let it not
317 be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and
318 opinions”, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. “God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take
319 decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit,
320 because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty”.
321 “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth,” Bahá'u'lláh proclaims. “They, and
322 not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them,” Shoghi Effendi states, “have
323 thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and
324 ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.”

325

326 The powers and duties with which the House of Justice has been invested encompass all
327 that is necessary to ensure the fulfilment of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity. For more than
328 a half century, the Bahá'í world has witnessed first-hand their range and expression, including
329 the promulgation of the Law of God, the conservation and dissemination of the Bahá'í Sacred
330 Writings, the raising of the Administrative Order and the creation of new institutions, the design
331 of successive stages in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, and the protection of the Faith and
332 safeguarding of its unity, as well as efforts conducive to the preservation of human honour, the
333 progress of the world, and the illumination of its peoples. The elucidations of the House of
334 Justice resolve all difficult problems, questions that are obscure, problems that have caused
335 difference, and matters not expressly recorded in the Book. The House of Justice will provide
336 guidance throughout the Dispensation according to the exigencies of the time, thus ensuring
337 that the Cause, even as a living organism, is able to adapt to the needs and requirements of an
338 ever-changing society. And it guarantees that no one can alter the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's
339 message or change the essential characteristics of the Cause.

340

341 In the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh asks, “What ‘oppression’ is more grievous than that a
342 soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not
343 where to go for it and from whom to seek it?” A world largely oblivious to the light of
344 Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation finds itself increasingly divided and disoriented on matters of truth,
345 morality, identity, and purpose, and bewildered by the accelerating and corrosive effect of the
346 forces of disintegration. For the Bahá'í community, however, the Covenant offers a source of
347 clarity and refuge, of freedom and strength. Every believer is free to explore the ocean of

348 Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, to come to personal conclusions, to humbly share insights with
349 others, and to strive to apply the Teachings day by day. Collective endeavour is harmonized
350 and focused through consultation and the guidance of the institutions, transforming bonds
351 between individuals, within families, and among communities, and fostering social progress.
352

353 Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and reassured by His explicit instructions, individuals,
354 communities, and institutions find in the two authoritative centres of the Covenant the
355 necessary guidance for the unfoldment of the Faith and the preservation of the integrity of the
356 Teachings. In this way, the Covenant protects and preserves the process of dialogue and
357 learning about the meaning of the Revelation and the implementation of its prescriptions for
358 humankind over the course of the Dispensation, avoiding the detrimental effects of endless
359 contention about meaning and practice. As a result, the balanced relationships among
360 individuals, communities, and institutions are safeguarded and develop along their proper path,
361 while all are enabled to attain to their full potential and exercise their agency and prerogatives.
362 Thus, the Bahá'í community can unitedly advance and increasingly fulfil its vital purpose by
363 investigating reality and generating knowledge, extending the reach of its endeavours, and
364 contributing to the advancement of civilization. After more than a century, the truth of 'Abdu'l-
365 Bahá's affirmation is ever more evident: "the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is
366 the power of the Covenant and nothing else".
367

368 *The unfoldment of the Administrative Order*

369

370 Beyond its perpetuation of the Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament laid the
371 foundation for another of the most significant achievements of the first century of the Formative
372 Age: the emergence and development of the Administrative Order, the child of the Covenant.
373 In a single century, the administration, which began with a focus on the establishment of elected
374 institutions, grew in breadth and complexity, unfolding throughout the world until it linked all
375 peoples, countries, and regions. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá that called
376 these institutions into being also provide the vision and spiritual mandate for these institutions
377 to assist humanity in constructing a just and peaceful world.
378

379 Through the Administrative Order of His Faith, Bahá'u'lláh has associated individuals,
380 communities, and institutions as protagonists in a system without precedent. In keeping with
381 the needs of an age of human maturity, He abrogated the historical practice whereby
382 ecclesiastics held the reins of religious authority, instructing the community of the faithful and
383 directing its affairs. In order to prevent the contest of competing ideologies, He set out the
384 means for cooperation in the search for truth and the pursuit of human well-being. In place of
385 the quest for power over others, He introduced arrangements that would cultivate the
386 individual's latent powers and their expression in service to the common good.
387 Trustworthiness, truthfulness, rectitude of conduct, forbearance, love, and unity are among the
388 spiritual qualities that form the basis of association between the three protagonists of a new way
389 of life, while efforts for social advancement are all shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the
390 oneness of humanity.
391

392 At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, the institutions of the Faith consisted of a small
393 number of local Assemblies functioning in disparate ways. Only a handful of agencies operated
394 beyond a local level, and there were no National Spiritual Assemblies. Bahá'u'lláh had
395 appointed four Hands of the Cause in Iran, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá directed their activities for the
396 progress and protection of the Faith, but He did not add to their number beyond four
397 posthumous appointments. Thus, up to that point, the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, abundant in spirit

398 and potential, had yet to form the administrative machinery that would enable it to systematize
399 its efforts.

400

401 In the first months of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi considered establishing the House of
402 Justice immediately. Yet, after reviewing the state of the Faith worldwide, he quickly
403 concluded that the conditions required for the formation of the House of Justice were not yet in
404 place. Instead, he encouraged the Bahá'ís everywhere to concentrate their energies on raising
405 Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. “The National Spiritual Assemblies, like unto pillars,
406 will be gradually and firmly established in every country on the strong and fortified foundations
407 of the Local Assemblies”, he stated. “On these pillars, the mighty edifice, the Universal House
408 of Justice, will be erected, raising high its noble frame above the world of existence.”

409

410 In helping the friends to understand their work to lay the foundations of their community,
411 Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the Administrative Order was not an end in itself, but an
412 instrument to canalize the spirit of the Faith. He highlighted its organic character, explaining
413 that Bahá'í administration “is only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social
414 life and laws of community living” and that “the believers are only just beginning to grasp and
415 practice it properly”. He also explained that the Administrative Order was the “nucleus and
416 pattern” of what would eventually become a new order for organizing the affairs of humanity
417 envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. And thus, as the friends began to raise the administration, they
418 could appreciate that the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions being
419 established would evolve in complexity, resulting in a growth in capacity over time as the Faith
420 expanded and generated a new pattern of life that could engage ever more broadly the peoples
421 of the world.

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423 Through a steady exchange of correspondence, Shoghi Effendi guided the friends step by
424 step in their efforts to learn to apply the teachings pertaining to the administration, and to
425 deepen their understanding of its purpose, its necessity, its methods, its form, its principles, its
426 flexibility, and the manner of its operation, while confirming for them the explicit basis for such
427 matters in the Bahá'í Writings. He assisted them in developing the process of Bahá'í elections,
428 establishing and administering the Bahá'í Fund, arranging the National Convention, building
429 the relationship between the National and Local Assemblies, and a host of other matters. He
430 dispelled the doubts and hesitancy of those who struggled to appreciate the essential continuity
431 between the culture and practices of Bahá'í life during the time of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and the steps
432 that he, as Guardian, was taking to lay the administrative foundations for the next stage of the
433 Faith's development. As the believers managed their administrative affairs, he patiently
434 answered their questions, resolved problems, and fostered the collective life of the Bahá'í world
435 community. Gradually the friends learned to work in harmony, to uphold the decisions of their
436 institutions and support their progress, and to appreciate that both understanding and capacity
437 for action would increase over time. Local Assemblies began to operate according to consistent
438 procedures for elections, consultation, financial affairs, and the conduct of community life.
439 National Assemblies were initially formed in the British Isles, Germany and Austria, India and
440 Burma, Egypt and the Sudan, the Caucasus, Turkistán, and the United States and Canada. In
441 keeping with the organic nature of the Administrative Order, National Assemblies were often
442 established first at a regional level, encompassing more than one country, and only later at the
443 level of a nation or territory as the number of believers and Local Assemblies multiplied. In
444 their wake, a host of different committees were constituted, appointed at both the local and
445 national levels, to advance collective efforts across a range of areas including teaching,
446 translation, publishing, education, pioneering, and organizing Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy
447 Days.

