

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

August 18, 2020

To the American Bahá'í community
for the Feast of 'Asmá'

Dearly loved Friends,

In its landmark July 22 message addressed expressly to this Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice characterized this time as “a moment of historic portent” which “holds significance not only for the destiny of America anticipated in the Sacred Writings, but also for the mission entrusted to your community by the hand of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” A significant element of that mission is to play a decisive role—in the fullness of time and as a result of determined and sustained effort—in eradicating the stain of racial prejudice from the fabric of our nation.

Such an endeavor requires from us capacities that are repeatedly emphasized in the concepts and approaches of the current series of Five Year Plans—not least of them the capacities to read our reality, assess that reality in light of the teachings of the Faith, take meaningful action according to those teachings, engage in honest reflection, and refine our efforts as new insights emerge. Achieving them requires the combined efforts of individuals, their respective communities, and the institutions of the Faith. Over time, we have found that Local Spiritual Assemblies in particular play a key role, and we have been pleased to hear from a number of them about their activities and learning.

We recently received, for example, a wonderful report written on behalf of the Spiritual Assembly of Washington, DC, which chronicles several years of conscious effort and learning centered on the concept of race unity. Several years ago, the DC Assembly decided to make freedom from racial prejudice the watchword in all of its meetings, agreeing that every matter would include consideration of the question: “What are the racial, cultural, class, and gender implications of this decision?” The Assembly also began regularly asking itself how its decisions promote the nobility of African Americans and draw on their experience. In the years since, the Assembly has applied these questions to virtually all facets of the life of the community.

“These questions,” the report states, “are placed at the top of the Assembly’s agenda, and asking them has definitely influenced decisions in many different situations. Equally important is the consultation that takes place when the questions are considered as part of the consultative process. Our understanding of issues deepens, as does our unity of thought. At times the consultation can become very intense, but the Assembly has not backed away from that intensity.”

The report goes on to describe numerous lines of action resulting from this approach, many undertaken in close collaboration with their Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies. One significant achievement has been an increase in the participation and enrollment of African Americans. The report states:

In the last year, eight African Americans have enrolled in the Faith; all were accompanied through the institute process by white, Latino, Persian, and African American Bahá'ís, and they all remain actively engaged in the core activities and community life. One of these new African American believers has recently been appointed as a member of the Area Teaching Committee. The Assembly invited all eight to a dinner meeting to learn about their desires and to share passages

about the pupil of the eye. From this gathering, the Assembly gained a great deal of insight into what these friends felt was important when sharing the Faith with other African Americans, such as the teachings on racial unity and racial justice and the concept of the pupil of the eye. The point of inviting them to such a gathering was to emphasize the role of African Americans and to assure them that they and their viewpoints are valued in this community. The Assembly strives to always remember that 'every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it.'

The Assembly summed up its approach this way:

Efforts to integrate questions of race, class and culture into the life of the DC Bahá'í community have been significantly aided by two foundational principles guiding the framework for action of the Five Year Plan: 1) approaching this with intention as an aspect of a process of learning that 2) advances as we build capacity through systematic action and reflection. The more we do, the more we learn. The more we learn, the more we grow in strength. Thus, we understand this is a process in which we learn to build our capacity at all levels—the individual, the community and the institutions—to better address issues of race proactively and as they naturally come up when a diverse group of people come together in an intimate space. This understanding allows us to appreciate that this is a process that unfolds over time, which is not at odds with urgency, and to remember that 'systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.' . . . [We are] sharing this information in the spirit of learning, not because we feel like we've arrived. We are grateful to Bahá'u'lláh for guiding us in our efforts, realizing that we still have much to learn.

Dear friends, the DC Assembly's entire 12-page report is accessible on the landing page of the national Race Unity Action Resources site (at <https://sites.google.com/bahai.us/race-unity-action/ideas-for-action/community-building>) and it merits your attention. We hope that the friends everywhere, especially members of local Assemblies, will read it carefully and will gain insights that will serve to stimulate and encourage their own efforts.

Our constant and ardent prayers accompany you in all your efforts in this great arena of endeavor.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

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Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary