

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

February 25, 2017

To the American Bahá'í community

Beloved Friends and Co-workers,

For the past several months, this Assembly has been deeply engaged in reflecting on both the condition of the society in which we live and serve and the profound responsibility we all bear to present the unifying teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to our fellow-citizens. The process has affirmed both the critical nature of this moment and the necessity of bold action to address the historic opportunity it presents.

At this pivotal juncture in our nation's history, our foremost responsibility is to everywhere affirm—in the Name of Bahá'u'lláh—the truth of the oneness of humanity in a manner that will have an impact for decades to come. We must accelerate our efforts to remove the stains of prejudice and injustice from the fabric of our society. As you take up this call with courage and zeal, we ask that you keep the following concepts in mind.

The tensions, divisions, and injustices that currently beset America are symptoms of a longstanding illness. The nation is afflicted with a deep spiritual disorder, manifest in rampant materialism, widespread moral decay, and a deeply ingrained racial prejudice. As a result, millions of our fellow Americans, subject to systemic injustices in many facets of life, are prevented from making their full contributions to society and of partaking fully in its benefits. No one is immune to this disorder—we are all members of this society and to some degree suffer the effects of its maladies. That we live in a critical time can be seen in the way essential questions of identity, social vision, and global relations are being raised to a degree not seen in decades. Increasing numbers of our fellow-citizens are actively in search of solutions both moral and practical to answer them.

The resolution to these challenges lies in recognizing and embracing the truth at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—the incontrovertible truth that humanity is one. Ignorance of this truth—which embodies the very spirit of the Age—is itself a form of oppression, for without it, it is impossible to build a truly just and peaceful world.

The oneness of humanity is far more than a slogan or an abstract and unattainable ideal. It has profound implications for both personal behavior and for the way society is organized—challenging many current assumptions and revolutionizing our conceptions of the relationships that should exist between the individual, society, and its institutions. Awareness of the spiritual reality of human beings carries with it the moral requirement that all be given every opportunity to fulfill their potential and to contribute to the advancement of civilization. To this end, we have a twofold mission: to develop within our own community a pattern of life that increasingly reflects the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings, and to engage with others in a deliberate and collaborative effort to eradicate the ills afflicting our nation.

The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith instruct us to work to reshape society based on principles of love, inclusiveness, and reciprocity. This requires that our means be consistent with our ends—that is, by transcending current approaches that tend to divide people into contending groups, raising consciousness in such a way as to bring them together in the earnest and honest search for solutions. The language we use and the attitudes we take, while not ignoring the harsh realities that exist in the world, should appeal to the nobler aspirations of our fellow-citizens. They should reflect assurance that the vast majority of us sincerely desire justice, and must be unifying rather than divisive. Above all, our approach must be suffused with the spirit of the sacred Word, which grants us access to immense spiritual resources. Indeed, it is the one

power on earth that can transform the copper of human consciousness into the gold of spiritual perception and behavior.

We have inherited a priceless legacy of service spanning more than a century, originally set in motion by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. In the past two decades especially, we have obtained important insights into how our combined and various efforts make for a coherent force for progress. The more we understand the framework of action given to us in the current Five Year Plan, the better we can appreciate that it is precisely suited to the needs of the time. We are rapidly gaining the ability to engage ever-greater numbers of individuals in the work of community building who, through a sustained and meaningful process of personal and social transformation, can join together in creating effective and lasting change. The process fosters the intellectual and spiritual capacities necessary to the complex and challenging task of creating a society founded on divine principles. Surely such a convergence of capacity and opportunity is nothing less than providential.

The task of transforming an entire society will require a many-faceted approach through which a pattern of life can emerge demonstrating the rich possibilities inherent in walking the spiritual path of love and service. The Universal House of Justice, without attempting to strictly define them, has stated that these possibilities can be considered as falling into the three broad categories of expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in the discourses of society. They emerge organically and coherently as a community rises from one level of advancement to the next. Experience has shown how, from the humblest beginnings, a pattern of community life that includes all three dimensions can develop. All three can be seen as mutually reinforcing elements of one process—a process that must be accelerated, for it will generate the consciousness necessary to apply in both word and deed the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the challenges we face, not least of them the challenge of race relations. As it gains momentum, it will embrace vast numbers of people empowered to take charge of their own social and spiritual development and contribute their full share to a new way of life.

