

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

10 February 2021

Transmitted by email

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has observed with interest the upsurge of Bahá'í activities held online during the last several months, particularly in response to restrictions on in-person gatherings necessitated by the present global health crisis. As you will recall, the House of Justice in its message dated 9 May 2020 to all National Spiritual Assemblies referred to the need for vigilance in ensuring that the primarily local character of community activities is not diluted. Because questions have arisen about the scope of some current activities, the House of Justice has asked that the following guidance be conveyed to you.

Eager to continue and even extend their activities for community building, and to study, share, and apply the Word of God with others, believers have in many countries conducted devotional meetings, study circles, and other gatherings using available technologies. It has been reassuring to know that at a time when opportunities for coming together in person are restricted in many places, the friends have been able to sustain the majority of their activities for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith—and often to even multiply them—by hosting them online. On occasion, a group of close friends who live in different communities or countries have arranged such gatherings; this is generally not of concern. In some limited instances, an individual in one country has even been called upon to assist with the activities of the Plan with believers in another. Furthermore, it has also been apparent that some friends have conducted other online activities that are coherent with the general direction of the community's endeavours in service to the Cause and to humanity and that can enrich the pattern of Bahá'í life, for example, a small group of believers who share an interest in a particular field coming together to study relevant Writings and guidance, or an individual offering a space for his or her friends and contacts to express the Teachings in the form of art and music.

As activities being held online multiply, you will wish to be particularly attentive to the possibility that they may be conducted in a manner that departs from well-understood principles and practices that guide the affairs of the Bahá'í community. It is, for example, quite easy for online gatherings organized by individuals to take on a regional, national, or even international scope, sometimes involving large numbers of a hundred or more participants. This type of gathering, no matter how well intended, is of a fundamentally different character than an individual initiative within the Bahá'í community. While many of these meetings may not, in themselves, be problematic, nevertheless, they may introduce various challenges, such as causing the friends to become inward looking, reducing the number of believers initiating their own activities, disengaging individuals from the local experience, or diminishing the effectiveness of the plans of local or regional institutions or agencies. They may even inadvertently intrude upon the prerogatives of Bahá'í institutions in other countries. Generally,

it would not be appropriate for an individual initiative that aims to promote the Faith through the use of the Internet, and particularly social media, to direct its conceptual focus and content towards an audience beyond its own national community. Nor should an individual initiative assume responsibility for matters or activities that should be undertaken by Bahá'í institutions. It is left to each National Assembly to offer guidance to the friends in their endeavours, to ensure that institutions at the appropriate level are actively involved in overseeing or organizing gatherings when appropriate, and to offer specific counsel to particular individuals as necessary. In this regard, you may find it helpful to consult with the Bahá'í Internet Agency, which is following such developments worldwide.

The aforementioned concerns are compounded further if discussions of participants veer into politics. When the forces of disintegration are accelerating, and visibly so within the political realm, believers may be tempted to comment on the day's political events or controversies. While such conversations are harmful to the Bahá'í community in any setting, they can be particularly dangerous—even to the lives of believers in certain lands—when carried out online in forums that include large numbers of participants, including those with believers from different countries, or those with open participation that might unexpectedly include individuals ill-disposed to the Faith. In these turbulent times, it is imperative for every follower of Bahá'u'lláh to recall the Guardian's admonitions to avoid involvement in political affairs and to not even “mention any political figures” in their public remarks. In this regard, you are asked to review the 1 December 2019 letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to all National Assemblies on the pitfalls associated with public pronouncements on social media.

Within the framework described above, and in consultation with the Counsellors, National Assemblies can guide Bahá'ís in their communities as specific questions arise about the propriety of particular online activities. The House of Justice hopes that you will continue to learn about these new developments, and it would appreciate if, from time to time, you could share with it the experiences and insights accumulating in your community. The supplications of the House of Justice are offered in the Holy Shrines that the blessings of the Ancient Beauty may inspire and sustain you and the friends you serve.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre
Boards of Counsellors
Selected Counsellors
Bahá'í Internet Agency