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After three decades devoted to constructing the administration at the local and national levels, in the final years of his life Shoghi Effendi inaugurated a new stage in the development of the Administrative Order by bringing into being institutions at the international and continental levels. It began with the “long anticipated rise and establishment of the World Administrative Centre of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in Holy Land”. In 1951, he proclaimed the formation of the International Bahá'í Council. This new institution, he explained, would evolve through various stages preparatory to its transformation and efflorescence into the Universal House of Justice.

This dramatic development was soon followed, at the end of the same year, by Shoghi Effendi's appointment of twelve Hands of the Cause of God, equally represented on three continents and in the Holy Land—the first contingent of Hands of the Cause to be raised up in conformity with the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. These distinguished individuals were appointed to advance the work of the propagation and protection of the Faith. The existence of an institution that plays such a vital role in furthering the interests of the Cause, but which has no legislative, executive, or judicial authority and is entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past. After many years of nurturing the system of elected Assemblies and their associated agencies, Shoghi Effendi began to shape this appointed institution, and to guide the friends to understand, welcome, and support its unique functions. The appointment, in 1952, of a second contingent of Hands raised their number to nineteen. The Auxiliary Boards, whose members served as deputies to the Hands in each continent, were established in 1954. Even up to the final days of his life, the Guardian continued to expand this institution, appointing a final contingent of Hands to raise their number to twenty-seven, and establishing an Auxiliary Board for Protection to complement the Board for Propagation.

In reflecting upon their efforts to build up the nascent form of the administration, Shoghi Effendi had explained to the believers that much of what was instituted under his guidance was temporary and that it was the function of the Universal House of Justice “to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration” of the Faith. On another occasion he wrote that “when this Supreme Body will have been properly established, it will have to consider afresh the whole situation, and lay down the principle which shall direct, so long as it deems advisable, the affairs of the Cause”.

Following the unexpected passing of Shoghi Effendi in November 1957, responsibility for the affairs of the Cause fell for a brief time to the Hands of the Cause of God. Only a month earlier they had been designated by the Guardian as “the Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth, who have been invested by the unerring Pen of the Centre of His Covenant with the dual function of guarding over the security, and of ensuring the propagation, of His Father's Faith”. The Hands faithfully and uncompromisingly adhered to the course laid out by the Guardian. Under their stewardship, the number of National Assemblies was raised from twenty-six to fifty-six, and by 1961 the steps he had described for the transition of the International Bahá'í Council from an appointed to an elected body had been implemented, setting the stage for the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963.

The organic unfoldment of the administration, so carefully nurtured by the Guardian, was systematically cultivated and further extended under the direction of the House of Justice. The subsequent span of more than half a century witnessed a host of achievements. Among the

498 most prominent of these, the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice, hailed by the
499 Guardian as the “Most Great Law”, was adopted in 1972. Following consultation with the
500 Hands of the Cause, the functions of that institution were extended into the future through the
501 creation of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in 1968 and the International Teaching Centre
502 in 1973. In addition, for the first time, Auxiliary Board members were authorized to appoint
503 assistants to broaden the reach of their ministrations for propagation and protection at the
504 grassroots. The number of National and Local Assemblies multiplied, and their capabilities
505 developed to serve the Bahá'í community and extend their influence through engagement with
506 the wider society. Regional Bahá'í Councils were introduced in 1997 to help address the
507 growing complexity of the issues facing National Spiritual Assemblies while maintaining the
508 balance between centralization and decentralization in a community's administrative affairs.
509 The system of teaching committees established in the time of the Guardian gradually gave way
510 to structures that could take responsibility for planning and decision making at more
511 decentralized levels, penetrating as far as neighbourhoods and villages. More than three
512 hundred training institutes, over two hundred Regional Councils, and administrative
513 arrangements in more than five thousand clusters were established. At Ridván 1992 the law of
514 Ḥuqúqu'lláh was applied universally across the Bahá'í world and its institutional structure
515 subsequently consolidated through the establishment of a network of Boards of Trustees and
516 Representatives at the regional and national levels, as well as, in 2005, through the appointment
517 of an International Board of Trustees. Following the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the
518 construction of Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs in Uganda, Australia, Germany, and Panama was
519 completed, and others were eventually raised in Samoa, India, and Chile; in 2012, the process
520 of establishing Houses of Worship was extended to the national and local levels.

521

522 Over the century, then, through a series of developmental stages, the relationships among
523 individuals, communities, and institutions have progressively evolved into ever more complex
524 forms, and the foundations of the administration have been extended, its methods continually
525 adapted, and arrangements for collaboration clarified and continually refined. What began at
526 the start of the first century of the Formative Age as a network of elected bodies had become,
527 by the end of that century, a vast constellation of institutions and agencies stretching from the
528 grassroots to the international level, uniting the Bahá'í world in thought and action within a
529 common enterprise across a diversity of cultural contexts and social settings.

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531 Today, although the administration has not yet reached its full maturity, the system
532 inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh evinces a new pattern of interactions and a marked dynamism in the
533 relationships among the three protagonists as they engage in the common purpose of working
534 for the organic development of the Faith and the betterment of the world. In the company of
535 like-minded co-workers and in the various settings of study, of reflection, and of numerous
536 other social interactions, individuals express their views and seek out the truth through a
537 process of consultation, without insisting upon the correctness of their own ideas. Together,
538 they read the reality of their surroundings, explore the depths of available guidance, draw
539 relevant insights from the Teachings and from accumulating experience, create cooperative and
540 spiritually uplifting environments, build capacity, and initiate action that grows in effectiveness
541 and complexity over time. They attempt to differentiate those areas of activity in which the
542 individual can best exercise initiative from those which fall to the institutions alone, and with
543 heart and soul they welcome the guidance and direction of their institutions. Across advanced
544 clusters and within villages and neighbourhoods that are centres of intense activity, a
545 community emerges with a sense of common identity, will, and purpose, providing an
546 environment for nurturing the capacity of individuals and uniting them in a range of
547 complementary and mutually reinforcing activities that welcome all and seek to uplift everyone.

548 Such communities are increasingly becoming distinguished by the sense of unity among their
549 members, their freedom from prejudices of all kinds, their devotional character, their
550 commitment to the equality of women and men, their selfless service to humanity, their
551 educational processes and cultivation of virtue, and their capacity to systematically learn and
552 contribute to the material, social, and spiritual progress of society. Those community members
553 called upon to serve on institutions endeavour to be conscious of their duty to set aside their
554 own likes and dislikes, to never consider themselves to be the central ornaments of the Cause or
555 superior to others, and to eschew any attempt to exercise control over the thoughts and actions
556 of the believers. In carrying out their responsibilities, the institutions facilitate creative and
557 collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community and strive to build consensus, to
558 overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience
559 the most efficacious ways to pursue the community's aims and purposes. Through various
560 means, including the establishment of educational agencies, they help foster the spiritual and
561 intellectual development of the believers.

562
563 As a result of these new relationships and capacities of the three protagonists, the circle
564 of those with the ability to think and act strategically has widened, while assistance, resources,
565 encouragement, and loving guidance are extended wherever needed. Experience and insight are
566 shared throughout the world, from the grassroots to the international level. The pattern of life
567 created by this dynamic engagement encompasses millions of souls from all walks of life,
568 animated by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a united world. In country after country, it has drawn the
569 attention of parents, educators, traditional leaders, officials, and leaders of thought to the power
570 of His system to address the world's pressing needs. Naturally, not every community exhibits
571 the characteristics of the most advanced; indeed, in Bahá'í history this has ever been so.
572 Nevertheless, the appearance of new capacities in any one place signals an evident advance and
573 serves as an augury that others will surely follow in that path.

