

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

Book 8

Unit 3

The Universal House of Justice

**PRE-PUBLICATION EDITION
MATERIAL IN DEVELOPMENT**

VERSION 1.4.1.PP

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Ruhi Institute

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The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution functioning under the aegis of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia. Its purpose is to develop human resources dedicated to the spiritual, social and cultural progress of the Colombian people. Over the decades its materials have increasingly been used by national Bahá'í communities in all parts of the world.

The approach to curriculum development followed by the Ruhi Institute differs significantly from the traditional one of design, field-testing and evaluation, carried out in a linear fashion. The first step in writing any set of materials is taken, rather, when an experience is created at the grassroots in performing some act of service in response to the exigencies of the development of a community. Materials emerge out of this experience and become an expression of it. They are, on the one hand, a record of the learning that occurs in applying the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in a particular area of service and, on the other, an instrument for the systematization of that learning. The approach has been described in the following terms in the small volume *Learning About Growth: The story of the Ruhi Institute and large-scale expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Colombia*:

Once an educational need is identified, a small group of people, working at the grassroots, consult among themselves, develop a set of ideas for educational activities, and put them into practice. The results of this practice are reviewed, evaluated and consulted upon; in light of this consultation, a modified set of educational activities is put into practice, and subjected to reflection that leads to further modification and revision. At no time in this process of curriculum development does action await the final preparation and evaluation of educational materials. At every stage, educational activities proceed with the best materials at hand, in the conviction that it is only through practice and reflection, both pursued in light of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, that more appropriate curricula can gradually evolve. Yet, this is not a setting in which a few individuals are developing materials for their own use, and it does become necessary at some point to finalize the structure and content of each unit so that it may be used with confidence by others. The decision to release a final version of the materials for a given course is made simply when it is noticed that modifications are becoming negligible. It is important to note that the various aspects of this process of consultation, action and reflection are carried out parallel with one another, and not performed in a linear sequence which would be inherently artificial.

As the use of the materials of the Ruhi Institute has become more widespread, the development process has drawn increasingly on experience worldwide in applying the teachings to the life of humanity. Though in practice the process today can take diverse forms, depending on the nature of the material in development, there are generally three stages that give rise to what is considered the final published edition.

1. Initial Outline

At this stage a course or text contains the basic concepts and a set of passages from the Bahá'í writings that, taken together, are believed to achieve the educational objective in question. For some time, this initial outline of ideas is used by small groups of individuals in the field, as part of the efforts to elaborate effective course content.

2. Alpha Version

As action progresses, the material is refined and begins to reflect new experience gained, incorporating ideas that arise out of it. Not infrequently, certain concepts are amended, new passages from the Bahá'í writings added, or a series of simple exercises introduced to

facilitate comprehension of a topic or to help develop an important skill or attitude. Through this process, a consolidated course or text emerges which is generally regarded as the “alpha version”.

3. *Pre-Publication Edition*

In time it is determined, generally on the basis of the integrity of the content, to make the course or text more widely available as a pre-publication edition. Through its continued use, it becomes apparent when a section needs to be moved or an exercise or two revised. Several successive versions may appear. Gradually, however, fewer and fewer modifications are required to achieve the intended purpose of the course or text, and the material, at this stage, goes for publication.

We are happy to make available to selected organizations and institutions one of the units that has reached the pre-publication stage. It is the third of three units of a book currently in development entitled *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*. You are encouraged to send us any comments you have based on your experience in using the course content.

Ruhi Institute

SECTION 1

On 21 April 1963, the first day of Riḍván and the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh, the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Him in His Most Holy Book, was brought into being. That day two hundred and eighty-eight members of fifty-one National and Regional Spiritual Assemblies gathered in the main hall of the Master's house in Haifa and, following a brief address by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum and the recitation of prayers, proceeded to fill out their ballots. In an atmosphere of silent reverence, the roll was then called—each Spiritual Assembly in alphabetical order—and the members present arose and placed their ballots in the ballot box. Those from absentee delegates were deposited as their names were read. Only five of the fifty-six National and Regional Assemblies in the world were not able to send a representative to that event, but ballots were received from all. The results of the election were announced the next day before a gathering of the delegates, and Bahá'í communities around the world were immediately informed of the outcome through a cable sent by the Hands of the Cause of God. It concluded with this statement:

“TO JUBILATION ENTIRE BAHÁ'Í WORLD VICTORIOUS COMPLETION BELOVED GUARDIAN'S UNIQUE CRUSADE NOW ADDED HUMBLE GRATITUDE PROFOUND THANKSGIVING FOLLOWERS BAHÁ'U'LLAH FOR ERECTION UNIVERSAL HOUSE JUSTICE AUGUST BODY TO WHOM ALL BELIEVERS MUST TURN WHOSE DESTINY IS TO GUIDE UNFOLDMENT HIS EMBRYONIC WORLD ORDER THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS PRESCRIBED BY BAHÁ'U'LLAH ELABORATED BY ABDU'L-BAHA LABORIOUSLY ERECTED BY SHOGHI EFFENDI AND ENSURE EARLY DAWN GOLDEN AGE FAITH WHEN THE WORD OF THE LORD WILL COVER THE EARTH AS THE WATERS COVER THE SEA.”¹

Thus had the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá written decades earlier come to pass:

“At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.

“The establishment of that House is not dependent upon the conversion of all the nations of the world. For example, if conditions were favorable and no disturbances would be caused, the friends in Persia would elect their representatives, and likewise the friends in America, in India, and other areas would also elect their representatives, and these would elect a House of Justice. That House of Justice would be the Supreme House of Justice. That is all.”²

SECTION 2

Soon after the election, the members of the Universal House of Justice and Hands of the Cause of God traveled to London to attend the first Bahá'í World Congress from 28 April to 2 May. The gathering commemorated “the formal assumption by Bahá'u'lláh of His Prophetic Office” one hundred years earlier and the successful conclusion of the “fate-laden, soul-stirring,

decade-long, world-embracing Spiritual Crusade”, which had been launched by the Guardian. It had been the hope of the Guardian that the congress would be held in Baghdád, but circumstances did not permit the fulfillment of his wish. More than six thousand Bahá’ís from across the globe converged on London during those days of rejoicing. On the third day, one of the Hands of the Cause of God presented to the congress the members of the newly elected Universal House of Justice, who arose and stood before the friends assembled. The first statement of the Universal House of Justice was then read by one of its members:

“All praise, O my God, be to Thee Who art the Source of all glory and majesty, of greatness and honor, of sovereignty and dominion, of loftiness and grace, of awe and power. Whomsoever Thou wilt Thou causest to draw nigh unto the Most Great Ocean, and on whomsoever Thou desirest Thou conferrest the honor of recognizing Thy Most Ancient Name. Of all who are in heaven and on earth, none can withstand the operation of Thy sovereign Will. From all eternity Thou didst rule the entire creation, and Thou wilt continue for evermore to exercise Thy dominion over all created things. There is none other God but Thee, the Almighty, the Most Exalted, the All-Powerful, the All-Wise.’

“Beloved friends: On this glorious occasion, the celebration of the Most Great Jubilee, we raise our grateful thanks to Bahá’u’lláh for all His bounties showered upon the friends throughout the world. This historic moment marks at one and the same time the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy, the Hundredth Anniversary of the Declaration of the Promised One of all ages, the termination of the first epoch of the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá designed to establish the Faith of God in all the world, and the successful conclusion of our beloved Guardian’s world-encircling Crusade, enabling his lovers and loved ones everywhere to lay this glorious harvest of victory in his name at the feet of the Blessed Beauty. This Most Great Jubilee is the crowning victory of the life work of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Cause of God. He it was, and he alone, who unfolded the potentialities of the widely scattered, numerically small, and largely unorganized Bahá’í community which had been called into being during the Heroic Age of the Faith. He it was who unfolded the grand design of God’s Holy Cause, set in motion the great plans of teaching already outlined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, established the institutions and greatly extended the endowments at the World Centre, and raised the Temples of America, Africa, Australasia and Europe, developed the Administrative Order of the Cause throughout the world, and set the Ark of the Cause true on its course. He appointed the Hands of the Cause of God.

“The paeans of joy and gratitude, of love and adoration which we now raise to the throne of Bahá’u’lláh would be inadequate, and the celebrations of this Most Great Jubilee in which, as promised by our beloved Guardian, we are now engaged, would be marred were no tribute paid at this time to the Hands of the Cause of God. For they share the victory with their beloved commander, he who raised them up and appointed them. They kept the ship on its course and brought it safe to port. The Universal House of Justice, with pride and love, recalls on this supreme occasion its profound admiration for the heroic work which they have accomplished. We do not wish to dwell on the appalling dangers which faced the infant Cause when it was suddenly deprived of our beloved Shoghi Effendi, but rather to acknowledge with all the love and gratitude of our hearts the reality of the sacrifice, the labor, the self-

discipline, the superb stewardship of the Hands of the Cause of God. We can think of no more fitting words to express our tribute to these dearly loved and valiant souls than to recall the Words of Bahá'u'lláh Himself: ‘Light and glory, greeting and praise be upon the Hands of His Cause, through whom the light of fortitude hath shone forth and the truth hath been established that the authority to choose rests with God, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained, through whom the ocean of bounty hath surged and the fragrance of the gracious favors of God, the Lord of mankind, hath been diffused.’

“The members of the Universal House of Justice, all being in Haifa at the time of the election, were able to visit the Holy Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá where they prostrated themselves at the Sacred Thresholds and humbly sought strength and assistance in the mighty task before them. Later in London they have paid homage at the resting-place of Shoghi Effendi, the blessed and sacred bough of the Tree of Holiness.

“As soon as the House of Justice is able to organize its work and deploy its forces it will examine carefully all the conditions of the Cause of God, and communications will be made to the friends. At this time we call upon the believers everywhere to follow up vigorously the opportunities opened up by the World Crusade. Consolidation and deepening must go hand in hand with an eager extension of the teaching work so that the onward march of the Cause may continue unabated in preparation for future plans. Now that the attention of the public is becoming more and more drawn to the Cause of God the friends must brace themselves and prepare their institutions to sustain the gaze of the world, whether it be friendly or hostile, eager or idle.

“The Universal House of Justice greets you all lovingly and joyfully at this time, and asks you to pray fervently for its speedy development and the spiritual strengthening of its members.”³

SECTION 3

The election of the Universal House of Justice galvanized the Bahá'í world. The “last and crowning stage in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh—the election of the Universal House of Justice” had been completed. It was now the center to which all the believers turned their gaze in love and loyalty. Described by Shoghi Effendi as the “last refuge of a tottering civilization” and the “supreme organ of the Bahá'í Commonwealth” of the future, it had assumed its rightful place on Mount Carmel and had taken the affairs of the Faith into its hands. When “this most great Edifice” would be “reared” on the “immovable foundation” of Spiritual Assemblies, Shoghi Effendi had written, “God’s purpose, wisdom, universal truths, mysteries and realities of the Kingdom” would “gradually be revealed and made manifest”. When “that central pivot of the people of Bahá’ would be “effectively, majestically and firmly established,” he had said, “a new era” would “dawn”, “heavenly bounties and graces” would “pour out from that Source”, and “the all-encompassing promises” would be “fulfilled”. Then would “the Throne of Bahá'u'lláh’s sovereignty be founded in the promised land”; then would “the scales of justice be raised on high”; then would “the banner of the

independence of the Faith be unfurled”; then would “His Most Great Law be unveiled and rivers of laws and ordinances stream forth from this snow-white spot with all-conquering power and awe-inspiring majesty”. And then would appear “the truth of what was revealed by the Tongue of Grandeur: ‘Call out to Zion, O Carmel, and announce the joyful tidings: He that was hidden from mortal eyes is come! His all-conquering sovereignty is manifest; His all-encompassing splendor is revealed.’ ‘. . . O Carmel . . . Well is it with him that circleth around thee, that proclaimeth the revelation of thy glory, and recounteth that which the bounty of the Lord, thy God, hath showered upon thee . . . Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Bahá who have been mentioned in the Book of Names.’”⁴

Before proceeding further, you are encouraged to complete the sentences below on the basis of the above-quoted passages:

1. The establishment of the Universal House of Justice represented the last and crowning stage in _____ .
2. The Universal House of Justice was described by Shoghi Effendi as the last refuge of a _____ .
3. The Universal House of Justice, he advised us further, is the _____ of the Bahá’í Commonwealth.
4. Referring to the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian indicated that when this most great _____ was reared on the _____ of Spiritual Assemblies, God’s _____ , _____ , _____ , _____ and _____ of the Kingdom would gradually be _____ and made _____ .
5. Referring to the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian indicated that when that _____ of the people of Bahá was _____ , _____ and _____ established, a _____ would dawn, _____ and _____ would pour out from _____ , and the _____ would be fulfilled.
6. Referring to the time when the Universal House of Justice would be established, the Guardian told us that the Throne of Bahá’u’lláh’s _____ would then be _____ ; the scales of _____ would then be _____ ; the banner of _____ would then be _____ ; and His Most Great _____ would then be _____ .

_____ and rivers of _____ and _____ would stream forth from this _____
_____.

7. Referring to the time when the Universal House of Justice would be established, the Guardian told us that the truth of the words revealed by Bahá'u'lláh would then appear: “Call out to Zion, O _____, and announce the _____: He that was _____ from _____ is come! His _____ is manifest; His _____ is revealed.” “. . . O _____ . . . Well is it with him that _____ around thee, that _____ the revelation of thy _____, and _____ that which the _____ of the Lord, thy God, hath _____ upon thee . . . Ere long will God _____ His _____ upon thee, and will _____ the people of _____ who have been _____ in the _____ of _____.”

SECTION 4

On 7 May 1963, in a message addressed to all National Conventions, the Universal House of Justice advised the Bahá'í world that, at Riḍván 1964, it would embark on a second global collective enterprise:

“The Cause of God, launched on the sea of the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, has achieved, under the superb leadership of its beloved Guardian, a spread throughout the world and a momentum which must now carry it forward on the next stage of its world-redeeming mission, the second epoch of the Divine Plan. The Universal House of Justice, in close consultation with the Hands of the Cause, is examining the vast range of Bahá'í activity and growth in order to prepare a detailed plan of expansion for the whole Bahá'í community, to be launched at Riḍván 1964.”⁵

On 6 October, in a message to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the House of Justice made a pronouncement of paramount importance, one with implications for the entire Bahá'í Dispensation, regarding the future of the Guardianship. As a matter not explicitly addressed “in the Book”, only the House of Justice could determine whether, in the absence of the appointment of a successor by Shoghi Effendi according to the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, there was any way for the line of Guardians to continue. This short statement clarified the issue:

“After prayerful and careful study of the Holy Texts bearing upon the question of the appointment of the successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God, and after prolonged consultation which included consideration of the views of the Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land, the Universal House of

Justice finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.”⁶

During that same month the House of Justice informed the followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world that a Nine Year Plan would be set in motion at Riḍván. “As the first step inaugurating this great undertaking”, it joyfully announced, nineteen new National Spiritual Assemblies would be formed. The global Plan would “include sixty-nine national plans”, and its goals would be forthcoming.

That the Ten Year Crusade would be followed by other Plans under the direction of the House of Justice had been foreseen by the Guardian many years earlier. Writing to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles in 1951 concerning its Two Year Plan, Shoghi Effendi had stated:

“On the success of this enterprise, unprecedented in its scope, unique in its character and immense in its spiritual potentialities, must depend the initiation, at a later period in the Formative Age of the Faith, of undertakings embracing within their range all National Assemblies functioning throughout the Bahá'í world—undertakings constituting in themselves a prelude to the launching of worldwide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in future epochs of that same Age, by the Universal House of Justice, that will symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies.”⁷

Indeed, referring to the House of Justice in an earlier communication, the Guardian had explained that it “will guide, organize and unify the affairs of the Movement throughout the world.” With the announcement of its decision to launch the Nine Year Plan, the House of Justice brought into sharp focus the work of the Bahá'í community, and the way forward was clear.

SECTION 5

Years have passed since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. Every one of us today is blessed to be the recipient of its wise counsels and loving care. We are all participants in what is the greatest drama of the world's spiritual history—the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity. Indeed, your participation in this course of studies suggests that you are fully engaged in the historical process that is unfolding in the world. All the courses in this series, both those that you have already completed and those that you will study in the future, draw extensively on elucidations and instructions given by the House of Justice in steering this process, and you will remain in constant interaction with its guidance as you strive to contribute your share to the great transformation occurring in the life of humanity.

With these thoughts in mind, we will limit our explorations in this unit to the study of a few selected passages from messages and statements of the House of Justice that help us catch a glimpse of the way in which it guides humanity on the path towards the World Order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh. The nature of our study will not be historical. It will be thematic instead, delving into broad areas, each essential to the worldwide enterprise in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. Our purpose will be to acquire a more profound appreciation for the extraordinary gift bestowed upon humanity by God in the institution of the Universal House of Justice. In its

entirety, the unit will, it is hoped, deepen even further our understanding of the power that the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh exerts on our individual and collective lives, specifically as it pertains to the statement “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.”

SECTION 6

Let us begin our exploration with the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice. The Constitution consists of two parts: a Declaration of Trust and a set of By-Laws. Together they outline in broad terms the major functions of the Universal House of Justice, as drawn from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the written communications of the Guardian. In this unit we will examine only the Declaration of Trust, which is set out below. Even if you are familiar with the document, you are asked to undertake a study of it again, reading it more than once and following closely the flow of ideas.

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE ONE, THE INCOMPARABLE, THE ALL-POWERFUL, THE ALL-KNOWING, THE ALL-WISE.

“The light that is shed from the heaven of bounty, and the benediction that shineth from the dawning-place of the will of God, the Lord of the Kingdom of Names, rest upon Him Who is the Supreme Mediator, the Most Exalted Pen, Him Whom God hath made the dawning-place of His most excellent names and the dayspring of His most exalted attributes. Through Him the light of unity hath shone forth above the horizon of the world, and the law of oneness hath been revealed amidst the nations, who, with radiant faces, have turned towards the Supreme Horizon, and acknowledged that which the Tongue of Utterance hath spoken in the Kingdom of His knowledge: ‘Earth and heaven, glory and dominion, are God’s, the Omnipotent, the Almighty, the Lord of grace abounding!’”

* * *

“With joyous and thankful hearts we testify to the abundance of God’s Mercy, to the perfection of His Justice and to the fulfillment of His Ancient Promise.

“Bahá'u'lláh, the Revealer of God’s Word in this Day, the Source of Authority, the Fountainhead of Justice, the Creator of a new World Order, the Establisher of the Most Great Peace, the Inspirer and Founder of a world civilization, the Judge, the Lawgiver, the Unifier and Redeemer of all mankind, has proclaimed the advent of God’s Kingdom on earth, has formulated its laws and ordinances, enunciated its principles, and ordained its institutions. To direct and canalize the forces released by His Revelation He instituted His Covenant, whose power has preserved the integrity of His Faith, maintained its unity and stimulated its world-wide expansion throughout the successive ministries of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi

Effendi. It continues to fulfill its life-giving purpose through the agency of the Universal House of Justice whose fundamental object, as one of the twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is to ensure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of the Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers, and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings.

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion”, declares Bahá'u'lláh, ‘is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. This is the straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure.’

“Unto the Most Holy Book”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá declares in His Will and Testament, ‘every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice.’

“The provenance, the authority, the duties, the sphere of action of the Universal House of Justice all derive from the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh which, together with the interpretations and expositions of the Center of the Covenant and of the Guardian of the Cause—who, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is the sole authority in the interpretation of Bahá'í Scripture—constitute the binding terms of reference of the Universal House of Justice and are its bedrock foundation. The authority of these Texts is absolute and immutable until such time as Almighty God shall reveal His new Manifestation to Whom will belong all authority and power.

“There being no successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God, the Universal House of Justice is the Head of the Faith and its supreme institution, to which all must turn, and on it rests the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the unity and progress of the Cause of God. Further, there devolve upon it the duties of directing and coordinating the work of the Hands of the Cause, of ensuring the continuing discharge of the functions of protection and propagation vested in that institution, and of providing for the receipt and disbursement of the Ḥuqúqu'lláh.

“Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested are:

“To ensure the preservation of the Sacred Texts and to safeguard their inviolability; to analyze, classify, and coordinate the Writings; and to defend and protect the Cause of God and emancipate it from the fetters of repression and persecution;

“To advance the interests of the Faith of God; to proclaim, propagate and teach its Message; to expand and consolidate the institutions of its Administrative Order; to usher in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh; to promote the attainment of those spiritual qualities which should characterize Bahá'í life individually and collectively; to do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace; and to foster that

which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world;

“To enact laws and ordinances not expressly recorded in the Sacred Texts; to abrogate, according to the changes and requirements of the time, its own enactments; to deliberate and decide upon all problems which have caused difference; to elucidate questions that are obscure; to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals; and to give attention to the preservation of human honor, to the development of countries and the stability of states;

“To promulgate and apply the laws and principles of the Faith; to safeguard and enforce that rectitude of conduct which the Law of God enjoins; to preserve and develop the Spiritual and Administrative Centre of the Bahá’í Faith, permanently fixed in the twin cities of ‘Akká and Haifa; to administer the affairs of the Bahá’í community throughout the world; to guide, organize, coordinate and unify its activities; to found institutions; to be responsible for ensuring that no body or institution within the Cause abuse its privileges or decline in the exercise of its rights and prerogatives; and to provide for the receipt, disposition, administration and safeguarding of the funds, endowments and other properties that are entrusted to its care;

“To adjudicate disputes falling within its purview; to give judgement in cases of violation of the laws of the Faith and to pronounce sanctions for such violations; to provide for the enforcement of its decisions; to provide for the arbitration and settlement of disputes arising between peoples; and to be the exponent and guardian of that Divine Justice which can alone ensure the security of, and establish the reign of law and order in, the world.

“The members of the Universal House of Justice, designated by Bahá’u’lláh ‘the Men of Justice’, ‘the people of Bahá who have been mentioned in the Book of Names’, ‘the Trustees of God amongst His servants and the daysprings of authority in His countries’, shall in the discharge of their responsibilities ever bear in mind the following standards set forth by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God:

‘In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, in the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice, it should be borne in mind, are not, as Bahá’u’lláh’s utterances clearly imply, responsible to those whom they represent, nor are they allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass of the faithful, or of those who directly elect them. They are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates and promptings of their conscience. They may, indeed they must, acquaint themselves with the conditions prevailing among the community, must weigh dispassionately in their minds the merits of any case presented for their consideration, but must reserve for themselves the right of an unfettered decision. *“God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth”*, is Bahá’u’lláh’s incontrovertible assurance. They, and not the body of those who

either directly or indirectly elect them, have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the lifeblood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.’

“The Universal House of Justice was first elected on the first day of the Festival of Ridván in the one hundred and twentieth year of the Bahá’í Era [21 April 1963], when the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies, in accordance with the provisions of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and in response to the summons of the Hands of the Cause of God, the Chief Stewards of Bahá’u’lláh’s embryonic World Commonwealth, brought into being this ‘crowning glory’ of the administrative institutions of Bahá’u’lláh, the very ‘nucleus and forerunner’ of His World Order. Now, therefore, in obedience to the Command of God and with entire reliance upon Him, we, the members of the Universal House of Justice, set our hands and its seal to this Declaration of Trust which, together with the By-Laws hereto appended, form the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice.”⁸

This exalted instrument was signed and sealed on 26 November 1972, the Day of the Covenant, in the Council Chamber of the Universal House of Justice. A cablegram was immediately sent announcing the adoption of this “profoundly significant step”. With these stirring words, it drew to a close:

“FULLY ASSURED MEASURE JUST TAKEN WILL FURTHER REINFORCE TIES BINDING WORLD CENTRE TO NATIONAL LOCAL COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT WORLD RELEASE FRESH ENERGIES INCREASE ENTHUSIASM CONFIDENCE VALIANT WORKERS HIS DIVINE VINEYARD LABORING ASSIDUOUSLY BRING MANKIND UNDER SHELTER HIS ALL-GLORIOUS COVENANT.”⁹

SECTION 7

The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice is a stupendous document, and our appreciation of it increases as we witness the House of Justice act in the world and see with what consummate wisdom and love it guides humanity. At this point you may find it helpful to reread the passage written by the Guardian that is quoted at the close of the Declaration of Trust and then to complete the sentences below.

1. In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith and in the enactment of the legislation to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice are not responsible to _____ .
2. In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith and in the enactment of the legislation to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice are not governed by _____

_____ .

3. The members of the Universal House of Justice are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, _____ .
4. The members of the Universal House of Justice may, indeed they must, acquaint themselves with _____ , must weigh _____ , but must reserve for themselves _____ .
5. In this respect, Bahá'u'lláh assures us that God will verily inspire them with _____ .
6. The members of the Universal House of Justice, and not _____ , have been made the recipients of _____ .

You may wish to pause for a moment and meditate, in light of the above exercise, on the following passage from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Though the passage was already the subject of your reflection in the first unit of this book, it may be worthwhile to think about its import here.

“Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.

“Say, O people: Verily the Supreme House of Justice is under the wings of your Lord, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, that is, under His protection, His care, and His shelter; for He has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.”¹⁰

SECTION 8

The opening passages of the Declaration of Trust make reference to a concept that we have considered earlier in this book: that, in the institution of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh has provided humanity with an authoritative source of guidance under His protection, so necessary in this period of history when its collective life must undergo such profound change, when the structure of society must be entirely reshaped, when the essential relationships that bind

people and nations must find new expression. Let us review what we have studied earlier and try to consolidate our understanding of this vital concept.

In Section 31 of the first unit of this book, we discussed the implications of the existence of the Universal House of Justice for the advancement of civilization. Among the quotations we studied in that section was the following from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh:

“Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the recipients of divine inspiration from the unseen Kingdom. It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them. All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.”¹¹

In Section 14 of the second unit, we read the passage below from a letter written by the Guardian:

“It should also be borne in mind that the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá'u'lláh, be safely embodied therein. To this testify the words of Bahá'u'lláh, as recorded in the Eighth Leaf of the exalted Paradise: ‘It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.’”¹²

We know that by the “Book” is meant the Word of God revealed by His Manifestation and that to it are bound inextricably the statements and pronouncements of His authorized Interpreter, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá followed by the Guardian. With the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the final pages of the “Book”, we could in a sense say, had been written for this Dispensation. What we need to remember is that, in the institution of the Universal House of Justice, we have an entity, inspired directly by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, alive in the world through which guidance will continue to flow to humanity. It, and it alone, is invested with the authority to decide on all matters not explicitly revealed in the Text, to elucidate questions that are obscure, and to settle all disputes. It was created by Bahá'u'lláh in such a way that it is, at all times, in complete and utter harmony with His Revelation; it is impossible for its guidance to depart from God's Will or to veer from the path that leads to the achievement of His purpose for humanity. In this way, then, the establishment of that Divine civilization, ushered in by Bahá'u'lláh, is assured.

So important to our understanding are the two passages quoted above that it is suggested you review them again by filling in the blanks in the following sentences:

1. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that inasmuch as for _____ there is a _____ and for _____ there is an _____, such affairs should be _____ to the _____ that its members may _____

- according to the _____ and _____ of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the _____ of _____ from the unseen Kingdom. It is _____ upon all to be _____ unto _____. All _____ should be referred to the _____, but _____ must be observed according to that which God _____.
2. Shoghi Effendi reminds us that the _____ of the Cause has been so fashioned, that _____ is deemed _____ to _____ into it in order to keep it in the _____ of all _____ movements, can, according to the _____ made by Bahá'u'lláh, be _____ therein. To this _____ the words of Bahá'u'lláh, as recorded in the Eighth Leaf of the exalted Paradise: “It is _____ upon the _____ of the House of Justice to _____ together regarding those _____ which have not _____ been _____ in the Book, and to _____ that which is _____ to _____. God will verily _____ them with _____ He _____, and He, verily, is the _____, the _____.”

SECTION 9

Let us reflect further on the concept discussed in the preceding section. The continuity provided by an authoritative source of guidance, directly inspired by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, will ultimately affect every department of life. At this moment in history, from among the many processes through which civilization advances, the growth of the Bahá'í community offers us the most ready example of the relationship between progress and continued guidance from the Universal House of Justice. We will use it, then, as a means of illustration. We will look specifically at the unfoldment of the global Plans of the Faith from 1996 to 2013, a period during which rapid and profound changes took place in the Bahá'í community. The following paragraph from a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the House of Justice summarized what occurred from the beginning of this period up until that point—over the course of the Four Year Plan (1996 to 2000), the Twelve Month Plan (2000 to 2001), and the Five Year Plan (2001 to 2006):

“Our 26 December 1995 message, which focused the Bahá'í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith, described in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead. As a first step, Bahá'í communities were urged to systematize their efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes. While every national community took measures to create institutional capacity to perform this essential function, it was not until the outset of

the Five Year Plan that the significance of a well-conceived program of training became widely appreciated. The introduction of the concept of the cluster made it possible for the friends to think about the accelerated growth of the community on a manageable scale and to conceive of it in terms of two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next. This image helped the believers to analyze the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate their findings. Never before have the means for establishing a pattern of activity that places equal emphasis on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation been better understood. Indeed, so consistent has been the experience with intensive programs of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in divers clusters, that no cause for equivocation remains. The way forward is clear, and at Riḍván 2006 we will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.”¹³

At the time, the movement of a cluster was largely defined in terms of “the steady multiplication of core activities”, but only some two hundred clusters had reached the stage in their development in which an intensive program of growth could be sustained. The House of Justice asked the Bahá’í world to raise that number to no fewer than 1,500 during the next Five Year Plan, from 2006 to 2011. In its Riḍván 2007 message, it commented on the progress thus far achieved:

“Today as we observe the workings of those clusters which are in a robust state of growth, we note that in every one of them the friends have continued to strengthen the institute process, while learning to mobilize their expanding nucleus of active supporters of the Faith, to establish an efficient scheme for the coordination of their efforts, to weave their individual initiatives and collective endeavors into an effective pattern of unified action, and to draw on the analysis of pertinent information in planning the cycles of their activities.”¹⁴

Twelve months later, in April 2008, the House of Justice addressed the delegates gathered at the Tenth International Bahá’í Convention:

“In just a few years, the intensive program of growth has emerged as a powerful means for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith on a large scale. Leading the process of learning that impels progress are scores of clusters where the friends have, through painstaking, systematic effort, come to understand how best to implement the cycles of activity that constitute such a program.”¹⁵

Equally important was the increase in capacity worldwide to diffuse and apply lessons learned:

“What sometimes required several years for the friends in one cluster to accomplish can now be learned in another in a relatively short span of time.”¹⁶

By now, momentum was gathering, and on 20 October 2008, at the midway point of the Five Year Plan, the House of Justice expressed joy at noting that “scores of clusters around the globe” were being “primed for systematic expansion”. “The challenge facing the friends in these and all clusters”, it wrote at the time,

“... continues to be twofold in character. While learning to identify receptive segments of society and share with responsive souls the message of the Faith—an aspiration generally not difficult to fulfill—they are striving to understand in practice how the diverse elements of a healthy pattern of growth, particularly the development of human resources, are to be integrated into a cohesive whole.”¹⁷

“To provide the opportunity for the friends to gather together, as much to celebrate the feats already achieved during the Plan as to deliberate on its current exigencies,” the House of Justice then announced the convocation of a series of regional conferences, forty-one in number, to be held in cities across the globe. The effects were profound. Nearly eighty thousand participants attended the conferences—a “mighty sea” that “stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith.” “No one could have imagined”, wrote the House of Justice referring to the outset of the Plan three years earlier, “how profoundly the Lord of Hosts, in His inscrutable wisdom, intended to transform His community in so short a span of time.” Indeed, by Ridván 2010, one year in advance of the Plan’s conclusion, the community had surpassed the 1,500 goal. What was striking, however, was “not so much the numerical feat” that had been achieved, but “a combination of developments” in the Bahá’í community “at the more profound level of culture”. Chief among them was the rise

“... in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá’u’lláh and His Revelation.”¹⁸

The early establishment of 1,500 intensive programs of growth had made evident how

“... courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside.”¹⁹

Even the most modest estimates suggested that there were

“... tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.”²⁰

The community had succeeded in

“... developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed . . .”²¹

By 2010, more than 350,000 souls worldwide had completed the first institute course, raising perceptibly

“... capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character . . .”²²

A near doubling in the reserve of Bahá'í children's class teachers in a five-year period, bringing the total to some 130,000, had made it possible

“ . . . for the community to respond wholeheartedly to the spiritual aspirations of the young.”²³

A sixfold increase in capacity over the same period to assist junior youth in navigating through such a crucial stage of their lives had provided

“ . . . an indication of the level of commitment to that age group.”²⁴

And fuelling the systematic multiplication of core activities across the globe, “with no fewer than half a million known participants at a given time,” were

“ . . . the efforts of close to 70,000 friends capable of serving as tutors of study circles.”²⁵

Only some fifteen years earlier the House of Justice had urged the community to systematize its “efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes.” Now, in the system it had in place to develop such resources, the community possessed “an instrument of limitless potentialities”. It had acquired the capacity

“ . . . to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.”²⁶

Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it was now possible for

“ . . . an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order.”²⁷

With so much learning acquired and capacity built, the friends residing in clusters with an intensive program of growth in operation were asked to go a step further. They were urged to focus their energies on smaller pockets of the population, generally found in a neighborhood or village, and help each develop into a center of intense activity. In this connection, they were encouraged to

“ . . . teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighborhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation.”²⁸

At the end of one Five Year Plan and the opening of the next at Ridván 2011, the House of Justice called upon the Bahá'í community “to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a program of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.” And two years later, in its Ridván 2013 message, the House of Justice commented on the endeavors of the friends to learn more about the ways of community building in the small setting of a village or neighborhood. Not only

had this approach demonstrated its efficacy in clusters with intensive programs of growth; in others, less advanced, it was showing its promise as well. Describing the profound changes being experienced in such places, the House of Justice wrote:

“Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighborhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community’s educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá’ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—molded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one’s immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.”²⁹

Though our survey of what has occurred in the Bahá’í community from 1996 to 2013 has extended over several pages, it still falls far short in summarizing the achievements that have been made. You may wish to watch the film prepared for the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention entitled *Frontiers of Learning*, which will offer you further insight in this respect, and then undertake a discussion in your group about the concept we have been trying to grasp here—namely, that an extraordinary power has been conferred upon the Universal House of Justice by the Almighty to guide the Bahá’í community through rapid processes of change, so necessary if the community is to achieve its purpose. Change is, after all, inherent in the mission of the Faith to establish a Divine civilization. But the change that occurs in the community, as it gains in strength and in numbers, is not haphazard, nor is it the result of random forces exerting their influence. The ship of the Cause of God is not adrift on the ocean that is this world of being. It is guided intimately by the Universal House of Justice as Head of the Faith, and in whatever direction it steers the community, we know that it is as willed by God.

SECTION 10

In the unfoldment of the global Plans of the Faith, we have seen an example of the interplay between the progress of the Bahá’í community and continued guidance from the Universal House of Justice. Its guidance, of course, touches upon every one of the many interacting processes through which the community advances. An exercise may help us to consolidate our thinking in this regard.

Below is a list of statements that describe several processes currently unfolding in the Bahá'í community. They are followed by a few quotations from messages written by the House of Justice. Each quotation conveys a specific directive or decision that may have influenced one or more of the processes listed. Decide which of the processes were most affected by each directive or decision. You may wish to discuss your answers with the friends studying this course with you. There is no need to belabor the exercise however; we are only trying to get an initial impression of how the progress of the Bahá'í community is forged through the guidance of the House of Justice. In this connection, you should note that neither the processes listed nor the passages that follow them are in any particular order.

- a. Development of human resources to carry out tasks associated with the growth of the Bahá'í community
- b. Expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community
- c. Preservation and development of the Spiritual and Administrative Centre of the Faith
- d. Development of the Bahá'í Administrative Order
- e. Promulgation and application of Bahá'í law
- f. Defense and protection of the Cause
- g. Involvement in the life of society
- h. Cultivation of relations with governments and civil society
- i. Publication and distribution of the writings of the Faith in the divers languages of the peoples of the world
- j. Administration and flow of financial resources
- k. Material and spiritual education of the believers
- l. Enrichment of the spiritual life of the individual and community
- m. Evolution of all the interacting processes, in their totality, through successive epochs of the Formative Age of the Faith

“It is with profound thankfulness and joy that we announce at this auspicious moment the decision to proceed with this last project. During the Five Year Plan, erection of the Mother Temple of South America in Santiago, Chile, will commence and thus fulfill a wish clearly expressed by Shoghi Effendi.” (Riḍván 2001)

“As indicated in our letter of 30 April 1987, the way is now open for the Bahá'í world to erect the remaining buildings of its Administrative Centre, and we must without delay stride forward resolutely on this path.” (31 August 1987)

“The Kitáb-i-Aqdas—the Book described in such exalted terms by the Guardian of the Cause of God as ‘that priceless treasury enshrining for all time the brightest emanations of the mind of Bahá'u'lláh, the Charter of His World Order, the chief repository of His laws, the Harbinger of His Covenant, the Pivotal Work containing some of His noblest exhortations,

weightiest pronouncements, and portentous prophecies, and revealed during the full tide of His tribulations, at a time when the rulers of the earth had definitely forsaken Him’—this Most Holy Book, we have the honor to announce, will, in a copiously annotated English translation, be released to the Community of Bahá at Naw-Rúz.” (5 March 1993)

“With joyful and grateful hearts we announce that the restoration and conservation work on the Ridván Garden in the Holy Land, which includes a circulating water system that recreates the island and an Ottoman flour mill that was in use during the time of Bahá’u’lláh, has now been successfully completed.” (29 October 2010)

“There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organized, formally conducted programs of training on a regular schedule.” (Ridván 1996)

“Even though children’s activities have been a part of past Plans, these have fallen short of the need. Spiritual education of children and junior youth is of paramount importance to the further progress of the community. It is therefore imperative that this deficiency be remedied. Institutes must be certain to include in their programs the training of teachers of children’s classes, who can make their services available to local communities. But although providing spiritual and academic education for children is essential, this represents only a part of what must go into developing their characters and shaping their personalities. The necessity exists, too, for individuals and the institutions at all levels, which is to say the community as a whole, to show a proper attitude towards children and to take a general interest in their welfare. Such an attitude should be far removed from that of a rapidly declining order.” (Ridván 2000)

“... we have reached the conclusion that the time has arrived for us to formalize a new element of Bahá’í administration, between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, to be designated as ‘Regional Bahá’í Councils’.” (30 May 1997)

“It is indeed propitious that systematic attention be given to this vital sphere of Bahá’í endeavor. We are happy, therefore, to announce the establishment at the World Centre of the Office of Social and Economic Development, which is to assist the Universal House of Justice to promote and coordinate the activities of the friends throughout the world in this new field.” (20 October 1983)

“In those areas where strong communities with a corps of deepened believers exist, systematic programs for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith should be established forthwith.” (9 January 2001)

“We are convinced that this learning can now be systematically propagated in every continent, and at Riḍván 2006 we will call upon Bahá’ís worldwide to establish, during the next Plan, intensive programs of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters.” (27 December 2005)

“We are pleased to share with you the joyful tidings of the conclusion of the restoration work on the Shrine of the Báb. This endeavor represents the most momentous among a series of projects recently carried out in the Holy Land—including the renovation of the interior and exterior of the International Archives Building; the regeneration of the Riḍván Garden; the acquisition of extensive properties at Bahjí and the construction of a boulevard that provides access to the northern gate; and, adjacent to the Most Holy Shrine, the realignment of the perimeter of the northwest quadrant, presaging the completion of the full circle of surrounding gardens.” (12 April 2011)

“It seems fitting, then, that the sacred law which enables each one to express his or her personal sense of devotion to God in a profoundly private act of conscience that promotes the common good, which directly connects the individual believer with the Central Institution of the Faith, and which, above all, ensures to the obedient and the sincere the ineffable grace and abundant blessings of Providence, should, at this favorable juncture, be embraced by all who profess their belief in the Supreme Manifestation of God. With humility before our sovereign Lord, we now announce that as of Riḍván 1992, the beginning of the Holy Year, the Law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, the Right of God, will become universally applicable. All are lovingly called to observe it.” (Riḍván 1991)