The activities at the core of our community life are the foundation for great social change. Simple as they might appear, they are, in reality, profound and revolutionary. This becomes clear as we observe systematically applied in action some of the capacities we are building through insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Among them is the ability to engage in distinctive conversations of a spiritual character. We learn to converse with others about the fundamental purpose of life, the relationship of the soul with its Creator, and the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's advent and His teachings for our spiritual and social progress. We learn to create an atmosphere of reverence and devotion to God in the community, to foster a spirit of friendship and intimacy that transcends the barriers of race and class, to provide spiritual and moral education for young people, to share the lives and teachings of the Central Figures of the Faith with confidence and with sensitivity to varying situations. We also learn to walk with others on the spiritual path, in a humble posture of learning, engaging in individual and collective service for the betterment of the world. These are but a few of many examples. All these activities must increase and grow to embrace multitudes of individuals. In an ever-enlarging number of neighborhoods, for example, we will learn how best and most effectively to work among diverse populations and about the practical dimensions of interracial fellowship. Such activity—and the genuine friendships that result—will help to weaken and eventually uproot prejudice-tainted notions underlying our present social order, and can begin to undo racism in our society.

In the realm of social action, it is possible to observe the range of projects and activities that emerge organically from our community-building work and highlight those which tackle, directly or indirectly, situations with a bearing on race relations. We anticipate the emergence

of more such activities as we gain in experience and capacity, and as more people become empowered to serve. In the area of discourse, we can explore and develop a conversation with the wider society which, when added to the range of conversations already cultivated by the institute process, can assist our fellow citizens to abandon the language and practices in society that have resulted in an intractable divide, unite on the basis of commonly held ideals and principles, and work together for a social order free of prejudice and characterized by unity in diversity. Such conversations will naturally come about as we pursue the work of community building at the level of neighborhoods, as well as through a diverse array of personal contacts. We can also appreciate activities of the kind in which a host of individual Bahá'ís are engaged—whether with like-minded organizations or in their professions—encouraging more Bahá'ís to similarly take advantage of opportunities in the wider community. At every level, we have much to learn from others who are striving for the same goals and with whom we can join hands in this vital and foundational work. And, through our Office of Public Affairs, we are advancing this institution's involvement in the national discourse on race—drawing on insights from the various experiences of the friends and from our own previous efforts to offer a Bahá'í perspective. A process is already underway leading to a national race unity conference under the sponsorship of this Assembly, details of which will be announced in due course.

A key component of our approach is the spirit of learning. This begins with the realization that successfully giving form to the divine principles given to us by Bahá'u'lláh will require persistent effort over time. We will progress as we build on strengths that emerge through experience. If we study carefully the ways various communities are active in each one of the three broad areas of expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in the discourses of society, we can identify new insights and bring them to the attention of others so they can be established in more and more places. As we move forward, we will come to an increasingly profound appreciation of the rich potential inherent in this approach.

Unity and effectiveness in our work will evolve to the extent that we see our efforts as complementary and mutually enriching. By advancing energetically in all areas, we will apply our systematic approach to learning to such effect that one can envision how, in the decades ahead, Bahá'ís will contribute in an ever more effective way to the eventual eradication of racism in our country.

We take as inspiration for our service the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to America more than a century ago. In clear and uncompromising terms, in private meetings and public assemblies, He raised the call of the oneness of humanity. He demonstrated fully, courageously, and consistently, whether openly in large gatherings or in the smallest personal acts, the implications of that spiritual truth, and challenged others to do the same. While acknowledging its marvelous material achievements and aspirations, He unhesitatingly warned of dire consequences to American society and to the cause of world peace if her peoples failed to live up to the truth of the oneness of humanity—especially in the relations between black and white. Above all, He stressed the central and unique role ordained for the American nation in the establishment of that universal peace anticipated by all the Prophets of past ages.

Dear friends! Let us follow His shining example with a sense of urgency and with determined focus. Let us consecrate ourselves to the creation of a world in which knowledge will be the province of all; where there are no limitations imposed upon a soul by virtue of race, gender, or creed; where the material and spiritual aspects of life are in harmony; and where all of the truths essential for human progress are held sacred. To do so will require great sacrifice, courage, and audacity. A rich tapestry of community life that increasingly reflects the sublime teachings of the

Blessed Beauty will not emerge of its own accord. The evils of racism, materialism, and moral decadence will be eradicated only by a love that is translated into action—such actions as deliberately going out of our way to befriend all, appreciating the indispensable contributions of all, and joining hands with all in the creation of a new world. We believe in the fundamental goodness and decency of the masses of our fellow-citizens. We are confident that Americans yearn as we do for spirituality, that they desire genuine justice and prosperity for everyone. We are assured that America's role on the world stage, however significant it has so far been, will in the future be more distinguished and praiseworthy, not because of any inherent superiority it now possesses but to the degree that its present gloom is dispelled by the Light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Surely we can, with God's assistance, and together with our sisters and brothers throughout the land, bear whatever pain and difficulties will be necessary to create a haven for a suffering and bewildered humanity.

“Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men,” is Bahá'u'lláh's call to the peoples of the world. *“Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City. Illumine and hallow your hearts; let them not be profaned by the thorns of hate or the thistles of malice. Ye dwell in one world, and have been created through the operation of one Will. Blessed is he who mingleth with all men in a spirit of utmost kindness and love.”* And, in another instance, He counsels: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. . . . That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”*

He especially appeals to His followers to seize the chance to make their own vital contribution to the realization of humanity's destiny:

“O friends! Be not careless of the virtues with which ye have been endowed, neither be neglectful of your high destiny. Suffer not your labors to be wasted through the vain imaginations which certain hearts have devised. Ye are the stars of the heaven of understanding, the breeze that stirreth at the break of day, the soft-flowing waters upon which must depend the very life of all men, the letters inscribed upon His sacred scroll. With the utmost unity, and in a spirit of perfect fellowship, exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God.”

In future communications, we will comment further on some of the themes touched on in this letter and will also share news of local and national developments. Be assured of the constancy of our prayers on your behalf. Our love for you is limitless, our gratitude to you is inexpressible, and our confidence in you knows no bounds.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

December 8, 2017

To the American Bahá'í community

Beloved Friends and Co-workers:

With hearts filled with admiration and deepest gratitude, we salute your efforts to joyfully and meaningfully commemorate the appearance in the world two centuries ago of Bahá'u'lláh, the One Whom posterity will acclaim as “the Judge, the Lawgiver and Redeemer of all mankind.” How infinitely precious was every opportunity the Bicentenary of His Birth afforded us to celebrate—with countless friends and contacts in neighborhoods, towns, and cities across the land—the immeasurable import of His example and teachings and the incalculable impact they are destined to have on the future of life on this planet!

In the United States, the Bicentenary events were attended by some 120,000 people, nearly two-thirds of them not members of the Faith. Impressive as this is, far more moving to us were stories we received from hundreds of individuals about their personal efforts to engage in meaningful conversations about the Blessed Beauty and His teachings. These testify to the devotion of the community, the receptivity of our fellow citizens, and the confirmations that descended upon all who arose to share the divine message.

Wonderful as those days were, their ultimate success will not be judged by what we did, but by what we now do. This year by no means represented the zenith of our potential as promulgators of this Cause. Rather, it fortified us for bolder and more effective teaching efforts in the years ahead. Our ardent prayer is that the spirit of teaching will so suffuse our individual and collective lives as to make of us a continually growing and invincible force for the creation of a society founded on principles of divine justice.

The time has come for a vast increase in the number and range of individual and collective teaching initiatives. Among them, devotional gatherings—where others are invited to join us in prayer and reflection on the sacred texts—can often open hearts to elevated conversations about the life and teachings of the Blessed Beauty. Continued screenings of *Light to the World*, coupled with discussions relating His unifying teachings to the current state of our society, will surely generate interest on the part of countless souls. A great increase in the number of firesides—where seekers have the opportunity to learn about the Faith in an atmosphere of warm hospitality—can in the aggregate serve to introduce many thousands to Bahá'u'lláh's message. Regular home visits will strengthen bonds of loving friendship and will help us to better understand each other's hopes and aspirations. Celebrations of coming Holy Days can have the same impact as those we just experienced. And there is no limit to the potential that resides in creative use of the arts as a means of attracting receptive souls. In all these and other efforts, let us introduce the universal message of Bahá'u'lláh, study His writings, and explore with our friends and contacts their implications for the reconstruction of the world. Let us see each as a portal to service, inviting those so inclined into other efforts in which we can together join hands in applying the Bahá'í teachings to the building of a new pattern of community life.

We have made historic strides in recent years, powered primarily by skills and insights we have gained from the training institute experience. Especially noteworthy is the unprecedented involvement of friends of the Faith in the life of the Bahá'í community.