574
575 In the epochs and centuries ahead, the Administrative Order will continue its organic
576 evolution in response to the growth of the Faith and the exigencies of a changing society.
577 Shoghi Effendi anticipated that as "its component parts, its organic institutions, begin to
578 function with efficiency and vigour," the Administrative Order will "assert its claim and
579 demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New
580 World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind". Thus, as
581 Bahá'u'lláh's system crystallizes, it will present humanity with new and more productive ways
582 of organizing its affairs. In the course of this organic evolution, relationships among
583 individuals, communities, and institutions will inevitably unfold in new directions and
584 sometimes unexpected ways. Yet, the unfailing divine protection that encompasses the House
585 of Justice will ensure that, as the Bahá'í world navigates the turmoil of a most perilous period
586 in humanity's social evolution, it will follow undeviatingly the course set by Providence.

587
588 *The worldwide spread and development of the Faith*

589
590 From its inception, the community raised by Bahá'u'lláh, though small in numbers and
591 geographically circumscribed, was galvanized by His lofty teachings and arose to share them
592 liberally with all those seeking a spiritual path to personal and social transformation. In time,
593 the friends learned to work closely with like-minded people and organizations to uplift the
594 human spirit and contribute to the betterment of families, communities, and society as a whole.
595 Receptivity to Bahá'u'lláh's message was found in every land, and through devoted and
596 sacrificial efforts over many generations, Bahá'í communities emerged around the globe, in far-
597 flung cities and villages, to encompass the diversity of the human race.

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During the Dispensation of the Báb, the Faith was established in two countries. In the time of Bahá'u'lláh it extended to a total of fifteen, and by the close of the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá it had reached some thirty-five countries. During the tumultuous years of world war, 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed one of His priceless legacies, the Tablets of the Divine Plan, His grand design for the spiritual illumination of the planet through the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This precious Charter raised a call for collective and methodical endeavour; yet by the time of the Master's passing, it had scarcely penetrated the thought and action of the community, and only a few extraordinary heroes of the Faith, foremost among them Martha Root, had arisen in response.

For twenty years after the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, its execution was held in abeyance until such time as the friends, guided by Shoghi Effendi, were able to create the administrative machinery of the Faith and foster its proper functioning. Only when the initial administrative structure was firmly in place could the Guardian begin to articulate a vision of the unfoldment of the Faith based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan. Just as the administration evolved through distinct stages of increasing complexity, so too did the effort to share and apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings evolve organically, giving rise to new patterns of community life that could embrace ever-larger numbers, enable the friends to take on greater challenges, and contribute to an increased measure of personal and social transformation.

To begin this systematic endeavour, Shoghi Effendi called upon the communities in the United States and Canada—the chosen recipients of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, whom he had designated, respectively, as its chief executors and their allies—to devise a “systematic, carefully conceived, and well-established plan” which was to be “vigorously pursued and continuously extended”. This call resulted in the launching of the first Seven Year Plan in 1937, which carried the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to Latin America, followed by the second Seven Year Plan, beginning in 1946, which emphasized the development of the Faith in Europe. Shoghi Effendi similarly encouraged the teaching work in other national communities, which subsequently adopted national plans under his watchful eye. The National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma adopted its first plan in 1938; the British Isles in 1944; Persia in 1946; Australia and New Zealand in 1947; Iraq in 1947; Canada, Egypt and Sudan, and Germany and Austria in 1948; and Central America in 1952. Each of these plans followed the same basic pattern: teaching individuals, establishing a Local Assembly and raising a community, and opening additional localities on the home front or in another land—and then repeating the pattern once more. When a sound foundation was built in a country or territory, a new National Assembly could be raised.

During these years, Shoghi Effendi constantly encouraged the friends to carry out their responsibility to teach the Faith within the context of the plans adopted by their National Assemblies. Over time, methods such as pioneering, travelling teaching, fireside gatherings, summer schools, and participation in the activities of like-minded organizations proved to be effective in certain places, and he urged the friends in other parts of the world to adopt them. Expansion efforts were matched by an emphasis on the internal development necessary to consolidate the identity and character of the Bahá'í Faith as a distinct religious community. This transformative process was carefully cultivated by the Guardian, who expounded for the believers the history of their Faith, facilitated the use of the Bahá'í calendar, emphasized regular participation in Feasts and the commemoration of Holy Days, and patiently guided them to embrace the obligation of obedience to Bahá'í laws, such as the provisions of Bahá'í

647 marriage. Gradually, the Faith emerged as a world religion, taking its place among its sister
648 religions.

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650 Along with the inauguration of international institutions, the collective endeavours of the
651 Faith in the teaching field moved into the arena of international cooperation. In 1951, five
652 national communities collaborated in the execution of the “highly promising” and “profoundly
653 significant” African Campaign to extend the spread of the Faith across that continent. And in
654 1953, the Ten Year Crusade was initiated, uniting the efforts of all twelve existing National
655 Assemblies in one common global Plan—the first of its kind. In this crowning stage of the
656 ministry of the Guardian, the network of administrative bodies the friends had raised and the
657 proven teaching methods they had developed were employed in a collective spiritual enterprise
658 the like of which the Bahá'í community had never before witnessed.

659

660 As the believers travelled far and wide to share their precious Faith, they found among
661 diverse peoples a great receptivity to its principles and teachings. These populations discovered
662 within the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh a deeper meaning and purpose for their lives, as well as
663 fresh insights that would enable their communities to overcome challenges and advance
664 spiritually, socially, and materially. A divine light, initially disseminated gradually from
665 individual to individual, thus began to be diffused rapidly among the masses of humanity. The
666 harbinger of the phenomenon of entry by troops foretold by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá became evident in
667 the enrolment of hundreds of believers in Uganda, the Gambia, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands,
668 and later, in Indonesia and Cameroon. Before that Plan drew to a close, the process had begun
669 in a number of other countries, with those individuals embracing the Faith reaching into the tens
670 of thousands or even more.

671 After the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Hands of the Cause ensured the successful
672 completion of the Ten Year Crusade by following undeviatingly the path he had outlined. By
673 applying the lessons learned under the guidance of the Guardian, more was accomplished in the
674 teaching field over a single decade than in the previous century. The Faith spread to 131 new
675 countries and territories, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided surpassed eleven
676 thousand, with a total of fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies and more than 3,500 Local
677 Assemblies. The enterprise culminated in the election of the Universal House of Justice by the
678 members of those National Assemblies, according to the provisions set down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
679

680 After its establishment, the House of Justice continued the systematic prosecution of the
681 Divine Plan, inaugurating its second epoch by gradually broadening and augmenting the range
682 of activities cultivated by the Guardian, adding to or extending various aspects of the work, and
683 coordinating and unifying the activities of all the National Assemblies. Among the areas of
684 emphasis that emerged or received increased attention were the universal participation of
685 individuals in service to the Cause and the deepening of individuals' understanding of the laws
686 and teachings. In addition, the process of strengthening the institutions emphasized
687 collaboration between the newly constituted Boards of Counsellors and the National
688 Assemblies, as well as between the Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies.
689 Community life was enhanced through a focus on children's classes, the introduction of
690 activities for youth and women, and the regular holding of Assembly meetings. Other
691 initiatives included the extensive proclamation of the Faith and its promotion through the
692 media; the development of centres of learning, including summer schools and teaching
693 institutes; greater involvement in the life of society; and the fostering of Bahá'í scholarship.
694