“DELIGHTED NEWS ALL REMAINING BAHÁ’IS PREVIOUSLY SENTENCED AND RESIDENT EGYPT HAVE BEEN ACQUITTED BY CAIRO COURT. ADVISE YOUR GOVERNMENT CONVEY DEEP APPRECIATION.” (16 June 1988)

“We call upon the Bahá’ís of the world to organize special meetings of prayer around 14 May for the indomitable followers of Bahá’u’lláh in Iran, indeed, for all the people in that blessed land who are similarly subject to oppression, that the Hand of Divine Providence may grant them relief from their long ordeal.” (9 May 2010)

“The Day of the Covenant, 26 November 2010, marks the opening of a new five-year term of service for the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith. It is with great joy that we announce the names of the Counsellors appointed for the coming term, whose number remains at eighty-one.” (1 November 2010)

“The Bahá’í International Fund must not fail to meet these needs. To assist it, we have decided to set up the World Centre Endowment Fund, for the preservation, upkeep, and security of the edifices and precincts of the

Spiritual and Administrative Centres of the Faith—activities that currently form so large a part of the responsibilities of the Bahá'í International Fund.” (12 November 2001)

“As you continue to labor in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavors. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.” (Riḍván 2008)

“At this point, then, early in the execution of the Plan, it seems more vital than ever for attention to be devoted to the issue of coordination. Though the basic elements of an effective organizational scheme are already well understood, the form it should assume under diverse circumstances is in need of articulation. We have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow efforts made in this direction, particularly in the several hundred furthest advanced clusters worldwide, in order to effect the rapid systematization of lessons learned.” (12 December 2011)

“What has been accomplished in the past two years will, surely, be far surpassed, not just in the concluding years of this present Plan but in the remaining years of the first century of the Formative Age. To spur on this mighty enterprise and to summon today's youth to fully assume the responsibilities they must discharge in this fast-contracting interval, we announce the convocation of 95 youth conferences, between July and October, planned for locations that span the globe.” (8 February 2013)

“Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. . . . To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavors of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.” (Riḍván 2013)

“To support the construction of the two national and five local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs*, we have decided to establish a Temples Fund at the Bahá'í World Centre for the benefit of all such projects. The friends everywhere are invited to contribute to it sacrificially, as their means allow.” (Riḍván 2012)

“As the time for the Conference drew near, there were signs that the Faith had arrived at a point in its development beyond which a new horizon opens before us. Such intimations were communicated in our report last Riḍván of the change in culture of the Bahá'í community as training

institutes emerged, as the construction projects on Mount Carmel approached their completion, and as the internal processes of institutional consolidation and the external processes towards world unity became more fully synchronized. They were elaborated in the message we addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors a few days ago. But the extraordinary dynamics at work throughout the Conference crystallized these indications into a recognizable reality. With a spirit of exultation we are moved to announce to you: the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh now enters the fifth epoch of its Formative Age.” (16 January 2001)

“The setting of the sun on 20 March 2015 will signalize the end of the year 171, the close of the ninth Váhid of the first Kull-i-Shay’ of the Bahá’í Era. We call upon the Bahá’ís of the East and West to adopt, on that auspicious occasion, the provisions that will unite them in the common implementation of the Badí‘ calendar.” (10 July 2014)

SECTION 11

We have looked, so far, at the circumstances surrounding the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963 and the significance of that momentous event, not only for the Bahá’í community but for the generality of humankind. We have made explicit that our concern here is to increase our understanding of what it means for all of us today to be the recipients of the blessings that flow from that body. To this end, we are studying a selection of passages from its written communications and statements that shed light—within the limited scope of this unit—on how humanity, in general, and the Bahá’í community, in particular, are quickened by its continued guidance.

One of the powers with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested is to “expand and consolidate” the institutions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order. In the second unit of this book, we followed the evolution of that Order through the ministry of the Guardian. With the election of the supreme governing institution of the Faith, the crowning unit had been put in place. Now the development of that Order, still in embryonic form, would be conceived and guided by the House of Justice as clearly indicated by the Guardian in the quotation below, which formed part of your study of the last unit.

“With these Assemblies, local as well as national, harmoniously, vigorously, and efficiently functioning throughout the Bahá’í world, the only means for the establishment of the Supreme House of Justice will have been secured. And 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.”³⁰

A major step in the development of the Administrative Order was taken by the House of Justice in 1968. It involved the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God and the extension into the future of its appointed functions. With the first contingent of Hands named in December 1951, the Guardian had only begun to develop this dimension of the Administrative Order when he passed away in 1957. In a letter dated 24 June 1968, the House of Justice explained:

“The majestic unfoldment of Bahá’u’lláh’s world-redeeming administrative system has been marked by the successive establishment of the various institutions and agencies which constitute the framework of that divinely created Order. Thus, more than a quarter of a century after the emergence of the first National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá’í world the Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was formally established, with the appointment by the beloved Guardian, in conformity with the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, of the first contingent of these high-ranking officers of the Faith. Following the passing of the Guardian of the Cause of God, it fell to the House of Justice to devise a way, within the Administrative Order, of developing ‘the Institution of the Hands of the Cause with a view to extension into the future of its appointed functions of protection and propagation,’ and this was made a goal of the Nine Year Plan. Much thought and study has been given to the question over the past four years, and the texts have been collected and reviewed. During the last two months, this goal, as announced in our cable to the National Conventions, has been the object of prolonged and prayerful consultation between the Universal House of Justice and the Hands of the Cause of God. All this made evident the framework within which this goal was to be achieved, namely:

“The Universal House of Justice sees no way in which additional Hands of the Cause of God can be appointed.

“The absence of the Guardian of the Faith brought about an entirely new relationship between the Universal House of Justice and the Hands of the Cause and called for the progressive unfoldment by the Universal House of Justice of the manner in which the Hands of the Cause would carry out their divinely conferred functions of protection and propagation.

“Whatever new development or institution is initiated should come into operation as soon as possible in order to reinforce and supplement the work of the Hands of the Cause while at the same time taking full advantage of the opportunity of having the Hands themselves assist in launching and guiding the new procedures.

“Any such institution must grow and operate in harmony with the principles governing the functioning of the Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God.”³¹

You are encouraged to reflect on the passage above by completing the following sentences:

The majestic _____ of Bahá’u’lláh’s _____
_____ is marked by the _____ of
various _____ and _____ which constitute the _____
of that _____ created Order. Thus, more than a quarter of a century after the
_____ of the first _____ of the Bahá’í
world the _____ was _____

established, with the _____ by the beloved Guardian, in _____ with the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s _____, of the first _____ of these _____ of the Faith. Following the passing of the Guardian of the Cause of God, it _____ to the _____ to devise a way, within the _____, of _____ the institution of the Hands of the Cause with a view to _____ into the _____ of its _____ of _____ and _____.

SECTION 12

The Bahá’í world was apprised of the decision of the Universal House of Justice to establish the Continental Boards of Counsellors in a cablegram sent on 21 June 1968:

“REJOICE ANNOUNCE MOMENTOUS DECISION ESTABLISH ELEVEN CONTINENTAL BOARDS COUNSELLORS PROTECTION PROPAGATION FAITH THREE EACH FOR AFRICA AMERICAS ASIA ONE EACH FOR AUSTRALASIA EUROPE. ADOPTION THIS SIGNIFICANT STEP FOLLOWING CONSULTATION WITH HANDS CAUSE GOD ENSURES EXTENSION FUTURE APPOINTED FUNCTIONS THEIR INSTITUTION. CONTINENTAL BOARDS ENTRUSTED IN CLOSE COLLABORATION HANDS CAUSE WITH RESPONSIBILITY DIRECTION AUXILIARY BOARDS AND CONSULTATION NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES. HANDS CAUSE GOD WILL HENCEFORTH INCREASE INTERCONTINENTAL SERVICES ASSUMING WORLDWIDE ROLE PROTECTION PROPAGATION FAITH. MEMBERS AUXILIARY BOARDS WILL REPORT BE RESPONSIBLE TO CONTINENTAL BOARDS COUNSELLORS. HANDS CAUSE RESIDING HOLY LAND IN ADDITION SERVING LIAISON BETWEEN UNIVERSAL HOUSE JUSTICE AND CONTINENTAL BOARDS COUNSELLORS WILL ASSIST FUTURE ESTABLISHMENT INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CENTRE HOLY LAND FORESHADOWED WRITINGS BELOVED GUARDIAN. DETAILS NEW DEVELOPMENTS BEING CONVEYED BY LETTER. FERVENTLY SUPPLICATING HOLY THRESHOLD DIVINE CONFIRMATIONS FURTHER STEP IRRESISTIBLE UNFOLDMENT MIGHTY ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER BAHA’U’LLAH.”³²

Five years into the operation of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, on 5 June 1973, the cablegram below was sent by the House of Justice:

“ANNOUNCE ESTABLISHMENT HOLY LAND LONG ANTICIPATED INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CENTRE DESTINED EVOLVE INTO ONE THOSE WORLD-SHAKING WORLD-EMBRACING WORLD-DIRECTING ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS ORDAINED BY BAHA’U’LLAH ANTICIPATED BY ABDU’L-BAHA ELUCIDATED BY SHOGHI EFFENDI. MEMBERSHIP THIS NASCENT INSTITUTION COMPRISES ALL HANDS CAUSE GOD AND INITIALLY THREE COUNSELLORS WHO WITH HANDS PRESENT HOLY LAND WILL CONSTITUTE NUCLEUS ITS VITAL OPERATIONS.”³³

The establishment of the International Teaching Centre brought to fruition the work carried out by the body of Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land, which acted as liaison between the Guardian as Head of the Faith and the Continental Hands, as mentioned in the preceding unit, and later between the Universal House of Justice and the Continental Boards of Counsellors. In thinking about the implications of the establishment of the Boards of Counsellors and the International Teaching Centre, decide whether the following statements are true or false:

- a. The establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors extended into the future the functions of the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God. T F
- b. The institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was renamed the Continental Boards of Counsellors. T F
- c. The Hands of the Cause of God and the Continental Boards of Counsellors were to carry out the same functions. T F
- d. The establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors ensured that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of the Administrative Order, particularly as expressed in His Will and Testament, was upheld. T F
- e. The Continental Boards of Counsellors are endowed with the capacity to further the interests, to apply the principles, to embody the ideals and execute the purpose of the Faith. T F
- f. The establishment of the International Teaching Centre brought to fruition the work of the body of Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land. T F
- g. The International Teaching Centre was established to act as liaison between the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land. T F
- h. The International Teaching Centre acts as liaison between the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the Universal House of Justice. T F

Today the institution of the Counsellors includes the following: the International Teaching Centre, the Continental Boards of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith, the Auxiliary Boards for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith, and assistants to Auxiliary Board members. We will take the evolution of that institution as an example and try to gain insight, by exploring relevant passages written by the House of Justice, into what it means for Bahá’í administration to develop under its direction.

In the last unit, we examined the development of the institution of the Spiritual Assembly by looking at several important concepts and principles related to Bahá’í administration: consultation as a cardinal principle that should govern collective decision making; the nature of the relationship between Spiritual Assemblies and the individual; the nature of relationships

among the institutions of the Administrative Order; the nature of Bahá'í elections; and the nature of service on an Assembly. We will adopt a similar approach in our study of the institution of the Counsellors, examining its development in the context of certain concepts and principles—namely, the nature of the relationship of the institution of the Counsellors with the individual believer; the nature of the participation of the Counsellors and their auxiliaries in the consultative processes of the Bahá'í community; and the nature of the relationship between Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors and their auxiliaries. Before we delve into the study of these three subjects, however, we will undertake, over the next several sections, a review of some basic facts related to the institution's present-day structure and functioning.

SECTION 13

We begin our review with the International Teaching Centre. There will be no exercises in the sections dedicated to this review; the readings they offer are intended simply to consolidate the knowledge you have already acquired about the institution. We will use as a reference the document issued in 2001 by the Universal House of Justice entitled “The Institution of the Counsellors”, which, bringing together much of the guidance it had given about that institution over the preceding three decades, sheds light on the Administrative Order in general. Concerning the membership of the International Teaching Centre, the document reads:

“The International Teaching Centre has nine members appointed as International Counsellors by the Universal House of Justice from among all the adult believers in the world for a five-year term, each term starting on 23 May immediately following the International Bahá'í Convention. The Hands of the Cause of God have been permanent members of the Teaching Centre ever since its inception.”³⁴

As you may know, ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, the last of the Hands of the Cause of God, passed away in September 2007, and from that point forward, the membership has consisted of nine International Counsellors only. Here is how the document describes the Teaching Centre's mode of functioning and duties:

“The work of the Teaching Centre is essentially corporate in character. Its responsibilities call on it to serve as a source of information and analysis for the Universal House of Justice and to provide guidance and resources to the Continental Counsellors. It is required to be fully informed of the situation of the Cause in all parts of the world and alert to possibilities for the expansion of the Faith, the consolidation of its institutions, and the development of Bahá'í community life. It has to analyze these possibilities in relation to global plans, anticipating needs worldwide and ensuring that the necessary resources become available to national communities. In this context, it gives particular attention to the development of human resources, helping communities increase their capacity to endow growing contingents of believers with spiritual insight, knowledge of the Faith, and skills and abilities of service.”³⁵

And on the subject of protection, the document reads:

“The International Teaching Centre is invested with the mandate to watch over the security and ensure the protection of the Faith of God. It must investigate all cases of incipient Covenant-breaking—employing, as necessary, the services of the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries and evaluating their reports—and decide whether the offender should be expelled from the Cause, submitting the decision to the Universal House of Justice for its consideration. It follows a similar procedure for the reinstatement of a contrite Covenant-breaker. More broadly, it needs to be attentive to the spiritual health of the Bahá’í community, urging the Counsellors and their auxiliaries to strengthen the believers to resist the influence of both external and internal sources of opposition to the Cause, and to assist National and Local Spiritual Assemblies in resolving questions that could raise doubt about the integrity of the Faith and its Teachings.”³⁶

SECTION 14

Let us now turn our attention to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the members of which are appointed by the Universal House of Justice. In this connection, the document “The Institution of the Counsellors” explains:

“Presently, five Continental Boards of Counsellors serve the five major regions of the world: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia and Europe. The term of office of the Counsellors and the precise boundaries of the region in which each Board operates are fixed by the Universal House of Justice, as is the number on each Board. The term of office—first established to begin on the Day of the Covenant, 26 November 1980—is currently five years.”³⁷

As for the mode of functioning of the Counsellors, the passage below from the document will provide you with much insight.

“Each Board of Counsellors holds a number of meetings during its term of service to consult on the various dimensions of its work in the propagation and protection of the Faith. Certain matters, such as the appointment of Auxiliary Board members and the allocation of funds, are decided by the entire Board. In the performance of other functions—for example, in providing stimulus to different components of the Bahá’í community in a particular zone in the continent—several Counsellors come together to consult and collaborate so that their abilities are used in a complementary fashion. Some duties, including the supervision and guidance of the Auxiliary Board members in an area, are generally performed by one Counsellor on behalf of the Board. In general, it should be borne in mind that, unlike other institutions of the Administrative Order, which must function as corporate bodies, Counsellors operate primarily as individuals. In handling most matters, they each have a wide range of possibilities available to them according to the flexibility inherent in their institution.

“Fundamental to the work of the Counsellors is the understanding that all members of the Continental Board bear responsibility for the entire continent and need to familiarize themselves, to the extent possible, with the conditions of the Cause in the countries therein. Through periodic reports from individual Counsellors, the Board is kept abreast of developments in every area of the continent and is able to offer guidance to assist its members in the execution of their duties. Whereas no Counsellor is to be regarded as having exclusive responsibility for any one territory, the detailed familiarity acquired by each through close interaction with the National Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board members in a particular area represents a valuable asset to all the Counsellors on the Board.”³⁸

SECTION 15

Let us consider, next, the functioning of the Auxiliary Board members. Originally established by the Guardian, two Auxiliary Boards, one for the protection and one for the propagation of the Faith, continue to operate in each continent today. Regarding their members, the following is quoted from the document “The Institution of the Counsellors”:

“The members of the Auxiliary Boards are appointed from among the believers of each continent by the Continental Board of Counsellors for five-year periods beginning on the Day of the Covenant of the year following the appointment of the Counsellors themselves. They should be twenty-one years of age or older.”³⁹

The number of members serving on each Board is determined by the Universal House of Justice, and perhaps you know that there are presently some one thousand in all, equally divided between the two Boards. They have been authorized by the House of Justice to name assistants, who help them with various aspects of their work. As to how the Auxiliary Board members function, the House of Justice tells us in “The Institution of the Counsellors”:

“The members of an Auxiliary Board are responsible individually to the Board of Counsellors which appoints them. They do not themselves constitute a decision-making body. However, Auxiliary Board members may confer and collaborate with each other as long as care is taken not to depart from this principle.

“Each Auxiliary Board member is assigned a specific territory, and although for practical purposes such a territory may coincide with a particular country or National Assembly area, there is no hard and fast rule that it must do so. Auxiliary Boards are continental institutions, and there need not be any correlation between the boundaries of the territories assigned to their members and national frontiers. Unless specifically deputized by the Counsellors, an Auxiliary Board member does not function as such outside the area to which he or she has been assigned. For obvious reasons, it is preferable for Auxiliary Board members to reside in the area they serve; however, if an area has no suitable candidate for this post, the Counsellors may decide to make an alternative arrangement.

“When assigning areas to members of the Auxiliary Boards, the Continental Board of Counsellors ensures that the entire continental area is divided up among the

members of each of the two Auxiliary Boards. That is to say, the Bahá'ís of any one locality are to have both a Protection Board member and a Propagation Board member to whom they can refer.”⁴⁰

SECTION 16

With the above review in mind, we will now take up the first of the three subjects that we have proposed to examine in these sections and will consider how the institution of the Counsellors relates to the body of the believers. The Universal House of Justice explains:

“The administrative processes of the Faith are not only concerned with judicial matters, laws and regulations, and programs that direct action, but also embrace those measures that elicit from the friends wholehearted response and channel their energies. Counsellors and their auxiliaries bring to bear on all such administrative processes their ability as individuals of proven devotion and consecrated spirit. Similarly, they play a vital part in encouraging the friends and in fostering individual initiative, diversity and freedom of action. In their endeavors they strive to follow in the footsteps of the Hands of the Cause, whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called on ‘to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things.’”⁴¹

In a letter dated 3 May 1998 addressed by the Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, we read:

“You represent an army of able and highly motivated servants of the Cause throughout the world. Yours is an institution which, in one respect, has a particularly intimate relationship with the Universal House of Justice; in another, it is able to exercise an influence that penetrates the very grassroots of the community. Its nature fits it, uniquely, to serve as a river of encouragement, example and love whose waters can refresh and invigorate the spirit of every believer they touch.”⁴²

Referring to the duty of the Auxiliary Board members to elicit from the individual wholehearted participation, the Universal House of Justice makes clear in “The Institution of the Counsellors”:

“It requires building confidence and changing fear and hesitation into courage and perseverance. It asks of the Board members and those they serve alike to forget their own weaknesses and fix their reliance on the power of divine confirmations. Further, it implies accompanying the friends in their endeavors as they develop the capabilities of effective service.”⁴³

A letter dated 9 January 2001 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors states:

“Training alone, of course, does not necessarily lead to an upsurge in teaching activity. In every avenue of service, the friends need sustained encouragement. Our

expectation is that the Auxiliary Board members, together with their assistants, will give special thought to how individual initiative can be cultivated, particularly as it relates to teaching. When training and encouragement are effective, a culture of growth is nourished in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh. They 'raise high the sacred torch of faith,' as was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wish, 'labor ceaselessly, by day and by night,' and 'consecrate every fleeting moment of their lives to the diffusion of the divine fragrance and the exaltation of God's holy Word.' So enkindled do their hearts become with the fire of the love of God that whoever approaches them feels its warmth. They strive to be channels of the spirit, pure of heart, selfless and humble, possessing certitude and the courage that stems from reliance on God. In such a culture, teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers. Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms."⁴⁴

And, in a message dated 28 December 2010, the Universal House of Justice writes of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants:

"They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action."⁴⁵

To help you think about the way in which the institution of the Counsellors relates to the individual, we are providing here some key words and phrases from the above passages. You may wish to write a paragraph or two on the nature of this relationship, making sure to use, in some form, all of the words and phrases noted here:

wholehearted response, channel, enkindle, energies, proven devotion, edify, consecrated spirit, initiative, diversity, elicit, learning, influence, love, accompanying, power of divine confirmations, build, reliance, confidence, culture of growth, encourage, foster, support, progress, unified action, trust in God, shoulder to shoulder, courage, perseverance, participation, capabilities of effective service

SECTION 17

The passages quoted in the preceding section underscore the importance of the contributions the individual makes to the work of the Cause and describe the way in which the Counsellors and their auxiliaries assist in this respect. Let us look further at this aspect of the relationship of the institution of the Counsellors with the individual by examining the nature of initiative.