Of the 40,000 people now participating in core activities nationwide, approximately a third are not enrolled members of the Faith. Further, they represent a great diversity of ages and backgrounds. The achievement is significant because it reflects the spirit of love and inclusiveness that should characterize all our community's endeavors. It also reflects an understanding that all are on a spiritual journey and all are valued contributors to the task of changing the world. In our most advanced clusters, where hundreds and more are participating, we are beginning to see the emergence of regular cycles of expansion and consolidation, engagement in social action, and contributing to social discourse—in which those who until recently were unaware of the Faith are now actively involved and increasingly taking charge of their spiritual destinies.

Such emerging patterns are both an important form of growth and the foundation for sustained expansion. Yet it is essential to understand that a steady increase in the number of avowed believers is also critical and should not be regarded as a separate matter, but a natural outcome of our efforts to foster the development of an inclusive and diverse community. We seek to create the best conditions for every soul to become engaged in our community-building work, to serve and to progress, aware that each person will have different inclinations and move at a different pace. Our approach must be characterized by wisdom—always in a spirit of loving invitation, yet teaching each person according to his or her capacities and receptivity, ultimately assisting as many as possible to recognize the coming of the Promised One of All Ages.

On a practical level, we must ensure that each person we engage feels welcome to participate according to his or her interests. Some might benefit from home visits as a prelude to further engagement. Some might attend firesides all the way to enrollment before participating in institute training. Others might be eager to begin the sequence of institute courses right away. Some might attend devotional gatherings for a considerable length of time before taking part in another activity. Some will immediately engage with us in service, while others will take more time. Some may be ready sooner, others later, to formally embrace the Faith. Some may first associate with us as children or junior youth, later to be followed by their friends and family members. In every case, we must be inviting to all yet flexible in our approach, firmly assured that the confluence of all paths ultimately makes for a coherent scheme for progress. Whether serving individually or in teams, whether in focus neighborhoods or throughout our clusters, much will depend on our capacity successfully to welcome, nurture, and walk with every soul.

Dear friends! Your achievements during the Bicentenary amply proved the current potential for teaching. Go forward, then, with faith—faith that what you are striving to accomplish is God's will for the day in which we live. That it is His will for humanity to live as one family; that it is His will for every single human being to live up to his or her full potential; that it is His will for peace and justice to fill every land and for love to reign in every heart. Be certain of His assistance. He knows you, He watches over and protects you, and He brings you victory—because you are the soldiers in His Army of Light!

With assurance of our ardent prayers,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

January 31, 2018

To the American Bahá'í community

Beloved Friends and Co-workers:

In our February 25 letter to you last year, we illustrated how the framework of the Five Year Plan provides the most effective means to steadily and inevitably eradicate the ills that afflict our nation—racial prejudice not least among them. In our letter of December 8, we called on the friends everywhere to build on the momentum generated by their celebrations of the bicentenary of Bahá'u'lláh's birth to achieve unprecedented levels of teaching effort. At this juncture, we wish to once again address the importance of understanding our teaching work and the quest for justice as interrelated elements of a single all-encompassing process set in motion by the Blessed Beauty, to be realized through our prosecution of the successive Plans formulated by the Universal House of Justice.

Deepening our understanding of the forces at work in our society and the nature of our response as Bahá'ís—especially as outlined in the current series of Plans—is critical to the cohesiveness, strength, and progress of our community. The Supreme Body has observed that wherever an intensity of teaching and community-building activities is maintained, it serves as a strong defense against the forces of materialism that would otherwise sap the precious energies of the friends. The American people as a whole, increasingly frustrated, alarmed, and anxious, are searching for answers and for a way forward. Seeking for truth, they are daily treated to a cacophony of competing voices which, to a greater or lesser extent, rest their respective cases on faulty foundations or bespeak outmoded habits of thought and behavior. Everywhere there is an increasing longing for an authentic and credible source to which people can turn for insight and for hope. As conditions in society grow more troubled, and the needs ever more urgent and pressing, we must strive to fully appreciate both the challenges and the opportunities of the hour.

There is a wealth of guidance in the Bahá'í writings about conditions in America, the role it is destined to play in world affairs, and the challenges we are bound to face on the road toward that destiny. We commend to the careful attention of every believer certain essential texts that will both edify us and inspire our services at this critical juncture in our history. Among them are Shoghi Effendi's seminal book-length letter to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, written in 1938 and published as *The Advent of Divine Justice*—especially the sections describing the spiritual prerequisites for success in teaching, which the Universal House of Justice has correlated with the capacities the Plan's framework of action is designed to foster. Likewise essential is the collection of his letters published as *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. These writings—complementing our daily prayer, study of the sacred texts and the messages of the House of Justice, teaching, and other efforts in service—are invaluable sources of guidance and inspiration as we boldly enter the arena of action. Our permanent and seasonal schools will be arranging special programs for the study of these and other relevant texts in connection with the teaching work, and we hope that similar efforts will be made at the local level.