695 As a result of all these efforts, by the 1990s the Faith had spread to tens of thousands of
696 localities and the number of National Assemblies more than tripled to some 180. During this
697 time, the development of national communities followed two broad patterns which were largely
698 contingent upon the response of the wider population. In the first, local communities tended to
699 be small in size, and only some grew to number a hundred believers or more. These
700 communities were often characterized by a strong process of consolidation that allowed for a
701 broad range of activities and the emergence of a strong sense of Bahá'í identity. Yet, it
702 increasingly became evident that, though united in shared beliefs, characterized by high ideals,
703 and proficient in managing its affairs and tending to its needs, such a small community—
704 however much it prospered or attempted to serve others through its humanitarian efforts—could
705 never hope to serve as a model for restructuring the whole of society.
706

707 The second pattern took shape in those countries where the process of entry by troops
708 began, resulting in an exponential increase in membership, new localities, and new institutions.
709 In several countries the Bahá'í community grew to comprise more than one hundred thousand
710 believers, while India reached some two million. Indeed, in a single two-year period in the late
711 1980s, more than one million souls embraced the Faith worldwide. Yet, in such places, despite
712 the creative and sacrificial efforts that were made, the process of consolidation could not keep
713 pace with expansion. Many became Bahá'ís, but the means did not exist for all these new
714 believers to become sufficiently deepened in the fundamental verities of the Faith and for
715 vibrant communities to develop. Classes for Bahá'í education could not be established in
716 numbers large enough to serve an ever-increasing number of children and youth. Over thirty
717 thousand Local Assemblies were formed, but only a fraction of them began to function. From
718 this experience, it became apparent that occasional educational courses and informal
719 community activities, though important, were not sufficient, for they resulted in raising up only

720 a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause who, no matter how dedicated, could
721 not provide for the needs of thousands upon thousands of new believers.
722

723 By 1996, the Bahá'í world had reached the point where the many areas of activity that
724 had previously contributed to so much progress over so many years needed reassessment and
725 reorientation. Individuals, communities, and institutions needed to learn not only how to
726 initiate a mode of action that could reach large numbers, but also how to rapidly increase the
727 number of individuals who could engage in acts of service so that consolidation could keep
728 pace with accelerating expansion. The effort to introduce the Faith to the many populations of
729 the world had to become more systematic. The call in the Four Year Plan for a “significant
730 advance in the process of entry by troops” was intended to acknowledge that the circumstances
731 of the Faith, as well as the conditions of humanity, allowed for, and even required, sustained
732 growth of the Bahá'í world community on a large scale. Only then could the power of
733 Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to transform the character of humankind be increasingly realized.
734

735 At the outset of the Four Year Plan, the friends in each region were encouraged to identify
736 the approaches and methods that applied to their specific conditions and to set in motion a
737 systematic process of community development in which they would review their successes and
738 difficulties, adjust and improve their methods accordingly, learn, and move forward without
739 hesitation. When the course of action was unclear, a range of approaches to the specific
740 challenges identified by the Plan could be tested in different places; when an initiative in a
741 particular area proved, through experience, to be effective, its features could be shared with
742 institutions at the national or international level and then be disseminated to other places and
743 even become a component of future Plans.
744

745 Over a quarter century this process of learning about growth gave rise to a range of
746 concepts, instruments, and approaches which continually enhanced the community's evolving
747 framework for action. Among the most prominent of these features was the creation of a
748 network of training institutes—offering educational programmes for children, junior youth, and
749 youth and adults—for empowering the friends in large numbers and enabling them to enhance
750 their capabilities for service. Another was the construct of clusters, which facilitated the
751 systematization of the teaching work in manageable geographic areas through the initiation and
752 gradual strengthening of programmes of growth, and accelerated the spread and development of
753 the Faith within each country and across the world. Within such programmes of growth, a new
754 pattern of community life emerged, beginning with the multiplication of four core activities that
755 served as portals for the entry of large numbers, combined with a range of other efforts,
756 including individual and collective teaching, visiting homes, hosting social gatherings,
757 observing Feast and Holy Days, administering community affairs, and promoting activities for
758 social and economic development—all of which together would effect a change in the spiritual
759 character of the community and strengthen social ties among individuals and families.
760

761 In looking back over a century of efforts to execute the provisions of the Divine Plan, it
762 becomes apparent that the Bahá'í world has experienced a significant advance at the level of
763 culture. Ever greater numbers have become engaged in a process of consciously learning to
764 apply the Teachings pertaining to growth and development within a framework for action that
765 evolves through the experience of the friends and the guidance of the House of Justice. The rise
766 in capacity for engaging in this process of learning is evident in characteristics that are
767 increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í community: maintaining a humble posture of learning,
768 whether celebrating successes or persevering in the face of obstacles and setbacks;
769 strengthening Bahá'í identity while preserving an orientation welcoming to all; and acting in

770 ever-wider spheres of endeavour while continuing to foster an approach to the work of the
771 Cause that is systematic and coherent. In thousands of clusters, growing numbers of people
772 have come to view themselves as protagonists in the acquisition, generation, and application of
773 knowledge for their own development and progress. They are engaging in discussions as
774 families, friends, and acquaintances on elevated spiritual themes and matters of social import;
775 initiating activities that shape a pattern of life distinguished by its devotional character;
776 providing education for young people and increasing their capacity for service; and contributing
777 to the material and social progress of their communities. They are empowered to contribute to
778 the betterment of their local community and to the world as a whole. As they think and act in
779 this way, they have gained a deeper appreciation of the purpose of religion itself.

780

781 *Involvement in the life of society*

782

783 Yet another dimension of the unfoldment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan is a greater
784 involvement of the Bahá’í community in the life of society. From the inception of his ministry,
785 Shoghi Effendi drew the attention of the friends again and again to the power of Bahá’u’lláh’s
786 Revelation to effect an organic change in society—a process which would ultimately result in
787 the emergence of a spiritual civilization. Bahá’ís, therefore, had to learn to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s
788 teachings not only for personal spiritual transformation but also for material and social change,
789 beginning within their own communities and then gradually extending their efforts to embrace
790 the wider society.

791

792 During the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, some Bahá’í communities in Iran, along with a few
793 others in nearby countries, had reached a size and attained conditions that enabled them to
794 pursue systematic endeavours for social and economic development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá worked
795 tirelessly with the friends to guide and foster their progress. For example, He encouraged the
796 believers in Iran to establish schools open to girls as well as boys, from all sectors of society,
797 that would offer training in good character as well as in the arts and sciences. He dispatched
798 believers from the West to assist with this development work. To the Bahá’í villages of nearby
799 ‘Adasiyyih and far-off Daidanaw He offered guidance for both the spiritual and material
800 flourishing of these communities. He directed that dependencies be created for education and
801 other social services around the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in ‘Ishqábád. At His encouragement,
802 schools were founded in Egypt and the Caucasus. After His passing, Shoghi Effendi provided
803 guidance to expand these efforts. Activities promoting health, literacy, and the education of
804 women and girls spread throughout the Iranian community. Spurred by the initial impulse that
805 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had provided, schools continued to be opened in cities and villages across that
806 country. These schools flourished for a time, contributing to the modernization of that nation,
807 until 1934 when they were compelled to close by the government.