Without doubt, the parameters set by the requirements of the global Plan under way at any given moment offer a broad arena for the individual to take initiative. Indeed, the successful

execution of the Plan depends, to a large extent, on the individual believer. It is, after all, the individual who must arise and, working alongside countless others, carry out whatever tasks are required. The Guardian himself emphasizes this point:

“This challenge, so severe and insistent, and yet so glorious, faces no doubt primarily the individual believer on whom, in the last resort, depends the fate of the entire community. He it is who constitutes the warp and woof on which the quality and pattern of the whole fabric must depend. He it is who acts as one of the countless links in the mighty chain that now girdles the globe. He it is who serves as one of the multitude of bricks which support the structure and insure the stability of the administrative edifice now being raised in every part of the world.”⁴⁶

You may wish to say a few words about how each of the following might help an individual to take action within the parameters set by the Plan, giving concrete examples to illustrate your thinking.

1. A growing understanding of the requirements of the Plan and of the relationships among its various elements: _____

2. A humble posture of learning: _____

3. The exercise of will: _____

4. The exercise of discipline: _____

5. Creativity and resourcefulness: _____

6. Perseverance: _____

7. A commitment to long-term action: _____

8. An appreciation for concerted unified action: _____

9. Concern for the common good: _____

10. The capacity to take joy in the accomplishments of others: _____

SECTION 18

In light of the discussion in the preceding section, reflect with your friends studying this course on the two passages below written by the Universal House of Justice. The first is extracted from its message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the second from its *Riḍván* 2008 message to the Bahá'ís of the world.

“A discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative—initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops. Endeavors are pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan. As a result, activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided. Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.”⁴⁷

“What we continue to find encouraging is how well disciplined is this individual initiative. Communities everywhere are gradually internalizing the lessons being learned from systematization, and the framework defined by the current series of Plans lends consistency and flexibility to the endeavors of the friends. Far from restricting them, this framework enables them to seize opportunities, to build relationships, and to translate into reality a vision of systematic growth. In a word, it gives shape to their collective powers.”⁴⁸

Your participation in this course suggests that you are well familiar with the current series of global Plans, which, as mentioned above, define a “framework” within which action takes shape. The nature of a framework—what it means and why it is important for consistent dynamic action—is not a trivial subject. And like other subjects that are complex, understanding its significance increases with time. There are no doubt many words and phrases closely associated with the framework delineated by the Plans, including those listed below, that are already part of your own vocabulary. You may wish to add a few more to the list.

capacity building, learning, culture of growth, participation, walking a path of service, mutual support and assistance, human resource development, training, spiritual empowerment of junior youth, spiritual education of children, meaningful conversation, the generation and diffusion of knowledge, coherence, systematic, accompany, reflection

Now, using the words and phrases above, write a couple of paragraphs that address these two questions: In what way does a framework give shape to the collective powers of the friends? What does it mean for endeavors to be pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the current series of Plans?

SECTION 19

We have looked at a few of the attributes that help render individual initiative fruitful in the context of unified action. Perhaps it would be instructive at this point in our discussion to think, as well, about those attributes and habits of the mind that could make it difficult for an

individual to direct his or her energies in an effective manner. Consider, as examples, the following and say a few words about each:

1. Lack of appreciation for the dynamics of crisis and victory, an appreciation so important if one is to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones for progress: _____

2. The conviction that one's contribution to the Faith should be different from—or indeed much more significant than—those of other Bahá'ís: _____

3. Undue attachment to the way things were done in the past, making it difficult to adjust one's thinking and action as the requirements of global Plans necessarily change from stage to stage: _____

4. The kind of timidity that does not allow one to participate in collective action without being overly self-conscious: _____

5. A craving for excitement, coupled with the desire to be entertained: _____

6. Apathy and a sense of hopelessness that may, for example, be the result of living in an oppressive environment: _____

7. An interpretation of individual initiative that confuses freedom to act with license to do whatever one pleases: _____

8. A fragmented way of looking at the world, which prevents one from thinking beyond one's own efforts to envision the results of unified action: _____

9. An overemphasis on the need for diversity, forgetting that “unity” in diversity is called for in the writings of the Faith: _____

10. A tendency to confuse unity of thought and unity of action with uniformity: _____

11. A lack of trust in authority and the institutions that exercise it, which has been carried into the Faith from one’s interactions with society and which has resulted in a reluctance to follow directives, seen as interference in the individual’s right to self-determination: _____

12. A habit of criticism and protest: _____

13. A conception of the Faith as an arena in which to pursue activities that, however subtly, primarily serve one’s personal goals: _____

14. An unquestioned assumption that modes of thinking and acting prevalent in society today are well suited to the needs of the Bahá’í community and should be adopted in furthering its aims and purposes: _____

SECTION 20

A concept that should be borne in mind when thinking about one’s contributions to the work of the Faith is universal participation, and we should take a moment to examine it here. The principle of universal participation is fundamental to the Cause. The wholehearted, unreserved participation of every believer endows the Bahá’í community with strength. The House of Justice writes in this connection:

“The real secret of universal participation lies in the Master’s oft expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual

health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.”⁴⁹

Think of the human body. No cell lives apart from the body. Every cell contributes to, and receives strength from, the health of the whole. That we are so united as a community has implications for the nature of our participation in the affairs of the Faith. In such a united body the well-being of one is the concern of all; the welfare of the whole is the concern of one. Look at the list below of things that an individual might possibly do. Which of them help the community advance towards the goal of universal participation as described above by the Universal House of Justice? Mark them.

- _____ Carrying out a personal teaching plan
- _____ Assisting a newly enrolled believer in his or her first efforts to teach the Cause
- _____ Contributing to Bahá'í Funds
- _____ Looking around to see who else is contributing to the Fund
- _____ Following a personal plan to study the writings of the Faith
- _____ Sharing knowledge of the Faith with others during a visit to their home
- _____ Forming a small group to study the writings together
- _____ Reading the verses of God every morning and evening
- _____ Participating in Bahá'í elections
- _____ Observing Bahá'í laws
- _____ Checking up on one's fellow believers to make sure they are adhering to Bahá'í laws
- _____ Counseling a close friend who is having difficulty upholding the standards of the Faith
- _____ Setting oneself up as a person in the community who counsels others about how to live a Bahá'í life
- _____ Overlooking the faults of others
- _____ Looking around to see who is doing what
- _____ Looking around to see who is doing what, with the intention of reporting any problems to the Local Spiritual Assembly or the Auxiliary Board member
- _____ Constantly wondering why others do not serve the Faith at the same level of intensity as oneself
- _____ Wondering why others do not come to one to ask questions when one is so knowledgeable in the Faith
- _____ Hosting a devotional gathering in one's home
- _____ Attending the Nineteen Day Feast
- _____ Contributing to the consultative portion of the Nineteen Day Feast

- _____ Participating in the cluster reflection meeting and contributing to the consultations under way
- _____ Participating in collective teaching activities under the direction of the institutions of the Faith
- _____ Taking it upon oneself to devise a plan for the community, on the basis of what one thinks is required, and promoting it among the friends
- _____ Initiating a personal blog or a newsletter to express one's concerns about the community
- _____ Circulating an email to other believers expressing one's concerns about the community

SECTION 21

In thinking about the all-important principle of universal participation, we need to consider another equally significant principle. Though the Faith is devoid of any class or category of believers that can be likened to a priesthood and its affairs are the concern of every Bahá'í, it is also true that there are institutions on which any one of us may be called upon to serve and through which our efforts are organized and unified. Referring to the duties and responsibilities enjoined on us as individuals and those that are shouldered by the institutions of the Faith, the House of Justice writes:

“So it is that the friends come to recognize that ‘wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort’ are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that ‘the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,’ and that ‘the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.’ And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. ‘With heart and soul’, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, ‘things may be properly ordered and well arranged’. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order.”⁵⁰

On another occasion, the House of Justice explains:

“And so it is that, through the wise direction of institutions and agencies of the Faith functioning at every level, the friends’ exertions, however modest individually, coalesce into a collective effort to ensure that receptivity to the call of the Blessed Beauty is identified quickly and nurtured effectively.”⁵¹

The above passages encourage us to reflect on the distinction between the activities undertaken by the individual and the endeavors of the institutions. By the same token, they help us to see that, at any given moment, that which occupies the institutions of the Faith is not fundamentally different from that which demands the attention of the body of the believers.

Indeed, though distinct, the pursuits of one take on meaning in light of the pursuits of the other. An exercise may clarify the nature of this distinction. Look at the pairs of statements below. Which statement in each pair seems to reflect the principle enunciated in the quotations above, and which one might prove counterproductive or even undermine the best interests of the Faith? Mark them “R” and “C” accordingly. Only a few examples of the many situations that can arise are given here as a means of illustration.

- a. Because the protection of the Faith is the concern of every Bahá’í, if one is in a position to contact government officials and people of influence and ask them to rise in defense of Bahá’ís residing in countries where they face opposition, one should seize the opportunity to do so. R C
- b. Establishing contact with government officials and people of influence and defending Bahá’ís residing in countries where they face opposition are areas that require coordination and supervision, and both are responsibilities that rest solely with the institutions of the Faith; individuals may offer suggestions and resources in this respect or may be called upon from time to time to take some specific steps, but it is for the institutions to decide on the course of action to be followed. R C
- a. Sharing the knowledge one has gained through study and action is integral to a life of dedicated service to the Cause. An individual who has broad knowledge of the writings of the Faith would do well to develop an educational program for the generality of the believers and offer it to the community regionally, nationally, or even internationally through the Internet. R C
- b. Educational processes in the Bahá’í community unfold under the guidance of the institutions of the Faith, which call upon individuals to contribute to these processes. R C
- a. Every individual should dedicate his or her talents and resources to the Faith as opportunities permit. One important service that anyone with the necessary skills can render is to set up a website as a personal endeavor that presents the teachings of the Faith and its literature to the public, as do official sites of the Faith. R C
- b. The Bahá’í presence on the Web implies the need for a number of official sites of the Faith which provide a comprehensive overview of Bahá’í belief, a survey of its literature, and the exposition of the plans and activities of the community. Individual believers with the requisite skills and inclination should take advantage of the environment created by the Web to share thoughts and insights inspired by their beliefs through, for example, their personal websites and weblogs and participation in discussion forums, ensuring the content does not in any way give the impression that it represents the official views of the Bahá’í community. R C

- a. The writings of the Faith call on us to serve not only the Cause but all of humanity. One service that a believer can render is to devise a program which he or she feels serves the social and economic needs of a population in a cluster or region, ignoring the lines of action the institutions are promoting there, and set up a Bahá'í-inspired organization to deliver it. R C
- b. The material needs of a population in a cluster or region should not be considered in isolation from a process already set in motion to address its spiritual needs. Social action, then, should emerge naturally out of an ongoing effort to build individual and collective capacity in a region to bring about material and spiritual prosperity and should develop organically under the moral guidance of the Bahá'í institutions, perhaps giving rise over time to a Bahá'í-inspired organization, though not necessarily. R C
- a. All of humanity should have access to the Word of God, and if an individual believer possesses the necessary financial resources, one service he or she can render is to set up an independent organization and hire people to prepare and publish translations of the writings of the Faith in the local language, hastening, in this way, the day when the message of Bahá'u'lláh can reach the entire population. R C
- b. It is for the institutions of the Faith to assess the need for translations of the Sacred Texts to be published. Institutions may, of course, turn to qualified individuals in specific instances for assistance with aspects of the translation or publication of the Bahá'í writings, or they may authorize certain agencies to publish certain texts. By the same token, individual believers are welcome to offer their assistance, including financial, to further the translation and publication work. R C

SECTION 22

Our reflections on how the institution of the Counsellors relates to the body of the believers opened up a discussion on several closely connected questions: how a collective framework endows with meaning our individual actions, how the principle of universal participation applies to the work of the Faith, and how our endeavors as individuals contribute to the whole and relate to a sphere of action belonging specifically to the institutions. Through the exploration of this subject, we have seen with what care the Universal House of Justice guides the development of the relationship between the individual and the institutions of the Faith, particularly the institution of the Counsellors. With these thoughts in mind, let us take up the second of the three subjects we are exploring here—the contribution of the institution of the Counsellors to consultative processes in the community.

We know that decision making in the Bahá'í community is governed by the principle of consultation. This principle finds expression in all aspects of our community life—for example, in the meeting of the Spiritual Assembly and the celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast, at the cluster reflection gathering and among small groups of believers. Of course the institution of the

Counsellors, which operates from the international level to the grassroots, is ever present in all the divers spaces that make up community life, bringing an added dimension to consultations undertaken and enabling it to exert its edifying influence throughout the Bahá'í world. In the document “The Institution of the Counsellors”, the House of Justice explains:

“Counsellors have the duty to stimulate on each continent the expansion and consolidation of the Faith and to promote the spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects of Bahá'í life. The spiritual health of the community and the vitality of the faith of the individual, the strengthening of the foundations of family life, and the study of the Teachings receive special attention from the Counsellors and those called upon to assist them. They are likewise concerned with enhancing the capacity of the friends and their institutions to devise systematic plans of action, to execute them energetically, and to learn from experience in the course of building the world civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. In this context, promoting a culture of growth within the Bahá'í community is fundamental to the work of the Counsellors.”⁵²

This passage suggests that, in participating in divers aspects of community life and the consultative processes integral to them, the Counsellors and their auxiliaries seek:

- to stimulate on their respective continents _____

- to promote _____

- to give attention to _____

- to enhance the capacity of the friends and their institutions to _____

The above passage gives us an indication of how critical and wide-ranging are the contributions made by the Counsellors and their auxiliaries to the processes of Bahá'í community life. Let us now narrow our focus and take a brief look at one aspect of this vital contribution.

The institution of the Counsellors is concerned with “learning”, including the capacity of the believers and the institutions to “learn from experience” as they strive to build the world civilization described in the Bahá'í writings. In this context, the Universal House of Justice states in the passage quoted above that “promoting a culture of growth” is fundamental to the work of the Counsellors. “Capacity building”, “learning” and “culture of growth” are all concepts that appear frequently in Bahá'í discourse. Indeed, they were included among the words and phrases that we associate with the framework established by the global Plans of the Faith, which we

considered in Section 18. Referring to the institution of the Counsellors in this connection, the House of Justice writes:

“A resource made available to the Counsellors by the International Teaching Centre and through them to the community at large is an accumulating store of wisdom born of experience—the experience of a highly diverse community dedicated to the creation of a new civilization. Through the network of Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and assistants, the Teaching Centre can observe the workings of individual and collective endeavors, analyzing their methods and approaches, and introducing the conclusions it draws into the processes of the systematic growth of the Faith. Thus in the institution of the Counsellors we have a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest spots on the globe can be shared with the entire body of the believers, enriching consultation, stimulating experimentation and inspiring confidence that the great enterprise in which the Bahá’í world is engaged is assured of success.”⁵³

In the above passage the House of Justice explains how the structure provided by the Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and assistants enables the International Teaching Centre to systematize experience and diffuse knowledge. What does it mean that, in the institution of the Counsellors, there is a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest places in the world can be shared with the entire community? In your own life as a Bahá’í you have surely felt the effects of this system. Can you say a few words about how the work of the institution of the Counsellors has influenced, for example, the nature of your participation in the current Plan?

SECTION 23

We now turn our attention to the nature of the relationship between Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors and their auxiliaries—the third subject we are considering in this part of the

unit dedicated to the guidance the Universal House of Justice has given in developing the institution of the Counsellors.

In the last unit, we sought insight from the Guardian's writings into how Spiritual Assemblies and their agencies relate to one another. There we saw how every facet of the relationship that binds one institution of the Administrative Order to another is permeated by a spirit of reciprocity and mutual trust. The authority invested in each, or the degree of influence exercised, is appropriate to the sphere of action and responsibilities assigned to it. Conflict and estrangement are both foreign to this relationship. Allegiance to the whole, to the higher purpose of servitude to Bahá'u'lláh, animates every member of every institution.

The relationship depicted by the Guardian was gradually better understood by the friends over time as he helped them to see in practice how National Spiritual Assemblies and Local Spiritual Assemblies, as well as committees and agencies, were to function as a collective whole. With the establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in 1968, the Universal House of Justice began a similar process through which the nature of the relationship between the Spiritual Assemblies and the institution of the Counsellors has progressively become clearer. In the document "The Institution of the Counsellors", this relationship is described in broad terms:

"Acting in their respective roles, the two institutions of the Counsellors and the Spiritual Assemblies share responsibility for the protection and propagation of the Faith. The harmonious interaction between them ensures the constant flow of guidance, love and encouragement to the believers and invigorates their individual and collective endeavors to advance the Cause. The value of such interaction is underscored by words of the Guardian, in a cable message dated 4 June 1957, referring at the time to the Hands of the Cause and National Assemblies: 'SECURITY PRECIOUS FAITH PRESERVATION SPIRITUAL HEALTH BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES VITALITY FAITH ITS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS PROPER FUNCTIONING ITS LABORIOUSLY ERECTED INSTITUTIONS FRUITION ITS WORLDWIDE ENTERPRISES FULFILLMENT ITS ULTIMATE DESTINY ALL DIRECTLY DEPENDENT BEFITTING DISCHARGE WEIGHTY RESPONSIBILITIES NOW RESTING MEMBERS THESE TWO INSTITUTIONS ...'"⁵⁴

And further in this same volume we read:

"The relationship of the Continental Boards of Counsellors to National Spiritual Assemblies is one of loving cooperation between two institutions of the Faith that are serving the same ends and are eager to see the same divine confirmations descend upon the efforts of the friends to promote and firmly establish the Cause. It is an evolving relationship that becomes richer as the two institutions face the challenge of building Bahá'í communities and witness with pride the onward march of the Faith. . . .

"The attitude of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies towards each other is not motivated by a legalistic application of the rules of their functional relationship. The discharge of joint responsibilities is only possible within the framework of the spiritual requisites for all successful Bahá'í relationships. Interactions between the two institutions flourish in an atmosphere of love and according to the dictates of genuine respect. Bahá'u'lláh's admonition is highly

instructive in this regard; He says: ‘Abase not the station of the learned in Bahá and belittle not the rank of such rulers as administer justice amidst you.’”⁵⁵

On the basis of the above quotations, complete the following sentences:

1. Acting in their respective roles, the two institutions of the Counsellors and the Spiritual Assemblies share responsibility for _____ .
2. The harmonious interactions between the two institutions ensure _____ and invigorate _____ .
3. The relationship of the Continental Boards of Counsellors to the National Spiritual Assemblies is one of _____ between two institutions of the Faith that are serving _____ and are eager _____ .
4. The relationship between the two institutions is an evolving one, which becomes richer as they face _____ and witness with pride _____ .
5. The attitude of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies towards each other is not motivated by _____ .
6. The discharge of the joint responsibilities of the Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies is only possible within _____ .
7. Interactions between the two institutions flourish in _____ and according to _____ .

Referring to the interactions between the two institutions of the Counsellors and the Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice has quoted in the passage above a cablegram written by the Guardian in 1957. That passage leaves no doubt that each of the following depends on the proper discharge of the responsibilities resting on the members of these institutions:

- the security of _____
- the preservation of _____

- the vitality of _____
- the proper functioning of _____
- the fruition of _____
- the fulfillment of _____

SECTION 24

We will end here our discussion of the institution of the Counsellors. Its development has provided us with one example of what it means for Bahá'í administration to evolve under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. If we look back over the past several decades, we can, of course, identify numerous other examples.