We cannot explore all of the themes presented to us in this guidance within the limited span of a single letter. But we do wish to call attention to a few essential concepts. First is the importance of reaching out to specific populations mentioned numerous times by

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice for the unique and vital contributions they will make to the creation of the new social order envisaged by the Blessed Beauty. Fresh and revitalized efforts must be made to reach out to American Indians and African Americans. Immigrant groups should also be included for special outreach, as they too have demonstrated heightened receptivity and vast potential. We are delighted that progress is being made in various clusters on all these fronts, particularly among younger people, and increasingly involving entire families. We hope that these efforts will accelerate. To this end, we now ask for a notable increase in the number of friends choosing to live among these populations as homefront pioneers.

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi all outlined the qualities necessary for success as a Bahá'í teacher. Among them are genuine love for all people—a love mirroring God's own love for them—demonstrating in word and deed a sincere desire for their happiness and progress. This is shown in a spirit of humility toward all, recognition of everyone's inherent capacities, a high degree of concern for the common well-being, and behavior that manifests an unbounded sense of loving fellowship. It also entails the ability to walk together with all people on the spiritual path—a path in which insights gleaned through interaction with the Word of God and their application in service are intertwined.

These qualities, characterizing individuals, institutions, and the community as a whole, provide for growing numbers everywhere to be together imbued with the spirit of the Faith. We can through systematic action—with institute training at its heart—steadily build the capacity to form deep, loving friendships inclusive of all peoples, as we pray and socialize together as true friends, provide spiritual education to our children and junior youth, consult about the conditions in our communities and act together for our common benefit, and bring insights from the Bahá'í teachings to bear on today's most pressing issues. We can envision the emergence in every locality of a rich and dynamic pattern of life, featuring a growing nucleus of those who have fully embraced the Bahá'í revelation and are active in service; beyond them a steadily enlarging circle of friends of the Faith who are also contributing in meaningful ways to the life of the community; and beyond them, still another circle of those who, whether consciously or not, are being affected by the spiritual powers released as a direct result of these efforts. This is surely the essence of our struggle for a world founded on the principles of divine justice. As we advance, this will increasingly demonstrate to a skeptical and disillusioned world the invincible power of the Cause of God.

We cannot too strongly emphasize that the need of the hour is action. Prayer, study, and reflection are all critical, to be sure—but the transforming effect of the Bahá'í revelation on ourselves and on the world can only be fully realized in the field of service. Let us move forward deliberately and prayerfully, but also urgently, to fulfill the sacred mission with which we have been entrusted by the Lord of the Age.

We are still too few in number, and the challenges ahead can seem overwhelming. Yet everything in our experience teaches us the vast benefits of serving shoulder to shoulder, of holding to a common vision, and of offering each other loving support. We know that

when we try, when we help each other, when we reflect unity of purpose, when we serve together patiently, when we are true both inwardly and outwardly to our principles—growing ever stronger and more effective through both steadfastness and practical experience—we attract divine confirmations and attain victory. What is more, we know that there are multitudes of wonderful, capable people eager to create a better world; people who, if given the chance, will respond with fullness of heart to the divine message.

Let us recall the words of our beloved Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, reminding us of the priceless opportunity that is ours—to establish once and for all a world filled with divine love and founded on justice, where every soul finds acceptance and fulfills the true purpose of life:

The Faith of the Blessed Beauty is summoning mankind to safety and love, to amity and peace; it hath raised up its tabernacle on the heights of the earth, and directeth its call to all nations. Wherefore, O ye who are God's lovers, know ye the value of this precious Faith, obey its teachings, walk in this road that is drawn straight, and show ye this way to the people. Lift up your voices and sing out the song of the Kingdom. Spread far and wide the precepts and counsels of the loving Lord, so that this world will change into another world, and this darksome earth will be flooded with light, and the dead body of mankind will arise and live; so that every soul will ask for immortality, through the holy breaths of God.