808

809 Elsewhere, however, Shoghi Effendi advised the friends to concentrate their limited
810 human and financial resources on teaching and on raising the Administrative Order. A letter
811 written on his behalf explained that “our contributions to the Faith are the surest way of lifting
812 once and for all time the burden of hunger and misery from mankind, for it is only through the
813 system of Bahá’u’lláh—Divine in origin—that the world can be gotten on its feet”. Others
814 “cannot contribute to our work or do it for us”, the letter continued, “so really our first
815 obligation is to support our own teaching work, as this will lead to the healing of the nations”.
816 While individuals found personal avenues in which they could contribute to material and social
817 development, generally the Bahá’ís focused their resources on growth and on building their
818 community. In the early years following the election of the House of Justice, guidance
819 continued for a time in this same vein. Thus, although the concept of social and economic

820 development is enshrined in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, owing to the circumstances of the Faith
821 throughout the Guardian's ministry and the years that followed, it was impracticable for most of
822 the Bahá'í world to undertake development activities.
823

824 In 1983, after decades of unrelenting effort in the teaching field and as a consequence of
825 significant growth in many countries across the world, the community of the Greatest Name
826 had attained the stage at which the work of social and economic development could be—
827 indeed, had to be—incorporated into its regular pursuits. The friends were urged to strive,
828 through their application of spiritual principles, rectitude of conduct, and practice of the art of
829 consultation, to uplift themselves and thus take responsibility as agents of their own
830 development. The Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the World
831 Centre to assist the House of Justice to promote and coordinate the activities of the friends in
832 this arena throughout the world, and over time it evolved to facilitate a global process of
833 learning about development. Individual believers arose to initiate various activities embracing
834 not only Bahá'ís but also the wider community.
835

836 Within a decade, hundreds of development activities had been initiated around the world,
837 addressing a range of concerns such as the advancement of women, education, health, mass
838 communication, agriculture, economic activity, and the environment. Activity ranged along a
839 spectrum of complexity. Fairly simple activities of short duration in villages and towns were
840 organized in response to specific problems and challenges faced in those localities. Sustained
841 projects, such as schools and clinics, were established to meet social needs over an extended
842 period of time, often along with organizational structures to ensure their viability and
843 effectiveness. And finally, by 1996, a few Bahá'í-inspired organizations with relatively
844 complex programmatic structures were founded by individuals to learn to systematically pursue
845 a coherent approach to development, within a population, that would result in a significant
846 impact in a region. In all these efforts, the friends sought to apply spiritual principles to
847 practical problems.
848

849 As Bahá'í-inspired agencies as well as agencies directly under the authority of Bahá'í
850 institutions began to appear in one country after another, the impact of their efforts within the
851 community and the wider society became increasingly evident, manifesting a dynamic
852 coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life. Advances occurred not only in
853 action, but also at the level of thought. The friends came to understand a set of fundamental
854 concepts: The world is not divided into categories of developed and underdeveloped—all are in
855 need of transformation and an environment that provides the spiritual, social, and material
856 conditions necessary to their security and flourishing. Development is not a process carried out
857 by one people on behalf of another; rather, people themselves, wherever they reside, are the
858 protagonists of their own development. Access to knowledge and participation in its
859 generation, application, and diffusion is at the heart of the endeavour. Efforts start small and
860 grow in complexity as experience accumulates. Programmes whose effectiveness has been
861 demonstrated in one region can be systematically introduced into others. As these principles
862 and concepts are applied within a particular setting, the friends become increasingly adept at
863 analysing their social conditions, drawing insights from the Writings and from various relevant
864 fields of knowledge, and initiating activities that are fully integrated with the work of
865 community building.
866

867 By 2018, the extensive spread and increasing complexity of Bahá'í development efforts
868 around the world had prompted the establishment of a new institution in the Holy Land—the
869 Bahá'í International Development Organization. This global institution assumed, and further

870 extends, the functions and mandate previously carried out by the Office of Social and Economic
871 Development, reinforcing the efforts for social action of individuals, communities, institutions,
872 and agencies everywhere. Like the Office that preceded it, its primary purpose is to facilitate
873 the global process of learning about development that is unfolding in the Bahá'í world, by
874 fostering and supporting action and reflection, the gathering and systematization of experience,
875 conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the teachings of the Faith.
876 Ultimately, it seeks to foster a distinctly Bahá'í approach to development.

877
878 Parallel with the systematic unfoldment of the processes of expansion and consolidation
879 and of social and economic development, another major area of action emerged: greater
880 participation in the prevalent discourses of society. In an increasing number of social settings
881 where deliberations on human problems occur, Bahá'ís seek to share relevant insights drawn
882 from the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It was Bahá'u'lláh Himself Who initially
883 proclaimed His healing remedy directly to the world's leaders and appealed for its adoption by
884 all humanity. Notwithstanding the failure of the kings and rulers to respond affirmatively to the
885 divine nature of His claim, He called upon them to apply His principles for the establishment of
886 world peace: “Now that ye have refused the Most Great Peace, hold ye fast unto this, the
887 Lesser Peace, that haply ye may in some degree better your own condition and that of your
888 dependents.” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in Writings such as the Tablets to The Hague, and especially in
889 talks delivered during His travels to the West, unceasingly proclaimed His Father's teachings to
890 the powerful and the masses grappling with the myriad difficulties facing humanity.

891
892 Early in his ministry, Shoghi Effendi, cognizant of the vital importance of making known
893 to the peoples and leaders of the world the insights and wisdom enshrined in the Bahá'í
894 teachings, fostered initiatives for this purpose. These included, among others, the opening in
895 1925 of a Bahá'í information bureau in Geneva, the publication of the volumes of *The Bahá'í*
896 *World*, and the call for knowledgeable Bahá'ís to correlate the Teachings with contemporary
897 thought in relation to the manifold pressing problems of the world. After the founding of the
898 United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community was established in 1948 as a non-
899 governmental organization representing Bahá'í communities throughout the world and became
900 increasingly engaged in aspects of the work of that international body. This opened a new
901 chapter in the Faith's continuing relationship with governments, global institutions, and
902 agencies of civil society in the international sphere. While never allowing this area of
903 endeavour to overshadow the primary importance of the teaching work, the Guardian
904 encouraged the friends to acquaint the wider society with the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's
905 teachings. “Collateral to this process of reinforcing the fabric of the Administrative Order and
906 of widening its basis,” he wrote to one national community, “a resolute attempt should be
907 made” for the establishment of closer contact with, among others, “the leaders of public
908 thought”. Stressing association rather than affiliation, and urging the believers to remain
909 untainted by any participation in political affairs, he encouraged them to engage with kindred
910 organizations concerned with social issues and to acquaint them with the aims and purposes of
911 the Faith and the nature of its teachings on such matters as the establishment of world peace.

912
913 After the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, this process of participation in
914 the discourses of society was further extended. At timely moments, the House of Justice itself
915 arranged for widespread dissemination of the principles of the Faith, as in its message
916 addressed to the peoples of the world, “The Promise of World Peace”. The Bahá'í International
917 Community strengthened its position at the United Nations, ultimately securing a more formal
918 association with various UN agencies in the 1970s. It published statements on world affairs and
919 created a unique space for engagement with governments as well as non-governmental

920 organizations. Recognized by those with whom it associated as harbouring no self-interested
921 agenda but working for the well-being of all peoples, it played a constructive role in various
922 international symposia, including the Conference on Environment and Sustainable
923 Development in Rio de Janeiro, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Summit
924 for Social Development in Copenhagen, and the Millennium Forum in New York. Following
925 the Iranian Revolution and the renewal of persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, several national
926 communities were impelled to enter into closer dialogue with various national and international
927 institutions and agencies. They consequently established national offices of external affairs to
928 reinforce efforts at the international level to defend the Faith.