In December 1995, for instance, the House of Justice called for the establishment of a network of training institutes around the world and, in doing so, defined further the nature of the interactions between the Counsellors and Assemblies. The training institute, the House of Justice indicated at the time, would be regarded as an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly, yet it would be positioned in the administrative structure of the Faith in such a way that Assemblies and Counsellors would be able to collaborate at the most intimate level in discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of believers:

“For the new thrust in the establishment of institutes to succeed, the active involvement of the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members in their operation is essential. Such involvement will help the Counsellors to kindle ‘the Fire of the Love of God in the very hearts and souls of His servants,’ ‘to diffuse the Divine Fragrances,’ ‘to edify the souls of men,’ ‘to promote learning,’ and ‘to improve the character of all men.’ These institutes will provide the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members with immediate access to a formal means of educating the believers, in addition to other avenues available to them such as conferences, summer schools, and meetings with the friends. Institutes should be regarded as centers of learning, and since their character harmonizes with, and provides scope for the exercise of, the educational responsibilities of the Auxiliary Board members, we have decided that intimate involvement in institute operations should now become a part of the evolving functions of these officers of the Faith.”⁵⁶

In 1997, to take another example, a new element of Bahá'í administration, operating between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, designated the “Regional Bahá'í Council”, was formalized. In making clear “its place in the evolution of national and local Bahá'í institutions”, the House of Justice noted: “One of the subtle qualities of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the balance between centralization and decentralization.” The establishment of Regional Bahá'í Councils would, it stated, “greatly enhance the ability of the Administrative Order to deal with the complex situations with which it is confronted in a number of countries at the present time”.⁵⁷

The development of Regional Councils in a country called for a “corresponding increase in the capacity of the National Spiritual Assembly itself to keep fully informed of what is proceeding in all parts of the territory over which it has ultimate jurisdiction.”⁵⁸ As institutional capacity at the national and regional levels was strengthened, the “smaller geographic areas” now known as “clusters”, first introduced by the House of Justice in 2001, also became the focus of attention. Gradually, then, administrative structures for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith at the grassroots of the community, only broadly formulated during the ministry of the Guardian, have been taking shape under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. In 2011, it wrote, for example:

“In all such clusters, where the demands of large-scale growth are asserting themselves, each stage of the educational process promoted by the training institute must receive added support. The work of the coordinator should be reinforced by assistance from a growing number of experienced individuals, and meetings for the exchange of information and insights become regular and more systematic in approach. So, too, must periodic occasions be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children’s classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole. And they, in turn, should meet on a regular basis with the Area Teaching Committee. Further, if an adequate flow of information, guidance and much-needed funds is to reach the cluster, a parallel set of steps will have to be taken by the board of the institute to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.”⁵⁹

In 2005, to provide yet another example, the House of Justice decided that the time was “propitious to bring into being an International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh to guide and supervise the work of Regional and National Boards of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh throughout the world.” It would operate, the House of Justice explained, “in close collaboration with the Chief Trustee, the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá,” and would “be able to benefit from his knowledge and counsel in carrying out its duties.”⁶⁰ After his passing in 2007, the work of the institution of the Right of God, overseen by the International Board, has continued to grow in strength and vitality.

SECTION 25

To focus on every one of the many elements of the Administrative Order and to discuss how the evolution of each has been guided by the Universal House of Justice would be a challenging task indeed. Though certainly inadequate, our exploration of the development of the institution of the Counsellors, together with the examples considered briefly in the preceding section, has helped us, nevertheless, to get a glimpse of the magnitude of what has been accomplished—the institutional capacity that has been created, the relationships that have been established, the processes that have been set in motion, the degree of administrative complexity that has been attained—even within the relatively short span of the first fifty years of the existence of that body through which, the Guardian stated, “the hopes of the people of Bahá’

would be “fulfilled”, “the foundation of the Cause” would be “firmly established upon the earth”, “its hidden potentialities” would be “revealed”, “its influence manifested, its standard unfurled, and the radiance of its light” would be “made to shine upon all created things.”

It seems necessary then, before we leave this subject, to place the development of the Administrative Order in the broader context of the progress of the Cause of God. To appreciate what the House of Justice has done in this respect, and that which successive generations will surely witness it do in the future, we must reflect on how indispensable is the Administrative Order to the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. Administration is an integral part of the united whole that is the life of the Bahá’í community. The Guardian has explained in this connection:

“To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.”⁶¹

The Bahá’í community is an organized community. It is not merely a body of dedicated individuals working harmoniously and lovingly together. It is administered by institutions designed to carry out certain functions that channel the energies of its members. The existence of administrative principles that are completely coherent with spiritual teachings gives the community strength. To gain insight into the nature of this coherence, you are encouraged to carry out an exercise. First, read the following list of some of the spiritual and humanitarian teachings that can be gleaned from the writings of the Faith:

- a. “No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.”
- b. “. . . backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.”
- c. “Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother.”
- d. “Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation.”
- e. “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other.”
- f. “The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.”
- g. “. . . that which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind.”
- h. “Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity.”
- i. “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.”

- j. “. . . God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds.”
- k. “. . . nearness to God necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him.”
- l. “As reality is one and cannot admit of multiplicity, therefore different opinions must ultimately become fused into one.”
- m. “. . . be ready to sacrifice your lives for one another, to prefer the general well-being to your personal well-being.”

Now, look at the administrative principles listed below. For each, identify one or more of the spiritual teachings upon which it touches. You may wish to think of a few other spiritual teachings, beyond those noted above.

_____ Personalities should not be made centers around which the community revolves.

_____ On no believer is conferred a station that places him or her outside and above the jurisdiction of the institutions of the Faith.

_____ Collective decision making should benefit from a diversity of perspectives through consultative processes.

_____ Members of institutions must disregard their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá’í community and promote the common weal.

_____ Members of the institutions should not consider themselves the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.

_____ Following consultation among the members of an Assembly, whatever the majority has decided should be carried out in a spirit of unity. It is not acceptable for any member to assume a posture of dissension.

_____ It is incumbent on all members of the community to obey the decisions of the Assembly with heart and soul.

_____ If a believer becomes aware of a problem or situation that could harm the Cause, he or she should turn to one of the institutions of the Faith and then leave the matter in its hands.

_____ Contributions to the Fund are purely and strictly confidential in character.

Bahá'í elections at every level are by secret ballot; there are no nominations, nor does electioneering or the formation of factions have any place in the electoral process.

The demand for specialization in the administrative functions of the Cause does not mean that some are exempt from joining their fellow believers in the forefront of the teaching work.

The discussion we began in Section 11 on the development of the Administrative Order, although limited to a few examples, has become lengthy. Let us end it by reflecting on this illuminating passage written by the Universal House of Justice:

“The institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh, rooted in the provisions of His Revelation, have emerged gradually and organically, as the Bahá'í community has grown through the power of the divine impulse imparted to humankind in this age. The characteristics and functions of each of these institutions have evolved, and are still evolving, as are the relationships between them. The writings of the beloved Guardian expound the fundamental elements of this mighty System and make it clear that the Administrative Order, although different in many ways from the World Order which it is the destiny of the Bahá'í Revelation to call into being, is both the ‘nucleus’ and ‘pattern’ of that World Order. Thus, the evolution of the institutions of the Administrative Order, while following many variants to meet changing conditions in different times and places, should strictly follow the essential principles of Bahá'í administration which have been laid down in the Sacred Text and in the interpretations provided by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian.”⁶²

SECTION 26

The goal that we have set for ourselves in this unit is modest indeed: we are reviewing but a small sampling of passages from the vast body of communications of the Universal House of Justice, with the hope of increasing our understanding of what it means for humanity today to be the recipient of its divinely inspired, unerring guidance—this, within the context of our overall purpose to gain further insight into the statement “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.” With this goal in mind, then, let us dedicate a few sections to the question of devotional life. The letter selected for this purpose is one addressed to the Bahá'ís of the world dated 28 December 1999. In it, the House of Justice announced its decision to make certain laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas universally applicable:

“In every land we see a growing thirst for spiritual life and moral clarity. There is recognition of the ineffectiveness of plans and programs for human betterment which are not rooted in lives of spiritual awareness and ethical virtue. Who should be better equipped to satisfy this longing than those who are already inspired by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and aided by His Power?

“We have determined, therefore, that it is imperative for all the believers to deepen their awareness of the blessings conferred by the laws which directly foster the

devotional life of the individual and, thus, of the community. The essentials of these laws are known to all Bahá'ís, but acquiring greater insight into their significance must include carrying out all the divinely revealed aspects of their observance. These are the laws which pertain to obligatory prayer, fasting and recitation of the Greatest Name ninety-five times a day.”⁶³

Perhaps you know that, before 1999, not all elements of the laws dealing with obligatory prayer and fasting—for instance, those concerning ablutions, traveling and the compensation for prayers missed—were universally binding. Of special significance for the Bahá'í world at the time, however, was the decision of the House of Justice, announced in that same letter, to call on the believers everywhere to observe the exhortation in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to recite the Greatest Name ninety-five times a day. Here is the relevant paragraph:

“We have also decided that it is timely for Bahá'ís in every land to take to their hearts the words of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: ‘It hath been ordained that every believer in God, the Lord of Judgment, shall, each day, having washed his hands and then his face, seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat “Alláh-u-Abhá” ninety-five times. Such was the decree of the Maker of the Heavens when, with majesty and power, He established Himself upon the thrones of His Names.’ Let all experience the spiritual enrichment brought to their souls by this simple act of worshipful meditation.”⁶⁴

The 28 December 1999 letter contained additional guidance, drawing attention to the relationship between individual devotions and community life:

“The spiritual growth generated by individual devotions is reinforced by loving association among the friends in every locality, by worship as a community and by service to the Faith and to one’s fellow human beings. These communal aspects of the godly life relate to the law of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár which appears in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Although the time has not come for the building of local Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs, the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all and the involvement of Bahá'í communities in projects of humanitarian service are expressions of this element of Bahá'í life and a further step in the implementation of the Law of God.”⁶⁵

In this respect, a letter dated 12 June 1984 written on behalf of the House of Justice to an individual believer had underscored the same point much earlier:

“As you quite correctly appreciate, the fundamental purpose of all religion is the spiritual development of the souls of human beings. This is expressed in the Short Obligatory Prayer . . .

“In addition to this fundamental purpose underlying all Revelation, there is a particular central purpose for each Dispensation. The one for this Dispensation is the establishment of the oneness of the world of humanity, and it is a Bahá'í teaching that the spiritual development of the soul requires not merely prayer and meditation, but also active service to one’s fellowmen in accordance with the laws and principles of the Revelation of God. The reconstruction of human society and the spiritual advancement of individual souls go hand in hand.”⁶⁶

Let us pause here and think about the various passages we have read. It is clear that the guidance the Bahá'í world received from the House of Justice in its letter dated 28 December 1999 focuses not on ritual and rigid practice—on the outer form of worship, as do, unfortunately, present-day interpretations of so many religious traditions. The House of Justice places emphasis, instead, on far deeper issues, helping us to approach, for instance, the act of repeating the Greatest Name ninety-five times with increased understanding. Below are some of the concepts that the passages quoted here associate with personal worship, making us ever more conscious of its far-reaching spiritual and social implications. Select one or two phrases from the above passages related to each one.

1. The development of the soul: _____

2. The relationship between worship and service: _____

3. The nature of our community life: _____

4. Human relations: _____

5. The development of the individual and society: _____

6. The state of society: _____

7. The purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation: _____

8. The implications of the principle of the oneness of humankind: _____

SECTION 27

The passage quoted in the preceding section regarding communal worship requires further consideration. With its help, we are able to explore an idea of crucial importance: in responding to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, our capacity as a community increases and we draw closer to the civilization envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh.

One of the unique features of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, which we discussed briefly in the last unit. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* calls for the establishment of this mighty institution "throughout the lands". As the 28 December 1999 message indicates, the promulgation of this law has necessarily proceeded in a gradual fashion. In the early days of the Faith in Iran, though conditions did not make it possible for the friends to raise up the edifice of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, they gathered for prayer in villages and cities throughout the country with this law in mind. The first *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* was erected in the city of 'Ishqábád, located in the then Russian province of Turkestan, under the direction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while construction work on the second began not long after on the outskirts of Chicago in the United States. Upon its completion, the Guardian started a program of constructing continental temples. The first among these were the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs* in Kampala, Sydney and Frankfurt, which were built in response to the Ten Year Plan goals. The Universal House of Justice continued along these lines with the building of Temples in Panama City, Apia, and New Delhi. Plans to begin the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago were announced in 2001. The establishment of *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs* at the national and local levels, however, has long been held in abeyance. Yet, if we glance back over the communications of the House of Justice, we can see that it has systematically, with consummate wisdom and grace, been moving the Bahá'í community towards the realization of this goal. Let us undertake the briefest review.

In its Ridván 1996 message, the Universal House of Justice described the characteristics of community life, indicating that

"It involves the practice of collective worship of God. Hence, it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Bahá'í centers, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of believers."⁶⁷

At the same time, the House of Justice called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, which were to "assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation." As the friends put this guidance into practice, they entered a process of systematic learning about how to raise up human resources for the work of expansion and consolidation. And as, in this way, the institute process began to take root in a few countries, a letter dated 21 January 1998 written to one National Spiritual Assembly on behalf of the House of Justice noted:

"Since the first course in the sequence emphasizes spiritual identity and prayer, the House of Justice applauds your decision to increase, parallel to the formation of study circles, the number of local communities holding regular devotional meetings. Even in communities where the Local Spiritual Assembly is not functioning, it should be possible to establish such meetings through the initiative of those taking part in the study circles."⁶⁸

By 2003, devotional meetings, which had become one of the "core" activities of the Bahá'í community, were multiplying consistently in clusters where the institute process was strong, as explained in a message dated 17 January:

“Devotional meetings begin to flourish as consciousness of the spiritual dimension of human existence is raised among the believers in an area through institute courses.”⁶⁹

Thus, in its message dated 27 December 2005, describing the process of growth in clusters ready for intense activity, the House of Justice noted the role played by devotional meetings in laying the spiritual foundations of community life:

“What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community’s collective endeavors.”⁷⁰

By Riḍván 2008 the Bahá’í community had developed considerably its capacity to hold regular devotional gatherings, in which people from all walks of life were invited to commune with God:

“Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character.”⁷¹

And, in its 28 December 2010 message, the House of Justice made reference to the “more than 350,000 souls worldwide” who had completed the first institute course and to the corresponding rise in capacity “to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character”. It commented further:

“In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends.”⁷²

So it was that, by Riḍván 2012, noting with pleasure the burgeoning devotional life of the community and the extraordinary advances made in the capacity to carry out acts of service at the grassroots, the House of Justice wrote:

“In our Riḍván message of 2001, we indicated that in countries where the process of entry by troops was sufficiently well advanced and conditions in national communities were favorable, we would approve the establishment of Houses of Worship at the national level, whose emergence would become a feature of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith. With exceeding joy we now announce that national Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs are to be raised up in two countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea. In these, the criteria we set are demonstrably met, and the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by

the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable. With the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago under way, the initiation of projects for building national Houses of Worship offers yet another gratifying evidence of the penetration of the Faith of God into the soil of society.

“The Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as ‘one of the most vital institutions of the world’, weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá’í life: worship and service. The union of these two is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the Plan, particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. The correlation of worship and service is especially pronounced in those clusters around the world where Bahá’í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in social action is apparent. Some of these have been designated as sites for the dissemination of learning so as to nurture the friends’ ability to advance the junior youth program in associated regions. The capacity to sustain this program, as we have recently indicated, also fuels the development of study circles and children’s classes. Thus, beyond its primary purpose, the learning site fortifies the entire scheme of expansion and consolidation. It is within these clusters that, in the coming years, the emergence of a local Mashriqu’l-Adhkár can be contemplated. Our hearts brimming with thankfulness to the Ancient Beauty, we rejoice to inform you that we are entering into consultations with respective National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the erection of the first local House of Worship in each of the following clusters: Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; and Tanna, Vanuatu.”⁷³

The passages above suggest that, as we strive to put into practice guidance from the Universal House of Justice, our collective capacity to contribute to the building of a new civilization increases accordingly, as does our capacity to receive further guidance. Responding to such fresh guidance raises our capacity to even higher levels, and the cycle repeats itself. A letter dated 14 August 2002 written on behalf of the House of Justice explains that the challenge before the friends everywhere is “to study the guidance issued by the House of Justice, on the one hand, and to learn from experience as they strive to put that guidance into practice, on the other.” In the interplay between the guidance of the House of Justice and our response to it, a pattern of community life that seeks to embody the principle of the oneness of humankind is steadily woven.

Let us try to examine further the powerful dynamics created by this interplay, dynamics which enable our community to make such rapid advances in its development. A simple exercise may help us to think about how our response to the guidance of the House of Justice builds our collective capacity. Listed below are some of the activities that recent messages of the House of Justice call us to pursue at the present time. Several of the capacities that the community needs to develop, as identified in these messages, follow the list. Which activities contribute to the enhancement of each capacity noted?

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| a. Participating in the study of institute courses | g. Visiting the homes of newly enrolled believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith |
| b. Holding regular devotional gatherings | h. Assisting others in entering the field of service |
| c. Serving as a children's class teacher | i. Serving as an institute coordinator |
| d. Serving as an animator of a junior youth group | j. Participating in the Nineteen Day Feast |
| e. Participating in the expansion phase of the three-month cycles of activity associated with a program of growth | k. Conversing with a receptive soul on spiritual matters and speaking about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation |
| f. Serving as a tutor of a study circle | l. Engaging in grassroots social action in one's locality |
| | m. Participating in consultations at the reflection meeting |

_____ To enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward

_____ To respond to the aspirations of the children of the world and attend to their need for spiritual education

_____ To assist youth in navigating through a crucial stage of their lives and in becoming empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization

_____ To reach large numbers of receptive souls with Bahá'u'lláh's message and to deepen their understanding of the essentials of the Faith

_____ To bind the members of the community together through ties of fellowship

_____ To enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social, and intellectual development

- _____ To sustain an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action
- _____ To bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation
- _____ To maintain an environment conducive to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance
- _____ To foster a decision-making process that benefits from a diversity of perspectives through consultation, which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups
- _____ To administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege
- _____ To develop strategies based on a unified vision of growth and a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, and to build on accomplishments
- _____ To apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to social reality
- _____ To address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements, as the community becomes larger and larger in size
- _____ To maintain an environment wherein true understanding can blossom

SECTION 28

Although it has not been our purpose in the past two sections to explore the nature of prayer and the powerful influence it exerts, our reflections on guidance received from the Universal House of Justice on the subject of devotional life would suffer were we not to acknowledge that our efforts in the teaching and administrative fields are constantly reinforced by its prayers. In the assurance of prayers given at the close of its messages to the Bahá'í world, as well as in those to individual believers and National Spiritual Assemblies written on its behalf, we catch a glimpse of the aspirations it holds for the Bahá'í community, for its institutions, and for each and every one of us. We take courage, too, in remembering that its supplications in the Holy Shrines join ours in calling to our aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of our individual and collective efforts depends. Below is a sampling of passages written by the House

of Justice, or on its behalf, to individual believers, to National Spiritual Assemblies, and to the Bahá'ís of the world, conveying its assurance of prayers.