With assurance of our ardent prayers,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

December 25, 2018

To the American Bahá'í community

Dearly loved Friends and Co-workers:

Eighty years ago on this date, Shoghi Effendi, the beloved Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, addressed a letter to the believers across the North American continent, calling on them to arise with fresh consecration to fulfill the goals of the recently launched Seven Year Plan. Later to be published in book form under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the letter describes in clear and compelling language the gravity of the challenge to which they were being summoned and the vital importance of their actions not only to the victorious conclusion of that Plan, but, beyond it, to the ultimate establishment of the unified, peaceful, and just World Order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. Since that time, that historic missive has seized the imaginations of every succeeding generation of American believers. Posterity will no doubt come to recognize it as having been of incalculable consequence to an understanding of the essentials of our Faith, and to its growth and development throughout the world.

The Advent of Divine Justice is suffused with a spirit of loving encouragement. In it, the Guardian describes the immortal deeds through which the Bahá'ís of North America had, by the time of the letter's writing in 1938, already done much to advance the Faith; confidently recalls 'Abdu'l-Bahá's shining promises of still greater triumphs yet to come; reaffirms the decisive contribution America will make to the establishment of the Most Great Peace; and calls upon us to continue heroically to impart our full share to the tasks required to achieve the great destiny ordained for this nation by Bahá'u'lláh.

Yet Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that it was not because of any intrinsic superiority, whether spiritual or material, that the Blessed Beauty chose America for such a sacred mission. On the contrary, he tells us in no uncertain terms that, just as Persia was chosen as the dawning-place of His Cause because of the thick clouds of religious fanaticism, intellectual torpor, and moral decay with which it was enshrouded, America has been entrusted with the Divine Plan for its worldwide growth owing to the patent evils deeply embedded in its society. The ailing condition of both countries demonstrates in greater measure the efficacy and healing power of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

Reflecting further on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's uncompromising assessment of the ills that afflict the American nation—and, to an extent, its Bahá'ís—the Guardian elucidates at length the spiritual prerequisites for success in our efforts to disseminate the Faith's teachings. Let the reader judge whether these are any less relevant today than eight decades ago:

Dearly beloved friends! A rectitude of conduct which, in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation and of the parties and factions that compose it; a holiness and chastity that are diametrically opposed to the moral laxity and licentiousness which defile the character of a not inconsiderable proportion of its citizens; an interracial fellowship completely purged from the curse of racial prejudice which stigmatizes the vast majority of its people—these are the weapons which the American believers can and must wield in their double crusade, first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation.

The American Bahá'í community has been striving to fulfill this twofold mission ever since, chiefly by furthering the successive Plans given to us first by the Guardian, now by the Universal House of Justice. We labor with the knowledge that—while there are millions of well-intentioned souls in our nation earnestly endeavoring to solve the profound social and economic problems afflicting us—there are none but us to conduct the sacred work with which we have been entrusted. And the uniqueness of this work has less to do with our own present capacity than with the infinite powers inherent in the Word of God—powers which must be progressively shared and systematically applied in the realm of action. As recently stated in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

“[T]he believers should never, for even one moment, lose sight of the fact that the crisis now engulfing every part of the planet is essentially spiritual.” If the crisis afflicting humanity is spiritual, can there be any question that its solution must also be spiritual? Is it any wonder that Shoghi Effendi referred to the “spiritual” prerequisites for success? Must not that same focus on spiritual truths and principles lie at the heart of the current series of Plans of the Faith? What else but the Word of God can spiritually ennoble, educate, and inspire souls to address the needs of the time? As the House of Justice has explained, the Word of God is at the center of the Bahá'í community's current endeavors: “Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God.” In study circles, participants are introduced to the study of the Word of God, consider its application and implications, and enter into a lifelong immersion in it, which will shape their knowledge, volition, and action; in children's classes, children memorize and learn about the Word of God; in the junior youth program, young people explore and are empowered by concepts found in the Word of God; and in devotional meetings, attendees recite and are inspired by the Word of God. Even in the Bahá'í community's other areas of focus—projects and activities for social action and involvement in the discourses of society—the Word of God offers insights for addressing the issues facing society and contributing to its social and economic betterment.