929

930 As the twenty-first century began, the organic progress of the Cause had created
931 conditions for a more systematic engagement in the discourses of society. International and
932 national Bahá'í websites dramatically extended the presentation of the Teachings spanning a
933 range of topics. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity was established to conduct
934 research into the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for pressing social issues; in time it
935 also initiated a series of seminars to promote understanding and develop capacity among Bahá'í
936 university students. The work of the Bahá'í International Community, initially centred in New
937 York and Geneva, was extended to regional centres in Addis Ababa, Brussels, and Jakarta. At
938 the national level, offices of external affairs increasingly learned how to participate in specific
939 national discourses in a systematic manner on behalf of their respective communities. Among
940 the topics addressed intensively across various nations were the advancement of women, the
941 role of religion in society, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, the promotion of
942 justice, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Today, a global process of learning from the
943 experience of contributing to these national discourses is facilitated by the Office of Public
944 Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre. And at the grassroots in neighbourhoods and villages,
945 and in their professions and other social spaces in which they participate as individuals, the
946 friends are learning to offer concepts from the Bahá'í Writings as a contribution to the evolution
947 of thought and action among their compatriots that is necessary to bring about constructive
948 change.

949

950 Involvement at all these levels of society becomes more pressing as the process of the
951 disintegration of the old world order intensifies and discourse becomes increasingly coarsened
952 and polarized, leading to the recrudescence of conflict among the competing factions and
953 ideologies that divide humanity. In keeping with their understanding that the transformation
954 envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh calls for the participation of everyone, Bahá'ís seek to work with the
955 many sympathetic individuals and organizations who pursue common objectives. In such
956 collaborative efforts, the friends share insights from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as
957 practical lessons gained in their own community-building efforts, while at the same time
958 learning from the experience of their collaborating partners. In working with individuals,
959 communities, and organizations both civic and governmental, the friends maintain awareness
960 that the discourse on many social issues may become contentious or entangled with political
961 ambitions. In all settings where Bahá'ís become more deeply engaged with the wider society,
962 they seek to foster consensus and unity of thought, and to promote collaboration and a common
963 search for solutions to humanity's pressing problems. To them, the means by which the end is
964 attained is as important as the end itself.

965

966 As the process of becoming ever more involved in the life of the wider society took root
967 in Bahá'í communities worldwide, it initially unfolded side by side with the teaching work and
968 the development of the administration. In recent decades, however, the efforts for social action
969 and involvement in the discourses of society have achieved marked coherence with those

970 related to expansion and consolidation as the friends have increasingly applied the elements of
971 the conceptual framework for action of the global Plans. As the friends labour in their clusters,
972 they are inexorably drawn into the life of the society around them, and the learning process that
973 propels efforts for growth and community building is extended to an expanding range of
974 activities. Community life is increasingly characterized by its contribution to material, social,
975 and spiritual progress as the friends cultivate their capability to understand the conditions of
976 society around them, create spaces in which to explore concepts from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation
977 and from relevant fields of human knowledge, bring insights to bear upon practical problems,
978 and build capacity among the believers and within the wider community. As a result of this
979 burgeoning coherence across the various areas of endeavour, the most basic grassroots activities
980 for social and economic development grew from a few hundred in 1990 to several thousand by
981 2000, and to tens of thousands by 2021. Bahá'í engagement in social discourse has been met
982 with a resoundingly affirmative response in countless settings, from neighbourhoods to nations,
983 as a humanity baffled and divided by the manifold problems resulting from the operation of the
984 forces of disintegration eagerly seeks new insights. At all levels of society, leaders of thought
985 increasingly associate the Bahá'í community with fresh conceptions and approaches sorely
986 needed by an ever more disunited and dysfunctional world. The society-building power of the
987 Faith, mostly latent at the start of the first century of the Formative Age, is now increasingly
988 discernible in country after country. The release of this society-building power resulting from a
989 new consciousness and a new capacity for learning among individuals, communities, and
990 institutions worldwide is destined to be the hallmark of the current and next several stages in
991 the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

992

993 *The development of the Bahá'í World Centre*

994

995 Parallel with the growth of the Faith and the unfoldment of the administration, equally
996 significant developments occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during the first century of the
997 Formative Age, set in motion by the impulse of another Charter, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of
998 Carmel. Mention has already been made of the interplay among the processes associated with
999 the three Charters, including the emergence of institutions and agencies of the administrative
1000 centre of the Bahá'í world. To this account can now be added some reflections on the
1001 development of its spiritual centre.

1002

1003 When Bahá'u'lláh's footsteps touched the shore of 'Akká, the climactic chapter of His
1004 ministry began. The Lord of Hosts was manifested in the Holy Land. His arrival had been
1005 presaged through the tongues of the Prophets thousands of years before. The fulfilment of that
1006 prophecy, however, was not the result of His own volition but was compelled by His
1007 persecution at the hands of His avowed enemies, culminating in His exile. "Upon Our arrival,"
1008 He stated in one Tablet, "We were welcomed with banners of light, whereupon the Voice of the
1009 Spirit cried out saying: 'Soon will all that dwell on earth be enlisted under these banners.'"
1010 The spiritual potency of that land was immeasurably enhanced by His presence and the
1011 interment of His sacred remains and, soon after, those of His Herald, Himself a Manifestation
1012 of God. It is now the point to which every Bahá'í heart is drawn, the focal centre of their
1013 devotions, the goal of every aspiring pilgrim. The Bahá'í Holy Places welcome the peoples of
1014 the Holy Land, and indeed the peoples of every land. They are a precious trust held for all
1015 humanity.

1016

1017 Yet, tenuous was the hold of the Bahá'ís on the spiritual centre of their Faith at the close
1018 of the Heroic Age and for many years thereafter. How difficult it was, at times, for 'Abdu'l-
1019 Bahá even to offer prayers at His Father's resting place. How dire was His situation, being

1020 falsely charged with sedition for raising the structure in which, at the command of Bahá'u'lláh,
1021 the earthly remains of the Báb were laid to rest after the long journey from the place of His
1022 martyrdom. The perilous and insecure condition of the World Centre persisted into the ministry
1023 of the Guardian, as evinced when the keys of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh were seized by the
1024 Covenant-breakers shortly after he assumed his responsibilities. Thus, among the first and most
1025 vital duties of Shoghi Effendi, pursued throughout his ministry, were the protection and
1026 preservation, the extension and beautification of the twin Holy Shrines and other Holy Places.
1027 To achieve this aim, he had to navigate a period of tumultuous change in the Holy Land—
1028 including global economic disruption, war, repeated political transition, and social instability—
1029 while upholding, like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá before him, the immutable Bahá’í principles of fellowship
1030 with all peoples and respect for established governmental authority. At one time, he even had to
1031 contemplate the transfer of the remains of Bahá'u'lláh to a suitable setting on Mount Carmel to
1032 ensure their protection. And he steadfastly remained in Haifa during times of tumult and strife,
1033 even as he directed the small band of local believers to disperse to other parts of the world.
1034 This taxing yet tirelessly pursued obligation continued to his final days, when the Shrine of
1035 Bahá'u'lláh was finally recognized as a Bahá’í Holy Place by the civil authorities, and the
1036 Bahá’í world was at last free to preserve and beautify its most sacred site.

1037
1038 In the course of his efforts to acquire, restore, and secure the Holy Places, the Guardian
1039 significantly expanded the properties surrounding the Holy Shrine and the Mansion at Bahjí and
1040 initiated what would eventually become extensive formal gardens. On the Mountain of God, he
1041 brought to its long-delayed completion the Shrine of the Báb, begun by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, adding
1042 three additional rooms, creating its arcade, raising its golden dome, and surrounding it with
1043 verdure. He traced “the far-flung arc around which the edifices of the World Bahá’í
1044 Administrative Order” were to be built; raised at one end of that arc its first structure, the
1045 International Archives Building; and situated, at its heart, the resting places of the Greatest Holy
1046 Leaf, her brother, and their mother. The Guardian’s labours for the development of the World
1047 Centre were continued under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. Additional land
1048 and Holy Places were acquired and beautified, the buildings on the Arc raised, and terraces
1049 extended from the bottom to the top of Mount Carmel, as originally envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-
1050 Bahá and begun by the Guardian. Before the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the
1051 property in the vicinity of the Shrine of the Báb was increased to over 170,000 square metres,
1052 while a series of land exchanges and acquisitions extended the property immediately
1053 surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh from some 4,000 to over 450,000 square metres. And in
1054 2019 construction began in ‘Akká, near the Riḍván Garden, on a fitting Shrine to serve as the
1055 final resting place of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

1056
1057 Over the course of the century, the pace of the development of the Bahá’í administrative
1058 centre also accelerated. For many years, early in his ministry, the Guardian longed for the
1059 assistance of capable helpers, but the Bahá’í world was then too small to provide the necessary
1060 support. As the community grew, however, the House of Justice was increasingly able to
1061 benefit from a continuous stream of volunteers to establish the departments and agencies vital
1062 to a rapidly developing Faith, serving the needs at the World Centre as well as of the
1063 communities multiplying worldwide. Questions and advice, insights and guidance, visitors and
1064 pilgrims now flow ceaselessly between all parts of the planet and the heart of the Bahá’í world.
1065 In 1987, after decades of change and uncertainty, the patient efforts begun much earlier by
1066 Shoghi Effendi to establish good relations with the civil authorities in Israel culminated in the
1067 formal recognition of the status of the Bahá’í World Centre as the spiritual and administrative
1068 centre of the worldwide Bahá’í community, operating under the aegis of the Universal House of
1069 Justice.

1070

1071 Just as the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions have evolved
1072 over time, building upon previous achievements and rising to meet new challenges, the same
1073 can be said of the Bahá'í World Centre and its relations with the Bahá'ís across the world. The
1074 intimate and inseparable association of the spiritual and administrative centre with the
1075 development of the Bahá'í world was captured in the 24 May 2001 message we addressed to
1076 the believers gathered for the events marking the completion of the projects on Mount Carmel:
1077 “The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the
1078 slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that
1079 embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the
1080 Cause we serve. They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have
1081 successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that
1082 divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal institutions of a unique and
1083 unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community's life. In the transformation that
1084 has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá'í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality
1085 on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God's good time, bring about the
1086 reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it.”

1087

1088 *Prospect*

1089

1090 A few weeks before He passed away, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was at His home with one of the
1091 friends. “Come with me”, He said, “that we may admire together the beauty of the garden.”
1092 Then He observed: “Behold, what the spirit of devotion is able to achieve! This flourishing
1093 place was, a few years ago, but a heap of stones, and now it is verdant with foliage and flowers.
1094 My desire is that after I am gone the loved ones may all arise to serve the divine Cause and,
1095 please God, so it shall be.” “Ere long”, He promised, will appear those “who shall bring life to
1096 the world.”

1097

1098 Dearly loved friends! At the close of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í
1099 world finds itself endowed with capacity and resources only dimly imagined at the time of
1100 ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. Generation after generation has laboured, and today a multitude has
1101 been raised up that stretches across the globe—consecrated souls who are collectively building
1102 the Faith's Administrative Order, widening the reach of its community life, deepening its
1103 engagement with society, and developing its spiritual and administrative centre.

1104

1105 This brief review of the past hundred years has illustrated how the Bahá'í community, in
1106 striving to systematically execute the three Divine Charters, has become a new creation, as
1107 anticipated by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. Just as the human being passes through various stages of physical
1108 and intellectual growth and development until it reaches maturity, so too the Bahá'í community
1109 develops organically, in size and structure, as well as in understanding and vision, embracing
1110 responsibilities and strengthening relationships among individuals, communities, and
1111 institutions. Over the course of the century, in local settings as well as on a global scale, the
1112 series of advances experienced by the Bahá'í community has enabled it to pursue purposeful
1113 action across an ever-wider range of endeavours.

1114

1115 When the Heroic Age drew to a close, the community faced fundamental questions about
1116 how to organize its administrative affairs in order to respond to the requirements of the Divine
1117 Plan. The Guardian guided the friends in learning how to address those initial questions, a
1118 process that culminated in the nascent international arrangements that were in place at the time
1119 of his passing. The capacity that was built during that period allowed the Bahá'í world to take

1120 on a host of new questions about how it was to carry on the work of the Faith at a greater level
1121 of breadth and complexity under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. Then, yet
1122 again, after making marked progress over several decades, even more questions about still
1123 greater opportunities concerning the future direction of the Cause emerged before the beginning
1124 of the Four Year Plan, which set out a new challenge for a further period of development
1125 centred on achieving a significant advance in the process of entry by troops in all parts of the
1126 world. It is this growing capacity to resolve complex questions and then to take on still more
1127 complex questions that characterizes the process of learning that is propelling the progress of
1128 the Faith. Thus, it is evident that with every step forward in its organic unfoldment, the Bahá'í
1129 world develops new powers and new capacities that enable it to take on greater challenges as it
1130 strives to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity. And so it shall continue to be, despite
1131 the changes and chances of the world, through crisis and victory, with many an unexpected turn,
1132 through countless stages of the Formative and Golden Ages to the end of the Dispensation.

1133

1134 By the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, a common framework for
1135 action had emerged that has become central to the work of the community and which informs
1136 thought and gives shape to ever more complex and effective activities. This framework
1137 continually evolves through the accumulation of experience and the guidance of the House of
1138 Justice. The pivotal elements of this framework are the spiritual truths and cardinal principles
1139 of the Revelation. Other elements that also contribute to thought and action involve values,
1140 attitudes, concepts, and methods. Still others include the understanding of the physical and
1141 social world through insights from various branches of knowledge. Within this continually
1142 evolving framework, Bahá'ís are learning how to systematically translate Bahá'u'lláh's
1143 teachings into action to realize His high aims for the betterment of the world. The significance
1144 of this increased capacity for learning, and its implications for the advancement of humanity at
1145 the current stage of its social development, cannot be overestimated.

1146

1147 How much the Bahá'í world has achieved! How much remains to be done! The Nine
1148 Year Plan outlines the tasks that lie immediately ahead. Among the areas of focus are the
1149 multiplication and intensification of programmes of growth in clusters worldwide and increased
1150 coherence in the work of community building, social action, and participation in prevalent
1151 discourses through the concerted efforts of the Plan's three protagonists. The training institute
1152 will be further strengthened and will continue to evolve as an educational organization that
1153 develops capabilities for service. The seeds it sows within the hearts of succeeding cohorts of
1154 young people will be nurtured by other educational opportunities to empower each soul to
1155 contribute to social progress and well-being. The movement of youth will be complemented
1156 worldwide by the unprecedented advancement of women as full partners in community affairs.
1157 The capacity of Bahá'í institutions will be fostered at all levels, with particular attention to the
1158 establishment and development of Local Assemblies and to enhancing their engagement with
1159 the wider society and its leaders. The intellectual life of the community will be cultivated to
1160 provide the rigour and clarity of thought required to vindicate to a sceptical humanity the
1161 applicability of the healing remedy of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And all these efforts will
1162 continue through a series of Plans comprising a challenge, spanning no less than a generation,
1163 that will carry the Bahá'í world across the threshold of its third century.

1164

1165 The determined efforts to gain a fuller understanding of, and to live in accordance with,
1166 Bahá'u'lláh's teachings take place within the larger context of the twofold process of
1167 disintegration and integration described by Shoghi Effendi. Attaining the objective of the
1168 current series of Plans—the release of ever-increasing measures of the society-building power

1169 of the Faith—calls for an ability to read the reality of society as it responds to, and is shaped by,
1170 these twin processes.