“You may be sure that the House of Justice will pray on your behalf at the Sacred Threshold, supplicating Bahá'u'lláh to confer upon you His bounties and guidance in the years to come.”⁷⁴

“Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that Bahá'u'lláh may continue to bless and confirm your family in serving His Cause.”⁷⁵

“Rest assured of the ardent prayers of the House of Justice that the blessings of the Almighty may continually enrich your community as you strive to raise awareness of the Cause of God in your land.”⁷⁶

“The Universal House of Justice wishes us to assure you of its prayers in the Holy Shrines that your forthcoming deliberations with the Counsellors may be guided and confirmed.”⁷⁷

“The Universal House of Justice appreciates the challenges you face in carrying out your manifold responsibilities in . . . , but has every confidence in your ability to meet the challenges before you. It assures you of its ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines for the reinforcement of your dedicated efforts.”⁷⁸

“As they press energetically ahead into the fourth year of the Five Year Plan, they may rest assured of our ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines on their behalf, that Bahá'u'lláh may richly bless their efforts to serve His Cause.”⁷⁹

“We are asked to assure you of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines for divine confirmations to surround you in all you undertake for the advancement of the Cause of God.”⁸⁰

“As they arise to carry out their tasks, they should be confident that the Universal House of Justice will be offering prayers in the Holy Shrines on their behalf, that they may be strengthened and guided and may face the challenges before them with determination and zeal.”⁸¹

“We pray earnestly at the Sacred Threshold that each one of you, bearers of the undying flame, may be surrounded by the potent confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh as you convey to others the spark of faith.”⁸²

“It is our ardent hope that the believers will arise rank upon rank, with a clarity of vision born of experience and with complete reliance on the confirmations of God, to offer His life-giving Message to every eager soul, to every receptive population. Our prayers at the Sacred Threshold will accompany them as they strive to seize the abundant opportunities now opening before them.”⁸³

“That His eager followers in every community will arise with devotion, audacity and determination to advance His Cause is the longing of our hearts and the object of our fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.”⁸⁴

“Our heartfelt plea at the Holy Threshold on behalf of us all is that we may be divinely aided and richly confirmed in whatever we do towards meeting the urgent aim of the Divine Plan at so fate-laden a moment in human history.”⁸⁵

“We offer thanks to the Blessed Beauty for endowing His youthful followers with an immense collective capacity for service, and we beseech Him that it might be realized in benefit to humankind.”⁸⁶

“As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the followers of Bahá’u’lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.”⁸⁷

“With each passing day, rising numbers of newly awakened souls turn in supplication towards His Shrine, the place where we, in honor of that blessed Day and in gratitude for every bounty bestowed upon the community of the Greatest Name, bow our heads in prayer at the Sacred Threshold.”⁸⁸

“Beloved friends, we shall not forget to supplicate at the Holy Threshold that from His retreat of deathless splendor the Blessed Beauty may fill the souls of each and all of you with the revivifying breath of His celestial power.”⁸⁹

SECTION 29

The next theme we will explore follows naturally on from the preceding one. Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested are, as stated in its Constitution, “to promulgate and apply the laws and principles of the Faith” and “to safeguard and enforce that rectitude of conduct which the Law of God enjoins”. Two related items of correspondence will serve as examples that will help us appreciate how the spiritual and social implications of Bahá’í law are elucidated by the House of Justice. The first is a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on its behalf to a small group of individual believers, and the second a letter dated 23 April 2013 addressed to a National Spiritual Assembly. We will study each letter independently over several sections and will then pause to consider, in a final section, the conception of Bahá’í law brought to light by the guidance of the House of Justice.

We begin with the letter addressed to the individual believers. As the letter itself indicates, it was written in response to concerns they had expressed about what they felt were the difficulties experienced by young Bahá’í men and women in Western countries in adhering to certain of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. The letter sums up the principal concerns of these friends: that the widening gulf between the sexual mores of contemporary Western society and the standard set forth in the Bahá’í writings poses a great challenge to members of their generation; that, for historical reasons, to abstain from sexual relations before marriage is viewed negatively in many countries today; that, not infrequently, those who profess ideals of chastity, as in the priesthood, fall prey to illicit behavior; that marriage is often delayed into the thirties after young people have

completed their education and have saved money for a home; and that married life is more complex than in the past since both spouses usually work.

The letter written on behalf of the House of Justice acknowledges the challenge faced by young Bahá'ís in Europe in this respect. “Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture,” the letter states, “the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others.” In this connection, reference is made to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s analysis of the limitations of European civilization in His treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization* and to His many exhortations to the individual in that same volume to become a source of social good. Far from allowing themselves to be acculturated to the standards of society, the House of Justice underscores, Bahá'ís are called upon to be the champions of a new civilization.

The letter then discusses at the level of principle the main issues involved: it examines the current condition of society, elucidates the nature of Bahá'u'lláh’s laws and teachings, and describes the responsibilities shouldered by every one of His followers in this regard, as well as by the community and the institutions of the Faith. We will adhere to the same sequence of ideas as we explore relevant passages in this and the next six sections. Some of the passages we will study are quite lengthy, but we will pause along the way and carry out exercises that will help us think about the guidance of the House of Justice. We start with the paragraph below related to the first concept, the current condition of society.

“We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.”⁹⁰

To reflect on the significance of the paragraph above, you are encouraged to complete the following exercises:

1. The House of Justice tells us that we live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is _____ .
2. The House of Justice indicates in the paragraph above that, in societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is _____

_____ .

3. Think for a moment about the characteristics of a society that has bowed to the dictates of materialism. Which of the following might be attributed to it?
- a. The material aspects of life are glorified. Y N
 - b. Economic activity is placed at the center of human existence. Y N
 - c. Things derive value from their ability to contribute to wealth and material comfort. Y N
 - d. Success is synonymous with material wealth. Y N
 - e. Science is considered an industry, like those dedicated to the production of goods and services, and is treated as such. Y N
 - f. The human being is defined as a consumer of goods and services. Y N
 - g. To be free to pursue one's personal preferences is considered the highest ideal. Y N
 - h. Powerful forces that operate in the human soul, such as attraction to beauty, are exploited for economic gain. Y N
4. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, the House of Justice indicates, the laws of religion are often regarded as _____

_____.
5. In such societies, the House of Justice explains, morality is _____ and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are _____.
6. Which of the following statements are indicative of a morality defined by materialistic assumptions that have taken on the status of unassailable truths?
- _____ If it makes me happy, it is good.
 - _____ No one can tell me what is right or wrong; it is for me to decide.
 - _____ I can do whatever I want so long as I do not hurt anyone.
 - _____ If it feels good, it is right.
 - _____ First and foremost I should look out for my own interests. If I do not know how to do that, how can I help anyone else.
 - _____ Honor and integrity are more important than personal gain.
 - _____ If I can get away with it, why should I not do it.
 - _____ Honesty is the best policy.

- _____ Why should I not cheat when the system is corrupt.
- _____ Privacy is a thing of the past; everything should be out there for everyone to hear and read.
- _____ There is a time to speak and a time to be silent.
- _____ A good name is better than riches.
- _____ Ends justify means.
- _____ No matter what, pretend to be happy and smile.

7. Materialism today is manifesting itself in the practices of consumer society. What are some of the assumptions underlying consumer society? Two examples are given to assist you.

If something is good, more of it is better.

The more you consume, the happier you are.

SECTION 30

Let us read the next paragraph from the letter written on behalf of the House of Justice. It provides further insight into the current condition of society.

“Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. Yet, the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon the opposite: cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality. Divine teachings shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. ‘Man should know his own self’, Bahá’u’lláh states, ‘and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.’”⁹¹

The exercises below may assist you in thinking through the ideas set out by the House of Justice.

1. One of the features of many contemporary societies, the House of Justice tells us, is ____

_____.

2. Think about the many aspects of life and how they are affected when truth is bent to conform to personal desire. Friendship, married life, personal conduct, artistic expression, and business dealings are only a few examples.

a. What patterns of behavior emerge when an inordinate desire to stay young sets the standard for personal conduct? _____

_____.

b. What are some of the characteristics of a friendship that is shaped by the desire to feel good? _____

_____.

c. What kind of difficulties appear in married life when a spouse is seen as someone who should make it possible for the other to do whatever he or she wants and desires? _____

_____.

d. What conception of beauty is propagated when the desire to be praised and idolized sets the standard for artistic expression? _____

_____.

e. What kinds of injustices are committed when the desire for greater and greater profit is accepted as the fundamental operating principle of business? _____

_____.

f. What kinds of attitudes are cultivated when the desire to be unrestricted in one's freedom defines how individuals relate to authority? _____

_____.

- g. What are the effects on the environment and on the health of the world’s population when the desire to have more and more defines humanity’s relationship with nature?

- h. How are sources of news and information to the masses of humanity affected when they are ruled by a combination of desires: to entertain and sensationalize, to sell things and ideas, and to promote the interests of powerful groups in society? _____

3. Now look at the answers you gave above and draw up a list of some of the characteristics of a society where energy and resources are spent in an effort to bend truth to conform to personal desire. Two examples are given to assist you.

It promotes rebelliousness.

Greed becomes a virtue.

4. In such a society, the House of Justice explains, a culture has emerged that _____

5. To think about the significance of the statement made by the House of Justice, look at the sentences below. Each reflects some aspect of the purpose and nature of human existence. By using the following phrases to complete the sentences, consider some of the ways in which the culture of many contemporary societies is distorting human nature and purpose: worldly possessions, opium of consumerism, surrender to base desires, love of luxuries and physical adornments, self-centeredness.

- a. Attraction to beauty, which should be directed towards the Beauty of the Creator, finds expression instead in the _____ .

- b. The yearning of the human soul for freedom from the chains and struggles of material existence is confused with _____ .

- c. Instead of being bound to God, the human heart, which was created to love, is attached to _____ .
 - d. The longing of every soul to find meaning for its existence is dulled by the _____ .
 - e. The quest for self-knowledge, which should give rise to an understanding of that which leads to loftiness and glory, leads instead to _____ .
6. The letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice goes on to explain that, rather than the pursuit of personal desire, the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon _____ .
7. The House of Justice tells us next that divine teachings shed light on _____ .
8. The light provided by divine teachings, the House of Justice indicates, enables every soul to _____ .

SECTION 31

Before we continue with our study of the letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, you may wish to pause here and reflect on what we have done so far. We have considered some of the conditions of contemporary society and have thought about the distortion of human nature and purpose that they perpetrate. Vast amounts of resources and enormous energy are being spent to convince human beings that their happiness and well-being depend on the pursuit of personal desire. A huge machinery is in operation worldwide dedicated to the perpetuation of this proposition—indeed, to the spread of the materialistic dogma—and vested interests manipulate the course of events. It is not difficult to imagine how, over time, generations grow more and more forgetful of those attributes that are to distinguish human beings, trapped as they are in the “pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings”, “pliable objects in the hands of the powerful”. “What ‘oppression’ is more grievous”, Bahá’u’lláh asks, “than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?”⁹² You may find it useful to write a paragraph or two about how this oppression is being systematically perpetuated in the world today and how humanity can break free from its yoke. With respect to the latter, in addition to the passage quoted in Section 30, you will draw inspiration from the following words of Bahá’u’lláh:

“Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.”⁹³

“Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.”⁹⁴

“Blessed are they that have soared on the wings of detachment and attained the station which, as ordained by God, overshadoweth the entire creation, whom neither the vain imaginations of the learned, nor the multitude of the hosts of the earth have succeeded in deflecting from His Cause.”⁹⁵

“Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge, and soared in the atmosphere of My love, and cast away all else besides Me, and taken firm hold on that which hath been sent down from the Kingdom of My wondrous utterance.”⁹⁶

And these words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will inspire you further:

“Verily, God has chosen you for His love and knowledge; God has chosen you for the worthy service of unifying mankind; God has chosen you for the purpose of investigating reality and promulgating international peace; God has chosen you for the progress and development of humanity, for spreading and proclaiming true education, for the expression of love toward your fellow creatures and the removal of prejudice; God has chosen you to blend together human hearts and give light to the human world. The doors of His generosity are wide, wide open to us; but we must be attentive, alert and mindful, occupied with service to all mankind, appreciating the bestowals of God and ever conforming to His will.”⁹⁷

SECTION 32

Following its brief analysis of the current condition of society, the letter we are studying comments on the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's laws and teachings.

“The object of every Revelation’, Bahá'u'lláh declares, is ‘to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.’ His appearance signals the emergence of ‘a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God’, a race that will be purified ‘from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires’ and that will manifest ‘the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth’. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh provide ‘such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth’. Thus, enshrined in His Revelation is a pattern for future society, radically different from any established in the past, and the promotion of His laws and exhortations constitutes an inseparable part of the effort to lay the foundations of such a society.

“It is evident that, if the body and mind are to maintain good health, the laws that govern physical existence cannot be ignored. So, too, for any nation to function properly, there are certain social conventions and laws that, everyone accepts, must be followed. In the same way, there are laws and principles that govern our spiritual lives, and attention to them is of vital importance if the individual and society as a whole are to develop in a sound and harmonious manner. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress. His teachings serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness, whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behavior, leads to true freedom. ‘Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation,’ Bahá'u'lláh states, ‘they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that

pervadeth all created things.’ ‘Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,’ He declares further, ‘Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.’”⁹⁸

In the above paragraphs, the House of Justice reminds us of certain concepts fundamental to the Faith that we have considered in earlier courses in this series and which may have already been the subject of your personal reflections: the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation; the profound change at the level of the individual and in the structure of society envisioned in His Revelation; the nature of physical, social, and spiritual laws; the inseparable twin duties of recognition and obedience; and our duty to adhere to God’s commandments. Of course, our purpose here is not to study the nature of Bahá’í law, but to see how the guidance of the Universal House of Justice helps us appreciate its significance. With these thoughts in mind, then, you may wish to carry out the exercises below.

1. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, the Universal House of Justice tells us in the above paragraph, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations
 - a. express _____
 - b. raise _____
 - c. increase _____
 - d. lift _____
 - e. provide _____
2. The House of Justice indicates that Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings serve to _____
3. Referring to His teachings, the House of Justice states they are the _____ of human _____, whose call, far from _____ obedience to an _____ and _____ regimen of behavior, leads to _____.
4. The description of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings provided by the House of Justice differs greatly from the statement we read in Section 29 describing the way in which religious laws are often viewed in society at large. To see just how sharp the distinction is, you may wish to complete the sentences below, using these words and phrases: understanding, means for social progress, true freedom, empower, human happiness, expressions of truth.
 - a. The laws of religion are often regarded as arbitrary rules whereas, in reality, they are _____.
 - b. The laws of religion are considered by some a prudish and outdated code of conduct, whereas, in reality, they provide the _____.

- c. Not infrequently those who follow the laws of religion are seen as incapable of independent thought while, in reality, such laws increase _____ .
- d. Far from being blindly obeyed, then, the laws of religion serve to _____ .
- e. They are not hypocritically imposed but lead to _____ .
- f. They do not place unreasonable demands on the individual but are the bearer of _____ .

What might be useful for us to do at this point is to examine one of Bahá'u'lláh's commandments in order to see how, as the Universal House of Justice mentions, it raises consciousness, increases understanding, lifts the standard of personal conduct, and enables society to progress. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* He declares: “Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves.”⁹⁹ What truth does this law express about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence? What truth does it express about the proper organization of society? What are some of the influences this commandment exerts on personal conduct? What are some of its implications for the progress of society? You may wish to write down your thoughts in the space below.

far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself,' the message noted. Young Bahá'ís especially need to take care, lest they imagine they can live according to the norms of contemporary society while adhering to Bahá'í ideals at some minimum level to assuage their conscience or to satisfy the community, for they will soon find themselves consumed in a struggle to obey even the most basic of the Faith's moral teachings and powerless to take up the challenges of their generation. 'Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar,' Bahá'u'lláh warns. The inner joy that every individual seeks, unlike a passing emotion, is not contingent on outside influences; it is a condition, born of certitude and conscious knowledge, fostered by a pure heart, which is able to distinguish between that which has permanence and that which is superficial. 'Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven,' are Bahá'u'lláh's words, 'yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face.'"¹⁰⁰

The paragraph above contains many essential points that you may wish to make the object of your reflection. There is one, however, that we should explore further here. The House of Justice warns young people especially against adhering to Bahá'í ideals at some minimum level merely to ease their conscience or to satisfy the community. The warning implies that, if we allow the standard to which we aspire to become lower and lower and make less and less effort, we will soon find ourselves powerless. What appears to be a less formidable path saps our strength and dulls our faculties, including, perhaps, our capacity to experience enduring joy. Let us try to explore these ideas further by looking at one Bahá'í ideal—namely, Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation: "Verily I say, the tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk. God hath forgiven what is past. Henceforward everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men."¹⁰¹ Decide whether you think the following statements are true or false.

- a. Realistically speaking, it is impossible for us to escape the patterns of thought associated with backbiting and gossiping, since so much of the media—even news services—encourage us to focus on the lives of those around us. T F
- b. If we take a middle approach and occasionally listen to gossip and backbiting, but do not actively take part, our friends and coworkers will not see us as fanatical or self-righteous. T F
- c. Allowing our friends and coworkers to vent their frustrations to us about other people every once in a while can be a means of strengthening bonds of trust. T F
- d. Slander creates an environment of suspicion and mistrust. T F
- e. In an environment of suspicion and mistrust, people become disempowered. T F
- f. In an environment of suspicion and mistrust, people lose their motivation to exert effort for the good of others. T F

- g. In a culture of slander and backbiting, it is easy to lose a sense of right and wrong. T F
- h. While we should avoid abusive language, making sarcastic comments, all in good fun, is a legitimate way of getting a point across, without actually saying anything critical about someone. T F
- i. There is a difference between occasionally using statements in a humorous way to imply the opposite of what is intended and possessing a sarcastic tongue. T F
- j. It is possible to develop a sarcastic tongue and possess a sin-covering eye at the same time. T F
- k. Sarcasm is acceptable so long as it is directed not at individuals, but towards abstract entities such as social systems, institutions, and authority. T F
- l. If we fall into the habit of being sarcastic, it is not difficult to end up using harsh language. T F
- m. If we develop the habit of combining, in clever ways, harsh language with kind but cutting remarks, it is not difficult to end up becoming verbally abusive. T F

SECTION 34

The next paragraph of the letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice addresses the question of obedience.

“The duty to obey the laws brought by Bahá’u’lláh for a new age, then, rests primarily on the individual believer. It lies at the heart of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved; ‘Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty,’ is Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation. Yet what is expected in this connection is effort sustained by earnest desire, not instantaneous perfection. The qualities and habits of thought and action that characterize Bahá’í life are developed through daily exertion. ‘Bring thyself to account each day’, writes Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Let each morn be better than its eve’, He advises, ‘and each morrow richer than its yesterday.’ The friends should not lose heart in their personal struggles to attain to the Divine standard, nor be seduced by the argument that, since mistakes will inevitably be made and perfection is impossible, it is futile to exert an effort. They are to steer clear of the pitfalls of hypocrisy, on the one hand—that is, saying one thing yet doing another—and heedlessness, on the other—that is, disregard for the laws, ignoring or explaining away the need to follow them. So too, is paralysis engendered by guilt to be avoided; indeed, preoccupation with a particular moral failing can, at times, make it more challenging for it to be overcome.”¹⁰²

The exercises below may assist you in thinking through the ideas set out by the House of Justice in this crucial paragraph describing the spiritual dynamics of obedience.

1. When we fail to live up to the Bahá'í standard, we should
 - a. recognize that perfection is impossible and give up trying. Y N
 - b. recognize that, if we continue to strive, we will overcome our weaknesses. Y N
 - c. talk openly about our failings with people to prove we are not hypocrites. Y N
 - d. keep the matter to ourselves, while maintaining the public veneer of propriety. Y N
 - e. withdraw from community life out of shame. Y N
 - f. have confidence that God knows our limitations and will accept our earnest efforts. Y N

2. When we make the same mistake over and over again, it means
 - a. we are not trying hard enough. Y N
 - b. we are being heedless. Y N
 - c. we are being careless. Y N
 - d. there is something we are not understanding. Y N
 - e. we have accepted ourselves for who we are. Y N
 - f. we have no fear of failure. Y N

3. Focusing a great deal of attention on our moral failings and feeling guilty about them
 - a. show how much we love Bahá'u'lláh. Y N
 - b. show we are good Bahá'ís. Y N
 - c. show we are repentant. Y N
 - d. help us to make sure we do not slip up again. Y N
 - e. make us absorbed with ourselves. Y N
 - f. hamper our participation in community life and diminish our capacity to serve. Y N
 - g. can become, however unconsciously, an excuse for inaction. Y N
 - h. show that our egos are playing tricks on us. Y N

with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

“In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá’í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgmental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá’í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

“Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the license that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá’í community, adhering to Bahá’í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will.”¹⁰³

With these three paragraphs, the letter enters into a discussion of the community and the institutions of the Faith and the responsibilities they shoulder in supporting individual efforts to uphold Bahá’í ideals. Many of the points raised here will be taken up in our study of the letter addressed to a National Spiritual Assembly, which we will begin in the next section. For now, then, you may wish merely to review the ideas expressed in the above passage by completing the following sentences:

1. In the first paragraph, referring to the efforts of the individual believer, the Universal House of Justice explains: What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to _____ and to _____, they are not _____ individuals, withstanding _____ the onslaught of the _____ operating in society. They are

_____ of a _____ community, _____ in scope,
_____ a bold spiritual _____—working to establish a _____
_____ and _____ suited to a humanity
entering its _____ of _____. Giving shape to the community’s efforts is
a _____ for _____ defined by the _____.
This framework promotes the _____ of the _____ in
conjunction with _____, as two _____
processes. Specifically, the _____ of the _____ are intended to set
the individual on a _____ in which _____ and _____,
_____ and _____, are gradually acquired through _____
—service intended to _____ the _____, helping to _____
the individual out of its _____ and _____ him or her in a _____
_____.