This guidance makes it clear that the Plan cannot be reduced to a mere set of activities, important as they are. It is rather through active engagement with the Creative Word that we and those who join with us gain capacity to reflect the full splendor of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. In the many clusters in our country still in the earliest stages of growth, small numbers of people are walking the spiritual path, steadily learning how to create bonds of true friendship and service with others. As their numbers grow, they are developing the means to systematically expand their efforts to include people of all backgrounds and ages. In our most advanced clusters, where hundreds, even a thousand or more, are involved in the life of the community, we can see the first glimmerings of a pattern of action that will eventually facilitate the movement of populations toward Bahá'u'lláh. It is in such settings that we are beginning to confront and to overcome the negative aspects of our culture that the Guardian identified. It is in pursuit of these ever-widening, ever-deepening relationships that we are acquiring a more profound generosity of spirit, practicing the language and behaviors of inclusiveness, appreciating the value of collective learning and action, developing a loving concern for all, acquiring the fortitude for long-term service for the common weal, increasing the capacity for detached and

consecrated effort, seeing the empowerment and advancement of others as the meaning of a life well lived—in sum, learning all the expressions of love in action that are the harbingers of a nascent Divine Order. It is in this work that patterns of life are emerging that will serve as beacons of hope to our increasingly bewildered fellow-citizens.

We are grateful for the efforts already being made in clusters throughout the country to invite others to join us in creating the dynamics of community life described by the Supreme Body in the foregoing passage. Much remains to be done, however, between now and the end of the current Plan. Far from being unnerved by the negative forces at work in our society—and never giving in to the temptation to expend our precious time and energies on solutions that are at best temporary and at worst illusory—we, the community of the Greatest Name, must appreciate as never before that this is a time for consecrated and focused action to further the Divine Plan. This urgent call embraces all believers, young or old, in every conceivable setting from urban centers to rural outposts. We are delighted at the response awakened by our recent call for believers to serve as homefront pioneers among populations of special significance—including American Indians, African Americans, and various newly arrived immigrant groups. Of some 600 pioneers now serving, nearly 200 arrived at their new posts since Ridván this year. Hundreds more are still needed to fortify the efforts underway—from clusters where growth is just beginning, to those where the process is well established and an increased intensity of effort is required. Yet in whatever locality we may find ourselves, the field is vast and the opportunities limitless.

In our February 25 letter last year on “America and the Five Year Plan,” we mentioned our intention to hold, in due course, a national race unity conference. Since that time we have, chiefly through our Office of Public Affairs, been working diligently to better understand the nature of the current national discourse on race relations, identify potential collaborators in our own community and among others engaged in the work, and refine our contributions to that discourse through participation in various opportunities created either by us or by others. The work has progressed to a point sufficient that we hope to announce details in the coming months.

A few points must be mentioned in connection with the eventual conference. One of its principal aims will be to share not only the spirit and fundamental teachings of the Faith, but what has been learned in applying them in our society. Further, the conference cannot be thought of as a single consummating event. It will be only one milestone in what will undoubtedly be a prolonged engagement with our fellow-citizens on the issue of racial justice. That process will progress in all its dimensions in the years to come—in expansion and consolidation, in social action, and in discourse—in an increasingly coherent manner.

Finally, it is primarily you, the believers throughout the country, upon whom the success of this process depends. As we are reminded in the same letter written on behalf of the House of Justice:

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi refers to the arenas, private and public, in which believers are called on to fulfill the spiritual prerequisites of success: “a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color.” Similarly, the

House of Justice is now asking the friends to bring such considerations to bear in the countless spaces they have been creating—through their engagement in the Five Year Plan—in the activities for community-building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society. It is this, rather than the introduction of any particular program into the Bahá'í community or its more extensive participation in any specific movement in the wider society, that will ensure the Guardian's ultimate aims for its destiny and the destiny of the nation of which it is a part.

This clearly is not the work of a single Plan or even of a single generation. It will continue until we have contributed our full share, in concert with countless other people of good will, to the eradication of the stain of racial prejudice—together with the defilement of materialism, corruption, and moral laxity—from the fabric of this nation.

The social environment in which we are now living is giving rise to demonstrably new levels of receptivity to the Bahá'í teachings. Experience in dozens of neighborhoods; in some 2,000 activities revolving around race unity reported this year by the friends, many encompassing teaching, social action, and discourse; from social media experiments in a handful of clusters; and from numerous other reports are together proving the high degree of receptivity of many of our fellow-citizens. This is being expressed in a marked eagerness to engage in meaningful conversations based on the Word of God and to afterwards join us in the work of community building.

The intensity of our efforts to advance our work must be commensurate with the urgency of the times. A vast increase in individual and collective teaching activity is now needed. The challenges of the moment will demand from us a degree of sacrifice which, although different in circumstance, must mirror the staunch devotion of our brothers and sisters in the Cradle of the Faith. Every secondary matter must be set aside for the sake of the Cause of God, so that our unity and singleness of purpose will attract the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty. In this spirit, we can and will usher in the second century of the Formative Age soaring on wings of victory!