1171

1172 A plethora of destructive forces and events, including environmental degradation, climate
1173 change, pandemics, the decline of religion and morals, the loss of meaning and identity, the
1174 erosion of the concepts of truth and reason, unbridled technology, the exacerbation of
1175 prejudices and ideological contention, pervasive corruption, political and economic upheaval,
1176 war and genocide, have left their traces in blood and anguish on the pages of history and the
1177 lives of billions. At the same time, hopeful constructive trends can also be discerned, which are
1178 contributing to that “universal fermentation” which Shoghi Effendi said is “purging and
1179 reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have
1180 been recognized and its unity established”. The diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity, a
1181 greater consciousness of global interdependence, the embrace of collaborative action among
1182 individuals and institutions, and a heightened longing for justice and peace are profoundly
1183 transforming human relationships. And thus, the movement of the world towards Bahá'u'lláh's
1184 vision advances in countless halting steps, in occasional dramatic leaps, and with intermittent
1185 stretches where progress stalls or is even reversed, as humanity forges the relationships that
1186 constitute the foundations of a united and peaceful world.

1187

1188 The destructive forces that buffet the world do not leave the Bahá'í community
1189 untouched. Indeed, the history of every national Bahá'í community bears their mark. As a
1190 result, in various places and at various times, the progress of a particular community was
1191 retarded by insidious social tendencies or temporarily restricted or even extinguished by
1192 opposition. Periodic economic crises reduced the Faith's already limited financial resources,
1193 hindering projects for growth and development. The effects of world war paralysed for a time
1194 the ability of most communities to implement systematic plans. The upheavals that have
1195 reshaped the political map of the world have created obstacles to the full participation of some
1196 populations in the work of the Cause. Religious and cultural prejudices once thought to be
1197 receding have re-emerged with fresh vehemence. Bahá'ís have striven to address such
1198 challenges with perseverance and resolve. Yet, over the past century, no nobler response to the
1199 hostile forces unleashed to oppose the advance of the Cause has been witnessed than that of the
1200 Bahá'ís of Iran.

1201

1202 From the earliest years of the Guardian's ministry, the persecution which the Bahá'ís of
1203 Iran had endured throughout the Heroic Age continued as waves of violent repression swept
1204 over that community, escalating in intensity in the attacks and systematic campaign of
1205 oppression which followed in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and which continues
1206 unremittingly to the present day. Despite all they have endured, the Bahá'ís of Iran have
1207 responded with unbowed courage and constructive resilience. They have won imperishable
1208 distinction through such achievements as the establishment of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher
1209 Education to ensure the education of succeeding generations, their efforts to transform the
1210 views of the fair-minded among their compatriots—whether inside or outside the country—and
1211 above all, their endurance of countless injustices, indignities, and privations in order to protect
1212 their fellow believers, maintain the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith in His beloved homeland,
1213 and safeguard its presence in that land as a benefit to its citizens. In such expressions of
1214 unswerving fortitude, of consecrated devotion and mutual support lie essential lessons for how
1215 the Bahá'í world must respond to the acceleration of the destructive forces that can be expected
1216 in the years ahead.

1217

1218 At its heart, the challenge presented by the interplay of the processes of integration and
1219 disintegration is the challenge of holding fast to Bahá'u'lláh's description of reality and to His
1220 teachings, while resisting the pull of controversial and polarizing debates and beguiling
1221 prescriptions that reflect futile attempts to define human identity and social reality through
1222 limited human conceptions, materialist philosophies, and competing passions. "The All-
1223 Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and
1224 prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy", Bahá'u'lláh states. "We can well perceive
1225 how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions." Yet, He
1226 adds, "They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the
1227 infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the
1228 mesh of their devices." If Bahá'ís become entangled in the delusory notions of contending
1229 peoples, if they emulate the values, attitudes, and practices that define a self-absorbed and self-
1230 serving age, the release of those forces necessary to redeem humanity from its plight will be
1231 delayed and obstructed. Rather, as the Guardian explains, "The champion builders of
1232 Bahá'u'lláh's rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into
1233 greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension, and distress. Let them forge ahead into the
1234 future serenely confident that the hour of their mightiest exertions and the supreme opportunity
1235 for their greatest exploits must coincide with the apocalyptic upheaval marking the lowest ebb
1236 in mankind's fast-declining fortunes."

1237
1238 None can anticipate precisely what course the forces of disintegration are destined to
1239 take, what violent convulsions will yet assail humanity in this travailing age, or what obstacles
1240 and opportunities may arise, until the process reaches its culmination in the appearance of that
1241 Great Peace that will signalize the arrival of the stage when, recognizing the unity and
1242 wholeness of humankind, the nations will "put away the weapons of war, and turn to the
1243 instruments of universal reconstruction". One thing, however, is certain: The process of
1244 integration will also accelerate, knitting together ever more closely the efforts of those who are
1245 learning to translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into reality with those in the wider society who
1246 seek justice and peace. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi explained to the
1247 Bahá'ís of America that, given the restricted size of their community and the limited influence it
1248 wielded, they must focus, at that time, on its own growth and development as it learned to apply
1249 the Teachings. He promised, however, that the time would come when they would be called
1250 upon to engage their fellow citizens in a process of working for the healing and betterment of
1251 their nation. That time has now come. And it has come not only for the Bahá'ís of America,
1252 but for the Bahá'ís of the world, as the society-building power inherent in the Faith is released
1253 in ever-greater measures.

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1255 Releasing such power has implications for the decades to come. Every people and every
1256 nation has a part to play in the next stage in the fundamental reconstruction of human society.
1257 All have unique insights and experiences to offer for the building of a unified world. And it is
1258 the responsibility of the friends, as the bearers of Bahá'u'lláh's restorative message, to assist
1259 populations to release their latent potentialities to achieve their highest aspirations. In this
1260 effort, the friends share this precious message with others, strive to demonstrate the efficacy of
1261 the divine remedy in the lives of individuals and communities, and work together with all those
1262 who appreciate and share the same values and aspirations. As they do so, Bahá'u'lláh's vision
1263 of a unified world will offer a hopeful and clear direction to peoples whose perception has been
1264 distorted by the confusion prevailing in the world, and a constructive path for cooperation in the
1265 search for solutions to long-standing social maladies. As the spirit of the Faith increasingly
1266 permeates the hearts to enkindle love and reinforce the shared identity of humanity as one
1267 people, it instils a sense of loyal and conscientious civic responsibility and, in place of the

1268 pursuit of worldly power, redirects energies towards disinterested service in the pursuit of the
1269 common good. Populations increasingly adopt the method of consultation, action, and
1270 reflection to displace endless contest and conflict. Individuals, communities, and institutions
1271 across divers societies increasingly harmonize their efforts in common purpose to overcome
1272 sectarian rivalries, and spiritual and moral qualities foundational to humanity's progress and
1273 well-being take root in human character and social practice.

1274

1275 The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. As the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh
1276 advances into the second century of the Formative Age, let all take inspiration from the words
1277 of the beloved Guardian, whose guiding hand immutably shaped the century past. Writing in
1278 1938 about the execution of the first stage of the Divine Plan, he said: "The potentialities with
1279 which an almighty Providence has endowed it will no doubt enable its promoters to achieve
1280 their purpose. Much, however, will depend upon the spirit and manner in which that task will
1281 be conducted. Through the clearness and steadiness of their vision, through the unvitiated
1282 vitality of their belief, through the incorruptibility of their character, through the adamant
1283 force of their resolve, the matchless superiority of their aims and purpose, and the unsurpassed
1284 range of their accomplishments, they who labour for the glory of the Most Great Name ... can
1285 best demonstrate to the visionless, faithless, and restless society to which they belong their
1286 power to proffer a haven of refuge to its members in the hour of their realized doom. Then and
1287 only then will this tender sapling, embedded in the fertile soil of a Divinely appointed
1288 Administrative Order, and energized by the dynamic processes of its institutions, yield its
1289 richest and destined fruit."

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[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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