2. In the next paragraph, the House of Justice describes the community-building process in
which we are engaged at the grassroots, noting that every individual finds himself or
herself _____ in a community that serves _____ as an
_____ conducive to the _____ of those _____
that are to distinguish a Bahá’í life—an environment in which

- a spirit of unity _____
- the ties of fellowship _____
- mistakes _____
- fear of failure _____
- criticism _____
- backbiting and gossip _____
- young and old _____
- _____
- _____
- children _____
- _____
- _____

– young people _____

3. The second paragraph continues: The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to _____ that such an _____ is _____. They do not _____ into the _____ of individuals. Nor are they _____ and _____, eager to _____ those who _____ of the Bahá'í standard. Except in _____ cases of _____ and _____ disregard for the _____ that could _____ the Cause and may require them to _____, their attention is focused on _____, _____, _____, and _____.

4. The final paragraph quoted above notes: Such an environment creates a _____ than the one found particularly in the _____ societies of today. _____, for instance, need not be _____, as it is in some parts of the world where the _____ and _____ of adulthood are _____ in pursuit of the _____ that a _____ grants. For the individual, who both _____ and _____ from the _____ that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is _____ with _____ and, though perhaps still difficult on _____, does not pose an _____.

SECTION 36

Over the past several sections, we have reflected on passages from a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice that offers guidance to the individual believer on matters related to Bahá'í law. We are now ready to take up a brief study of the letter dated 23 April 2013 addressed to a National Spiritual Assembly in Western Europe that had inquired how it might best help the young members of its community uphold the standard of conduct set forth in the teachings. The letter was later shared with other National Spiritual Assemblies. We will confine our explorations of it to a few concepts, reading only two or three extracts and carrying out some corresponding exercises.

The letter begins by making reference to the one dated 19 April—a copy of which is provided as an attachment for the National Assembly—and expands on the ideas set forth therein. Indeed, it picks up, in a sense, where the other letter came to a close. In this connection, it indicates that

“. . . the issues involved can best be considered in light of the relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá’í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavors, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá’í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá’í law.”¹⁰⁴

The way the institutions of the Faith discharge their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers is the first topic considered. The aim is not to offer “repeated admonitions” or “dogmatic instruction in proper conduct” but “to raise consciousness and to increase understanding”. In this light, the letter to the National Assembly describes briefly the educational process in which the training institute seeks to engage the individual. At the heart of this process, which focuses on building capacity for service, is “contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual’s attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with ‘the feet of detachment’.” “Virtuous conduct and self-discipline”, then, are developed in the field of action.

The letter goes on to discuss how the moral development of the individual relates to community life. In doing so, it quotes several passages written on behalf of the Guardian that encourage the individual believer to learn through “active, wholehearted and continued participation” in community activities and to become “a real part” of a “living organism”. “Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith”, the House of Justice explains, provides a context for the efforts made by individuals “to align their lives with Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.” “When the desire to uphold the Bahá’í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unflinching love and warm encouragement,” individuals faced with difficulties will not feel inclined “to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.”

Here the House of Justice turns directly to the question of the community and refers the National Assembly specifically to the letter dated 19 April which we studied earlier, noting that it describes “some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá’ís, guided by their institutions, are striving to create.” “At the most fundamental level,” the environment sought is “one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavoring to achieve the Bahá’í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance.” The following warning is then given:

“What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá’í community is charged with an historic mission. It

must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: ‘A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.’ The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community’s mission. The institutions of a Bahá’í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá’í institution must energetically engage.”¹⁰⁵

Below are a few exercises that may assist you in reflecting on some of the points raised by the Universal House of Justice in this passage, as well as in the paragraphs quoted in Section 35, which also relate to the moral development of the individual and community life. You may wish to go back and reread those paragraphs before completing the exercises.

1. The House of Justice indicates that we are members of a purposeful community, pursuing a bold spiritual mission, a community which serves increasingly as an environment where we are able to cultivate the attributes that are to distinguish our lives as Bahá’ís. What are some of the characteristics of the environment mentioned by the House of Justice in the letters we are studying?

2. How does an environment with the characteristics you described above help to confirm individuals in the mission with which Bahá’u’lláh has entrusted them?

3. The House of Justice refers to the environment created in a community with an insular mentality. While it shares many of the characteristics with the one you described above, the two do not affect their members in the same way. What characteristics are present in the one that are lacking in the other?

4. How does complacency make the members of a community vulnerable to the forces of materialism?

5. In an environment characterized by a strong sense of purpose to effect change, morality and spirituality are not associated with passivity but with energy and activity. To think for a moment about the implications of this concept of morality, complete the five phrases below.

- a. Whereas goodness is often defined in terms of not causing harm to anyone, the environment of the Bahá'í community tries to cultivate a kind of goodness that _____

- b. Whereas humility is sometimes associated with lack of capacity and confidence, the environment of the Bahá'í community tries to cultivate a kind of humility that _____

- c. Whereas purity is often associated with frailness and naïveté, the environment of the Bahá'í community tries to cultivate a kind of purity that _____

- d. Whereas truthfulness is often seen as simply not telling blatant lies, the environment of the Bahá'í community tries to cultivate a kind of truthfulness that _____
- _____
- _____
- e. Whereas not infrequently justice is defined merely in terms of not infringing on the rights of others, the environment of the Bahá'í community tries to cultivate a kind of justice that _____
- _____
- _____

Now, in light of the above exercises, discuss in your group what it means to uphold the Bahá'í standard during this period of transition from humanity's childhood to its maturity. How does participation in community life help to foster the attributes of a morality suited to this age, attributes that enable us to combat the forces of moral decay unleashed in the world today?

SECTION 37

In addition to their ongoing responsibilities in supporting the individual believer and in fostering a vibrant pattern of community life, the institutions may need to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law. Below are some of the points raised in this connection by the letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Assembly.

The circumstances in which action may be required by the institutions are stated plainly: that is, “when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name,” or “when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community.” Such cases should be approached “with the utmost delicacy and wisdom”. On the one hand, Spiritual Assemblies “should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behavior contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community.” On the other, they should not “act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.”

If an individual's situation or conduct becomes so blatant that it attracts the attention of the Assembly, it would generally offer “loving but firm advice to the friend involved”, after gaining “a relatively clear picture of the issues” at hand. It may first need to determine “to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards”, and it should stand ready to counsel him or her dispassionately, perhaps “over an extended period”, to increase appreciation for “the requirements of Bahá'í law”. It may prove necessary for the Assembly, often with the aid of the Counsellors or Auxiliary Board members, to help the individual “reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options.” Institutions are advised to exercise patience, allowing the friend concerned “sufficient time to bring about a change”. They are also encouraged to take care, lest an individual's problem become “a source of

backbiting or disunity in the community.” Other members of the community should “focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.”

At all times, an Assembly is “guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá’í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards.” Continued patience and loving advice are appropriate “when a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation”.

“Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection. What is at stake is the participation of the individual in those aspects of community life internal to the body of the followers of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, not his or her civil rights. In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá’í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community. Restricting the believer from other forms of service—for instance, acting as a tutor of a study circle or as a children’s class teacher—may also be considered. Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, ‘although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline,’ this prerogative of the National Assembly ‘should be used only in extreme cases.’”¹⁰⁶

Let us think, if only briefly here, about the meaning of administrative sanctions in the Faith. As is clear from the above passage, sanctions, far from being punishment or retribution, are intended to help the believer, to protect the good name of the Faith, and to safeguard the community. This conception of “sanctions” requires some reflection. Look at the statements below. Are any of them, uttered by one or another member of the community, in keeping with the spirit of administrative sanctions? As always with this type of exercise, while the decision may appear obvious in some cases, the statements, in their entirety, will help you to think through a set of ideas.

- _____ That will teach him! He always has to learn his lessons the hard way.
- _____ He got what was coming to him!
- _____ Sometimes you have to make an example out of people.
- _____ Those who break the law must be punished, for the greater good.

- _____ An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
- _____ Justice is blind.
- _____ No one is above the law.
- _____ No exceptions to the rules!
- _____ Anyone found guilty will have to pay the price.
- _____ Confess your sins and accept your punishment.
- _____ He should feel terrible for the way he behaved; how can he look at himself in the mirror?
- _____ A person is innocent until proven guilty.
- _____ Everyone ganged up against him; he didn't deserve to be sanctioned.
- _____ God is the only real judge, not our institutions, much less any one of us as individuals.
- _____ An individual's personal conduct is a matter between him- or herself and God.
- _____ The important thing is to keep up appearances; what other people don't know won't hurt them.
- _____ Let he who is without sin throw the first stone!
- _____ Human beings have been given free will; they should be left to exercise it as they please.
- _____ People learn from their own mistakes; they should be allowed to explore their own reality and discover through experience the best way to live their lives.
- _____ People learn correct behavior from what they see around them; if society has not provided an environment for people to learn proper conduct, how can they be blamed for their misdeeds?
- _____ By imposing administrative sanctions on individuals, our institutions create disunity in the community.
- _____ The Faith is all about unity; the imposition of sanctions goes against the spirit of loving acceptance that it is trying to promote.

The above statements, each carrying with it certain assumptions about the nature of the human being and the purpose of society, demonstrate how fruitless it is to bring the standards of the world today to bear on the question of administrative sanctions. Even a Bahá'í who happens to receive some form of sanction understands it as a process necessary for the health of the community and for the progress of the individual and society.

A final point deserves mention here: In no way should we confuse in our minds the question of administrative sanctions, which is one aspect of a loving educational process, with the need to protect the community from the influence of those who hope to undermine the unity of the Cause or who have stepped outside the shadow of the Covenant. The Counsellors and their auxiliaries, as well as Spiritual Assemblies, are ever ready to take action in coordination with one another, should the need arise. The burden falls on them to counsel individuals so bent, recognizably few in number, and to counteract their schemes, as necessary. And conscious that

the institutions of the Faith are vigilant in guarding over the community as a whole, each one of us is prepared—through study of the writings and daily prayer, through the bonds that connect us to the community and its institutions and our constant reference to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice—to protect ourselves, should we ever become the object of such machinations.

SECTION 38

Though the discussion on which we embarked in Section 29 has given us many insights into the question of Bahá'í law, this was not its primary purpose. Our exploration was about the promulgation and application of the Law by the Universal House of Justice as the Head of our Faith. With this thought in mind, consider for a moment the two letters we have just studied. Think about how lovingly the House of Justice addresses the individual. Underlying the care and precision with which it sets out its comments, is it not possible to see the respect and tender feelings it has for each and every one of us? Look at how it speaks to the institutions of our Faith, and look at the language it employs in discussing Bahá'í law. Whereas so many institutions that wield authority revel in spouting long lists of do's and don'ts, the House of Justice places the question of law in a comprehensive context. Whereas oftentimes authoritative bodies are accusatory, the House of Justice reminds us of our nobility. It helps us to see relationships and draw connections in our minds—in the case of Bahá'í law, the relation to civilization building and to individual and social transformation. One sees emerging in its communications a new conception of the individual, the institutions, and the community and the relationships that bind them—relationships that will bring forth civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. Reflect, then, on how exquisitely and with what majesty the Universal House of Justice is upholding, for all of humanity to witness, these and so many other statements found in the writings of our Faith:

“Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight!”¹⁰⁷

“The primary purpose, the basic objective, in laying down powerful laws and setting up great principles and institutions dealing with every aspect of civilization, is human happiness; and human happiness consists only in drawing closer to the Threshold of Almighty God, and in securing the peace and well-being of every individual member, high and low alike, of the human race; and the supreme agencies for accomplishing these two objectives are the excellent qualities with which humanity has been endowed.”¹⁰⁸

“Who can doubt that such a consummation—the coming of age of the human race—must signalize, in its turn, the inauguration of a world civilization such as no mortal eye hath ever beheld or human mind conceived? Who is it that can imagine the lofty standard which such a civilization, as it unfolds itself, is destined to attain? Who can measure the heights to which human intelligence, liberated from its shackles, will soar? Who can visualize the realms which the human spirit, vitalized by the outpouring light of Bahá'u'lláh, shining in the plenitude of its glory, will discover?”¹⁰⁹

SECTION 39

Our discussion of Bahá'í law has made us aware, once again, of the direction in which history is unfolding and the civilization to which Bahá'u'lláh is summoning humanity. His Revelation is universal in character. It belongs to the entire human race, not to any one group of people. Every human being and every human group can benefit from the pearls of wisdom contained therein. Indeed, “all the atoms of the earth”, the Universal House of Justice tells us, “are responding to the vibrating influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.” We will dedicate this and the next two sections, then, to a theme of utmost importance: humanity's access to the Word of God.

Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested, as expressed in its Constitution, are “to ensure the preservation of the Sacred Texts and to safeguard their inviolability” and “to analyze, classify, and coordinate the Writings”. In this new Day, humanity is blessed not only with the Word of God revealed by His Manifestation but also with a vast body of written works from the authorized Interpreter of His Words, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian after Him, which affirm “the true meaning, the real significance, the innermost secret” of the revealed Verses. As we discussed earlier, the statements and pronouncements of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are bound inextricably to the “Book” itself.

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh comprises more than one hundred volumes in the original Persian and Arabic languages. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's written works, too, are in Persian and Arabic, though a few are in Turkish. And while much of the correspondence of the Guardian was penned in English, a significant percentage was sent to the believers in the East as well. If the peoples of the world are to have access to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, in order to study the teachings and apply them to their individual and collective lives, the writings must be translated into scores and scores of languages. This is an enormous enterprise. Let us think about some of its implications here.

To begin, we should remember that many texts in the original Persian and Arabic have been generally available for a long time. Both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá addressed Tablets to individuals, and over the years nearly all of these have been collected at the World Centre, along with the communications of the Guardian. Further, we know how much importance Shoghi Effendi attached to the translation work, since he, as a young man, studied English with the hope of assisting his beloved Grandfather through this service. When, as Guardian of the Faith, he immediately set about translating the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, he initiated a process that continues to unfold under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. The many passages and Tablets he translated into English, from which, he advised, they could be taken into a myriad other languages, serve as a standard for the preparation of translations today.

The House of Justice has established agencies at the World Centre to assist it in analyzing, classifying, and coordinating the Persian, Arabic, and English texts and in facilitating the English-language translation work. Such delicate work, we can well appreciate, requires not only a command of the relevant languages but also a dedication to acquiring a profound understanding of the purpose and character of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and the historical circumstances in which it progressively unfolded. To translate even a single verse, one needs to draw on a great deal of knowledge and experience, if the final rendition is to resonate in the hearts and minds of readers and remain faithful to the original.

Periodically, then, the House of Justice will announce the completion of a new English-language compilation or publication with selections from the writings, chosen specifically by it, from the immense range available, on the basis of their “immediate relevance to the work of the Cause at this stage of its development.” From the English version, every selection is then taken into other languages, with the assistance, as necessary, of reference to the original Persian or Arabic. There are only a few exceptions where the translation is to be made directly from the original, for example, Turkish and Urdu, languages closely related to Persian and Arabic. The translation work usually proceeds under the aegis of National Spiritual Assemblies, but for certain languages widely spoken in the world that cross national borders, the House of Justice has set up international panels to oversee the translation of the Bahá’í writings. It has also placed special funds at the disposal of the Counsellors to help National Assemblies in their efforts to ensure basic Bahá’í literature is available in as many languages as possible. Now highly organized, the translation work worldwide moves with a dispatch unimaginable in decades past.

SECTION 40

As a means of illustration of what we have studied in the last section, let us look at the trajectory that the translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has followed. Our discussions will draw largely, though not exclusively, on the introduction written by the Universal House of Justice to the first authorized English translation of the Most Holy Book, from the original Arabic, completed in 1992.

First we should remind ourselves that “Bahá’u’lláh revealed the Kitáb-i-Aqdas around 1873, some twenty years after He had received, in the Síyáh-Chál of Tíhrán, the intimation of His Revelation.” He eventually had “manuscript copies sent to Bahá’ís in Iran, and in the year 1308 A.H. (1890–91 A.D.), towards the end of His life, He arranged for the publication of the original Arabic text of the Book in Bombay.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “anticipated its publication in various languages”, and Shoghi Effendi himself “translated substantial portions of it into English which he diffused through his letters and in his compilations of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings”. Further he,

“as an essential prelude to the eventual translation and publication of its entire text, initiated steps in 1955 for the preparation of a Synopsis and Codification of the Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. This was a task on which he made considerable progress and which was completed by the Universal House of Justice in 1973 . . .”¹¹⁰

Then, in its Ridván 1986 message, the House of Justice reviewed the achievements of the global Plan drawing to a close, commented on the Faith’s emergence from obscurity and on the maturation of the institutions of the Cause, and announced its decision to prepare the English translation of the complete text of the Most Holy Book. It considered this undertaking “both possible and essential”.

The introduction to the final published volume provides a description of the subsequent work involved. Of course, the style had to be in keeping with the significant portions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas already translated by the Guardian, who had “faced the challenge” of finding a style that would not only “faithfully convey the exactness of the text’s meaning,” but would also “evoke in the reader the spirit of meditative reverence which is a distinguishing feature of response to the original.” “The form of expression he selected,” the House of Justice states,

“captures the elevated mode of Bahá’u’lláh’s Arabic, while remaining accessible to the contemporary reader.” The following passage offers us valuable insight into the nature of the translation process that unfolded under the direction of the House of Justice:

“Although both Arabic and English are languages with rich vocabularies and varied modes of expression, their forms differ widely from one another. The Arabic of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is marked by intense concentration and terseness of expression. It is a characteristic of this style that if a connotation is obvious it should not be explicitly stated. This presents a problem for a reader whose cultural, religious and literary background is entirely different from that of Arabic. A literal translation of a passage which is clear in the Arabic could be obscure in English. It therefore becomes necessary to include in the English translation of such passages that element of the Arabic sentence which is obviously implicit in the original. At the same time, it is vital to avoid extrapolating this process to the point where it would add unjustifiably to the original or limit its meaning. Striking the right balance between beauty and clarity of expression on the one hand, and literalness on the other, is one of the major issues with which the translators have had to grapple and which has caused repeated reconsideration of the rendering of certain passages. Another major issue is the legal implication of certain Arabic terms which have a range of meanings different from those of similar terms in English.

“Sacred Scripture clearly requires especial care and faithfulness in translation. This is supremely important in the case of a Book of Laws, where it is vital that the reader not be misled or drawn into fruitless disputation. As had been foreseen, the translation of the Most Holy Book has been a work of the utmost difficulty, requiring consultation with experts in many lands. Since some one-third of the text had already been translated by Shoghi Effendi, it was necessary to strive for three qualities in the translation of the remaining passages: accuracy of meaning, beauty of English, and conformity of style with that used by Shoghi Effendi.

“We are now satisfied that the translation has reached a point where it represents an acceptable rendering of the original.”¹¹¹

The translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas was even more demanding than most other volumes because, as stated by Shoghi Effendi, it had to be “copiously annotated”. So, not only did the remaining text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas have to be translated, but accompanying notes and an index had to be prepared, work meticulously carried out under the guidance of the House of Justice. The final volume, bearing the title *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, also contains supplementary texts from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the compilation of questions put to Him by early followers and the answers He revealed, and the Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The full volume has since been translated into a reported thirty-seven languages to date, making it possible for at least some four billion people to study it in their own native languages, as noted in the table on the next page.