Though voiced 80 years ago, the beloved Guardian's words of appeal speak to us with undiminished clarity and forcefulness:

The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the American continent—the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith—must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter.

Be assured of our abiding love, our unceasing prayers, and our utmost confidence in the capacity of this community to achieve the high destiny to which it has been called.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

November 27, 2019

To the participants in the
"Pupil of the Eye" Conference

Dearly loved Friends,

Barely a month has passed since Bahá'ís across the globe celebrated that momentous day, 200 years ago, when the Báb, the Prophet-Herald of the long-promised Day of God, was born into this world. His appearance set in motion spiritual forces of incalculable potency designed, on one hand, to shatter for all time antiquated concepts and patterns governing human affairs that were characterized by ignorance, strife, and conflict, and, on the other, to establish in their place the foundation on which a wholly new order could be erected, resting on mighty pillars of true knowledge and divine justice. These two processes were described by the beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, as agencies both "of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos . . . [which] are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind."

In these opening decades of the 21st century, we remain very much in the midst of a struggle to achieve this destiny, so glorious and long sought for. Nowhere is this more apparent than in America. Despite the sacrificial efforts of countless people over many generations to remold our society according to noble ideals and the genuine progress that has been made, we continue to be mired in rampant materialism, sunk in ever-deepening and more deplorable moral decay, and enmeshed in a deep-seated and seemingly intractable form of racism that manifests itself in virtually every dimension of our public and private lives. Even those who have accepted the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, however earnest their belief, are not immune to the pernicious influence of these forces and the insensitivities and injustices to which they give rise. All are the result of our immature and incomplete understanding and practice of the shining truth of the oneness of humanity.

You, the people of color of this nation who for so long have been subjected to wounds grievous and slow-healing, understand well that what the world needs is more than mere lip-service to the ideal of human brotherhood. You know that the hearts of your fellow citizens must be entirely transformed; that patterns of community life must be created that will over time manifestly and magnetically demonstrate the richness and splendor of Bahá'u'lláh's unifying teachings; and that Bahá'í institutions must be tested and refined until they reflect the full glory of His vision. You are only too aware that America desperately needs persuasive evidence of "a true pattern, in action, of something better than it already has." You also know that only the Bahá'í revelation has the power to fulfill these longings.

You have assembled at a time of critical importance to the nation's future. You will spend the next few days reflecting on the contribution you can make to the task of applying Bahá'u'lláh's healing medicine to a sick and diseased society. In particular, you

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will prayerfully consider the implications of this situation for people of African descent and the special role they have been assigned by the Blessed Beauty Himself, as stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Bahá'u'lláh once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the spirit shineth forth.

This powerful statement provides indisputable proof of the greatness of your divinely appointed station and mission, to be long cherished in the trying days ahead as we together work shoulder to shoulder to build a new civilization, the like of which the world has never seen.

These tasks must be taken up in community after community, the Universal House of Justice has stated, in a "sustained, spiritual and social transformation" that will "gradually grow in scale and effectiveness—through action and reflection over time." The Supreme Body further elaborates that it is "[t]hrough collective action in the various social spaces in which the friends are wholeheartedly engaged to translate the Teachings into action that they will, through mistakes and difficulties, with love and forbearance, learn to resolve challenges pertaining to race, both within their communities and in the society at large."

Throughout the course of this conference you will doubtless call to mind African American believers of past generations whose outstanding services helped lay the strong foundation on which this community stands. We refer, of course, to such heroes of our Faith as Pocahontas Pope, Robert Turner, Elsie Austin, Hand of the Cause of God Louis G. Gregory, Magdalene Carney, and countless others who stand ready to assist you. Above all, you will surely call to mind the incomparable example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Whose keen and uncompromising sense of justice, infinite love, and ceaseless encouragement set the very pattern of Bahá'í service. Whatever the obstacles ahead, however seemingly insurmountable the challenges, we all have faith in the ultimate victory of this sacred Cause, and in the destiny assigned to America by the Master's unerring pen:

Likewise, the continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide and the free assemble.

We ardently supplicate the Beloved of the World to enfold you, each and every one, in the shelter of His loving embrace, and to bless, guide, and sustain you in all your efforts to spread the Light of this glorious Day.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES