

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

9 May 2020

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

As will by now be all too apparent, the Five Year Plan's final year has brought challenges different to those of the preceding four. The world is caught in the grip of a fast-spreading virus that has claimed many thousands of lives and severely disrupted a large share of humanity's social and economic activity. Yet the Bahá'í community has remained composed and has acted swiftly to meet the immediate demands that confronted it. It has found ways to ensure the continuity of community life, while also striving to play its part in meeting spiritual and material needs in society more widely—a fitting response to an emergency situation. We commend all the action that has been taken so far. Now, however, we wish to explore more fully what the coming year might entail. Your efforts to stimulate the advancement of the Plan in its final months will inevitably be shaped by your pressing responsibility to guide the friends in their response to an evolving global crisis. These unique circumstances require that we address you directly; you may share this letter with your communities, in whole or in part, as you deem appropriate.

When we expressed our desire to see five thousand intensive programmes of growth established by the end of this Five Year Plan, we were keenly aware of the magnitude of the undertaking this implied, but the condition of the world demanded it. We called for the work of strengthening programmes of growth to accelerate everywhere. We were gratified to see how the supporters of the Cause were galvanized into action, exerting unprecedented levels of effort. In the space of four years the Bahá'í community doubled both the number of core activities occurring worldwide and the number of their participants. To have brought hundreds of thousands of individuals into the embrace of the community's activities in such a short period is an advance in capacity that has no parallel in any of the previous Plans in the present series.

Much, then, has been accomplished, and this is a clear indicator of the strength and confidence of the Bahá'í community. But, as you already appreciate, the current crisis has altered the context in which the Plan is being pursued. We have been impressed by how many communities have taken great strides in adapting to this new reality. Far from viewing the present period as simply a hiatus to be endured with patience, they have recognized that the state of the world has made the need to render meaningful service to humanity more urgent. Naturally, the activities undertaken must suit the prevailing conditions, but there should be no doubt that this is a time for noble aims, high resolve, and intense endeavour. As is well known, the activities of the Plan are intended to cultivate a thriving community spirit, through which resilience to mighty challenges is also strengthened. Educational efforts aim to raise up a growing number of souls who can contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of a

community; devotional meetings nurture the spirit of service as it blossoms, rooting it in a culture of collective worship. In short, the promotion of the Plan implies building capacity to walk the path of service in every time and season—which must surely include moments of acute peril in the life of humanity, such as now. It is essential, then, that the steps being taken to learn how to apply the Plan’s framework for action to the current circumstances of the world continue in earnest; in all likelihood, the global health crisis will have a direct impact on Bahá’í activities, to a greater or lesser degree, for months or even years, and the task of adapting to the situation cannot be postponed. In this regard, the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, ably guided by the International Teaching Centre, have shown impressive determination in their efforts to spur on the friends and orient them in their approach to the work at hand; they will doubtless do the same over the coming four cycles and beyond.

We appreciate, of course, that some activities have had to be suspended, and particular strategies or methods that are unsuited to current conditions have had to be set aside for a time. However, while certain possibilities have been temporarily closed, others have opened up, and new means have emerged for strengthening existing patterns of activity. Flexibility has proven to be an asset, but so has vigilance in ensuring that the primarily local character of community activities is not diluted; efforts to nurture flourishing communities within neighbourhoods and villages and across clusters must continue. In some cases, present conditions have created unexpected opportunities for widening community participation in devotional meetings and study circles, conducted with safety in mind. Many parents whose families have been confined to home surroundings have welcomed support that has helped them to move from the position of observer to protagonist in the spiritual education of their children. Junior youth and groups of youth have discovered the power of simple acts of compassionate service carried out with wisdom. Nevertheless, it would be understandable if you determine, in some instances, that plans that require the movement of pioneers, mobile tutors, or visiting teachers will have to be postponed, and this should not give you cause for concern; you can re-evaluate the situation in the months ahead. The coming One Year Plan could afford an opportunity to fulfil any goals or objectives that may in the end remain out of reach during the present Plan.

We recognize that continuing to function in the course of this crisis will, in many cases, put you under financial strain, and the economic hardship being experienced by many in the community may limit the resources upon which you can draw. Be assured that we stand ready to support you. Let there be no doubt or equivocation in this regard: it is essential that the institutions of the Faith maintain their operations throughout this period and not be obstructed by lack of resources in the discharge of their core duties. Unquestionably, the whole company of the faithful in each country will rally around you, and in particular, we are confident that believers with means will come forward to aid you.

As you are aware, there is considerable unevenness in the ways that different societies are coping with the difficulties arising from this crisis; consequently, the challenges that confront different National Assemblies are not the same. And these challenges will change over time. This will call for tremendous agility as local, regional, and national institutions seek to read their reality and stay alert to new developments. We wish to impress upon you that your collaboration with the Counsellors will be of paramount importance: it should be committed and sustained, an almost constant exchange of information and insight, to ensure that you are responding swiftly to the needs of your community, anticipating problems before they emerge,

seizing opportunities that open up, and supporting promising initiatives. Exactly what measures should be taken by Bahá'í institutions will naturally depend on the relevant circumstances. But in every place, the friends will need clear and timely guidance; special attention must be given to those who are most at risk from the virus itself, or from the economic impact of its spread; and creative approaches will be required to sustain the collective spirit of the community during difficult times. Networks of various kinds comprising families, neighbouring households, or other groupings are offering valuable support to many; you should be confident in the resourcefulness of your communities, and seek to draw on their talents and energies to the fullest. As grave as conditions have already become in some places, National Assemblies in countries that have so far been spared the more severe consequences of the pandemic must keep in mind that there is the potential for worse to occur, and any preparations that can be made now for that eventuality, before the introduction of further restrictions hampers such efforts, should commence at once—without alarm, but without delay. Local Spiritual Assemblies in particular should consider what means might be within their power to prevent, relieve, or mitigate suffering in the wider society of which they are an integral part.

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

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

It is not possible to foresee the extent to which this pandemic will influence the movement towards unity among the nations. But there is no doubt whatsoever that, for the endeavours of the Bahá'í community, the months ahead will be consequential. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise. This final year, of the final Plan, in a series spanning the final quarter of the opening century of the Formative Age, will seal the foundation upon which will rest the next series of global undertakings. It is the concluding act in a captivating drama whose end is yet unwritten.

Not a moment passes when you are not in our thoughts. All our trust and confidence in your capacity to face this challenge comes from our knowledge that your ultimate supporter and helper is the Abhá Beauty Himself. In our entreaties at the Sacred Threshold, we implore Him to make you pure channels for the flow of His grace to humankind.

The Universal House of Justice

cc: International Teaching Centre
Boards of Counsellors
Counsellors