Languages in which “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book” is available¹

Language	Native speakers (in millions)	Total speakers (in millions)
1. Chinese (Mandarin)	955	1,026
2. Spanish	407	466
3. English	359	>765
4. Hindi	311	380
5. Arabic (original)	293	452
6. Portuguese	216	217
7. Bengali	206	250
8. Russian	154	272
9. German	89	111.8
10. Indonesian	77	>140
11. Korean	76	78
12. Telugu	76	79
13. Vietnamese	76	80
14. French	74	118.5
15. Tamil	70	76.8
16. Urdu	66	167.4
17. Persian ²	65	110
18. Turkish	63	90
19. Italian	59	61.1

Language	Native speakers (in millions)	Total speakers (in millions)
20. Thai	56	60
21. Malayalam	38	–
22. Burmese	33	42
23. Oriya	33	–
24. Tagalog	28	65
25. Romanian	24	28
26. Dutch	21	28
27. Lao	19	20
28. Hungarian	13	13
29. Czech	10	11
30. Bulgarian	9.1	10
31. Albanian	7.4	–
32. Danish	5.6	6
33. Hebrew	5.3	10
34. Finnish	5	6
35. Norwegian	5	5
36. Slovak	5	–
37. Greenlandic	0.057	–
TOTAL	4,009.457	–

¹ List based on information available to the Department of Statistics at the Baha’i World Centre as of February 2014. Population figures are compiled from the most reliable resources available.

² In accordance with directives from the Guardian, the text remains in the original Arabic. Some of the supplements as well as “Questions and Answers” were revealed in Persian; the introduction, the “Synopsis and Codification”, and Notes have been translated into Persian.

SECTION 41

In the example we have taken of the release of the English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, we have seen that there is an expanding effort, unfolding under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, to translate the writings of the Faith and make them available to all of humanity, an effort so central to the mighty enterprise “to build anew the whole world”. What we should do now is consider the implications of this effort for our exertions as individuals to deepen our knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.

Of course, as we study the books of the training institute, and perform the corresponding acts of service, our knowledge of the teachings steadily increases, as does our understanding of their significance for our individual and collective lives. In addition to imparting knowledge and strengthening skills and abilities, qualities and attitudes, however, the institute courses strive to reinforce in participants many a desired habit, including the habits associated with rigorous and methodical study of the writings. To recite “the verses of God” every morning and every evening is one of these. Reflect for a moment on how much can be studied in a lifetime when the habit of daily reading has been formed, and then write a few thoughts down about how you are organizing your time to ensure you receive the bounties that flow from this exhortation of Bahá’u’lláh.

To engage in personal systematic study of the writings is another habit that the institute courses hope every participant will form. In the previous two units of this book, it was suggested that you draw up a personal plan to study the many written works and talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the communications and statements of the Guardian. Although Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is no doubt the object of your constant reflection, you may wish to take the opportunity here to devise a similar plan that focuses on His Writings, if you have not already done so.

Beyond such a plan, there are of course times when a few friends may wish to come together in a locality, as part of their individual efforts to deepen their knowledge of the Faith, and study a particular volume as a small group. Other kinds of habits that the institute is helping to develop will naturally manifest themselves in such a group—for example, habits of thought that are discernable in the mutual support the friends lend to one another, in the joy they derive from the insights of one another, and in the respect they have for the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment, not thinking in terms of categories such as the deepened and the uninformed. They also take care not to allow their own deepening efforts to so absorb them that they neglect the imperative of service in the field. They know well how easily inward-looking habits can form and how quickly momentum in the work of expansion and consolidation can be lost.

One more point deserves mention here: In a life in which personal growth and commitment to the well-being of others are seen as an integrated whole, and not as separate

and sometimes conflicting ends, sharing the knowledge one acquires is essential. For many of us, the visits that we undertake to the homes of newly enrolled believers to discuss certain themes, the act of service addressed in Book 2, assist us in fulfilling this important requisite. Through the discussions that ensue in such a setting, all gain insights. So, too, there are the occasional events promoted by the institutions of the Faith through which we can draw inspiration from the insights of others. Among them are local deepening classes, conferences, and winter and summer schools, in which those of us who have studied and reflected a great deal on some specific area may be called upon to offer a course or workshop or to give a talk. To what extent you are able to pursue such opportunities will depend on your inclinations and possibilities. For now, however, you may wish to draw up your own personal plan for the systematic study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation on the basis of the following overview:

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, of course, holds a special place in Bahá'í literature. As with the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, you will refer to it time and again throughout your life. The Guardian emphasized that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Will and Testament “are not only complementary, but that they mutually confirm one another, and are inseparable parts of one complete unit.”¹¹² Together, Shoghi Effendi indicated, they constitute “the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith”,¹¹³ and he encouraged the friends to study the provisions of both these weighty documents.

As for the other translations prepared by the Guardian, though the titles were enumerated in the last unit, we should say a few words about each here. You are already familiar with *The Hidden Words* and with the Kitáb-i-Íqán, both of which, as mentioned in the fourth course in this series, were revealed by Bahá'u'lláh during the period of His exile to Baghdád. Shoghi Effendi translated the former in 1923—followed by subsequent revisions—and the latter in 1931. Four years later, in 1935, his work on *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, described by him as “a selection of the most characteristic and hitherto unpublished passages from the outstanding works of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation”, reached completion. This was followed by the release in 1938 of the equally substantial volume *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*. The fifth and final translation given by the Guardian to the Western readership, *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, was published in 1941. Addressed to a prominent Islamic cleric who had persecuted the Bahá'ís in Persia, this Tablet was Bahá'u'lláh's last major written work and contains a selection of passages from His Writings which He Himself made towards the end of His life.

During the Guardian's ministry, the English-language volume *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys* was also published. It contains two separate Tablets, addressed to different individuals by Bahá'u'lláh while in Baghdád. Both are mystical in character, referring to the stages through which the spiritual wayfarer passes. The English translation was prepared by two early believers and was published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States with the knowledge of the Guardian.

Regarding the volumes prepared thus far under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, almost all of which, like the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, have incorporated key passages translated by Shoghi Effendi, the first carried the title *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*. Bringing together a selection of Tablets and passages addressed by Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and rulers of the earth during His exile to Adrianople and in the early years of His banishment to 'Akká, it was released in 1967, in conjunction with the commemoration of the centenary of His Proclamation and with

SECTION 42

In drawing up a personal plan for the study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, we have brought to a close our reflections on the theme of humanity's access to the Word of God and on some of the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice is invested in this respect. It seems appropriate, at this point, for us to take a few moments to remind ourselves that, apart from our ongoing study of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as those of the Guardian, we are in constant interaction with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Its messages to the Bahá'í world and others made widely available are also the object, then, of our systematic and intense study. Among them are its Ridván messages and the general messages it issues on occasion regarding the global Plans of the Faith. What excitement is generated in the Bahá'í world every time one of these messages is released, and we are able to catch a glimpse of the vision of the House of Justice, from such a lofty perspective, of what has been achieved and what can be accomplished in weaving a pattern of life that embodies the principle of the oneness of humankind—not unlike witnessing the progressive unrolling of the most exquisite tapestry. Sometimes its messages of this kind are gathered into volumes covering certain time periods, which we can also study. Let us read, then, a passage from a message dated 28 December 2010 addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, in which the House of Justice describes the posture it hopes we will assume in studying its guidance as we strive to put it into practice:

“It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyze but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.”¹¹⁴

You may find it useful to write down here some of the habits, to which the House of Justice refers in the above passage, that you have formed in the setting of the study circle and that are assisting you in reflecting on its guidance and putting it into practice.

SECTION 43

Our explorations over the course of this unit have led us back to a subject that we took up during the early part of our study: that, in the institution of the Universal House of Justice, we have an entity, inspired directly by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, alive in the world through which guidance will continue to flow to humanity and through which the achievement of the purpose of His Revelation is assured. From its Seat standing at the apex of the Arc on Mount Carmel, which it occupied in 1983, the House of Justice carries out its functions and issues its communications. So it is that, from the Bahá'í Spiritual and Administrative Centre, permanently fixed in the twin cities of 'Akká and Haifa, the supreme governing Body of our Faith—with its Council Chamber oriented towards Bahjí, the most sacred spot on Earth, and situated in close proximity to the Shrine of the Báb—exercises the powers and duties with which it has been invested.

One of these powers and duties is, of course, “to preserve and develop the Spiritual and Administrative Centre of the Bahá'í Faith” itself. The evolution of the World Centre is closely linked, as we noted in the preceding unit, to the progress of the global Bahá'í community; an expanding number of agencies operate from there under the supervision of the House of Justice in the discharge of their responsibilities. In this connection, a letter written on its behalf explains: “As the work of the Bahá'í World Centre steadily increases, the Universal House of Justice, in order to concentrate on matters requiring its direct attention, has progressively referred to various Departments subjects that can be handled in other ways.”¹¹⁵ The Office of Social and Economic Development and the Office of Public Discourse, established in 1983 and 2012 respectively, are just two of these. So, too, there are offices that maintain relations with government agencies in Israel and that tend to the needs of the thousands of pilgrims who make their way to the Holy Land each year to pray and meditate in the Sacred Shrines.

There are, moreover, several agencies that directly support the work of the House of Justice, most notably its Secretariat, through which its correspondence flows to the world. The Secretariat also writes to individuals and institutions on behalf of the House of Justice at its instruction. So voluminous had such correspondence become that, in 1999, it announced its decision to pass to an auxiliary office, called the Office of Correspondence, a certain range of communications, more routine in nature, which would be handled according to set policies.

We also know from the messages of the House of Justice that, at any given moment, there may be any number of projects under way at the World Centre to expand, maintain, and beautify the physical premises. The development of the gardens surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the erection of the International Teaching Centre Building and the Centre for the Study of the Texts, the restoration of the International Archives Building, and structural repairs to the Shrine of the Báb have all been among them.

As with other themes we have considered, then, we will necessarily have to content ourselves with one example in our efforts to gain insights into the implications of the developments taking place at the World Centre under the watchful eye of the Universal House of Justice. Its statement dated 22 May 2001, read at the official opening of the magnificent flight of terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, has been chosen for this purpose:

“With joyful and thankful hearts, we welcome all who have come from near and far to join us on this auspicious occasion for the Bahá'ís of the world. We acknowledge with deep appreciation the presence of so many distinguished guests.

“A century and a half have passed since that unspeakable tragedy in the northwest of Persia when the Báb faced the volley fired at Him from the rifles of 750 soldiers. The soldiers had followed the orders of the highest authorities in the land. The Báb's mangled body was then thrown on the side of a moat outside the city, abandoned to what His cold-blooded persecutors thought would be a dishonorable fate. They had hoped thus to put an end to the growing influence of His teachings on masses of people throughout the country. These masses had accepted, in the face of intense persecution, the Báb's claim to prophethood, and their lives were being transformed spiritually and morally as He prepared them for what He said was the dawn of a new age in which a world civilization would be born and flourish. The expectations that stirred countless hearts were heightened even more sublimely by the Báb's announcement that One greater than He would soon arise, One who would reveal the unparalleled character of the promised world civilization that would signify the coming of age of the entire human race.

“We are met not to lament the tragedy of the Báb's martyrdom and the persecutions that followed; rather have we come to celebrate the culmination and acknowledge the meaning of an unprecedented project that had its beginning over a century ago. It was then that Bahá'u'lláh, Whom the Ottoman authorities had banished to Acre to serve out His days in confinement, visited Mount Carmel and selected the spot where the remains of His Herald would be interred. We humbly trust that the wondrous result achieved by the completion of the nineteen terraced gardens, at the heart of which rises the Shrine of the Báb, is a fitting fulfillment of the vision initiated by Bahá'u'lláh.

“The sufferings sustained by the Báb so as to arouse humanity to the responsibilities of its coming age of maturity were themselves indications of the intensity of the struggle necessary for the world's people to pass through the age of humanity's collective adolescence. Paradoxical as it may seem, this is a source of hope. The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia. That our Earth

has contracted into a neighborhood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. Death pangs are yielding to birth pangs. The pain shall pass when members of the human race act upon the common recognition of their essential oneness. There is a light at the end of this tunnel of change beckoning humanity to the goal destined for it according to the testimonies recorded in all the Holy Books.

“The Shrine of the Báb stands as a symbol of the efficacy of that age-old promise, a sign of its urgency. It is, as well, a monument to the triumph of love over hate. The gardens which surround that structure, in their rich variety of colors and plants, are a reminder that the human race can live harmoniously in all its diversity. The light that shines from the central edifice is as a beacon of hope to the countless multitudes who yearn for a life that satisfies the soul as well as the body.

“This inextinguishable hope stems from words such as these from the Pen of Bahá’u’lláh: ‘This is the Day in which God’s most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace has been infused into all created things.’ May all who strive, often against great odds, to uphold principles of justice and concord be encouraged by these assurances.”¹¹⁶

SECTION 44

At this point we should admit that the study we have undertaken of selected passages from messages and statements of the Universal House of Justice, organized according to several broad themes, has been far from comprehensive. If we glance back to the Declaration of Trust from its Constitution in Section 6, we will see how short our study has fallen in capturing the magnitude of its functions. It is, the Guardian has stated, “the wellspring of the actions and undertakings of all the Bahá’ís”.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the themes addressed in future courses in this series will all be concerned, in one way or another, with processes gathering momentum under its direction. The unfoldment of the Divine Plan, the development of Spiritual Assemblies, the emergence of schemes for coordinating the expansion and consolidation of the Faith, the promotion of social action and involvement in the discourses of society—our exploration of these and other processes will serve, it is hoped, to deepen still further our understanding of the implications for our individual and collective lives of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.”

For now, then, let us end this unit by remembering that the Universal House of Justice, the Head of our Faith, is the “exponent” and “guardian” of that “Divine Justice” which can “alone” ensure “the security of,” and establish “the reign of law and order in,” the world. The selection of passages in this section, as always a small fraction of the relevant communications from the House of Justice, will help us to reflect on the nature of its guidance in this respect.

It is incumbent upon the House of Justice, Bahá’u’lláh has stated, “to have the utmost regard for the interests of the people at all times and under all conditions.” So, too, it is “to do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace”. The extract below from a statement dated October 1985 addressed by the House of Justice to the peoples of the world, on the occasion of the United Nations International Year of Peace, offers us an example of its guidance in this connection.

“It is out of a deep sense of spiritual and moral duty that we are impelled at this opportune moment to invite your attention to the penetrating insights first communicated to the rulers of mankind more than a century ago by Bahá’u’lláh, Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, of which we are the Trustees.

“‘The winds of despair,’ Bahá’u’lláh wrote, ‘are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective.’ This prophetic judgment has been amply confirmed by the common experience of humanity. Flaws in the prevailing order are conspicuous in the inability of sovereign states organized as United Nations to exorcise the specter of war, the threatened collapse of the international economic order, the spread of anarchy and terrorism, and the intense suffering which these and other afflictions are causing to increasing millions. Indeed, so much have aggression and conflict come to characterize our social, economic and religious systems, that many have succumbed to the view that such behavior is intrinsic to human nature and therefore ineradicable.

“With the entrenchment of this view, a paralyzing contradiction has developed in human affairs. On the one hand, people of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but their longing for peace and harmony, for an end to the harrowing apprehensions tormenting their daily lives. On the other, uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive and thus incapable of erecting a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on cooperation and reciprocity.

“As the need for peace becomes more urgent, this fundamental contradiction, which hinders its realization, demands a reassessment of the assumptions upon which the commonly held view of mankind’s historical predicament is based. Dispassionately examined, the evidence reveals that such conduct, far from expressing man’s true self, represents a distortion of the human spirit. Satisfaction on this point will enable all people to set in motion constructive social forces which, because they are consistent with human nature, will encourage harmony and cooperation instead of war and conflict. . . .

“A candid acknowledgement that prejudice, war and exploitation have been the expression of immature stages in a vast historical process and that the human race is today experiencing the unavoidable tumult which marks its collective coming of age is not a reason for despair but a prerequisite to undertaking the stupendous enterprise of building a peaceful world. That such an enterprise is possible, that the necessary constructive forces do exist, that unifying social structures can be erected, is the theme we urge you to examine.”¹¹⁸

In this statement, as on so many other occasions, the House of Justice expounds on the role of religion in shaping human affairs. Indeed, the House of Justice has been called upon by Bahá’u’lláh to do the utmost in its power to “safeguard” the “position” of religion and to “promote its interests and exalt its station in the eyes of the world.”

“The endowments which distinguish the human race from all other forms of life are summed up in what is known as the human spirit; the mind is its essential quality. These endowments have enabled humanity to build civilizations and to prosper materially. But such accomplishments alone have never satisfied the human spirit, whose mysterious nature inclines it towards transcendence, a reaching towards an invisible realm, towards the ultimate reality, that unknowable essence of essences called God. The religions brought to mankind by a succession of spiritual luminaries have been the primary link between humanity and that ultimate reality, and have galvanized and refined mankind’s capacity to achieve spiritual success together with social progress.”¹¹⁹

And again, addressing the world’s religious leaders in a message dated April 2002, the House of Justice writes:

“Religion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. Unquestionably, the seminal force in the civilizing of human nature has been the influence of the succession of these Manifestations of the Divine that extends back to the dawn of recorded history.

“This same force, that operated with such effect in ages past, remains an inextinguishable feature of human consciousness. Against all odds, and with little in the way of meaningful encouragement, it continues to sustain the struggle for survival of uncounted millions, and to raise up in all lands heroes and saints whose lives are the most persuasive vindication of the principles contained in the scriptures of their respective faiths. As the course of civilization demonstrates, religion is also capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of any fundamental advance in civilization that did not derive its moral thrust from this perennial source. Is it conceivable, then, that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia-long process of the organization of the planet can be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum? If the perverse ideologies let loose on our world during the century just past contributed nothing else, they demonstrated conclusively that the need cannot be met by alternatives that lie within the power of human invention.”¹²⁰

And time and again, the House of Justice, which is “to foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world”, upholds the role played by the rational faculty in building civilization and proclaims the principle of harmony between science and religion. Its message to the world’s religious leaders reads in this respect:

“Together with the crumbling of barriers separating peoples, our age is witnessing the dissolution of the once insuperable wall that the past assumed would forever separate the life of Heaven from the life of Earth. The scriptures of all religions have always taught the believer to see in service to others not only a moral duty, but an avenue for the soul’s own approach to God. Today, the progressive restructuring of

society gives this familiar teaching new dimensions of meaning. As the age-old promise of a world animated by principles of justice slowly takes on the character of a realistic goal, meeting the needs of the soul and those of society will increasingly be seen as reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.

“If religious leadership is to rise to the challenge that this latter perception represents, such response must begin by acknowledging that religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop. Far from being in conflict with one another, these fundamental modes of the mind’s exploration of reality are mutually dependent and have been most productive in those rare but happy periods of history when their complementary nature has been recognized and they have been able to work together. The insights and skills generated by scientific advance will have always to look to the guidance of spiritual and moral commitment to ensure their appropriate application; religious convictions, no matter how cherished they may be, must submit, willingly and gratefully, to impartial testing by scientific methods.”¹²¹

The House of Justice has been exhorted by Bahá’u’lláh “to ensure the protection and safeguarding of men, women and children”, and in message after message we can perceive its deep concern for the plight of the masses of humanity and their long-suffering. To the friends in Iran, for decades the object of persecution, it writes, for instance:

“No one would contend that you are alone in the ordeals you are enduring. The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression.’ What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself.”¹²²

That the Bahá’í community, in the face of such oppression, has been preserved from “spiritual corrosion of this nature”, the message goes on to note, is not lost on the world. And here, as on so many other occasions, the House of Justice holds out to a beleaguered humanity, hungering for righteousness, the experience of the Bahá’í community as “living proof that faith in God and confidence in social progress are in every sense reconcilable; that science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization.” In this light, the above message issues the following warning:

“Ruling elites can make no more serious error than to imagine that the power they have managed to arrogate to themselves provides an enduring bulwark against the

relentless tides of historical change. Today, in Iran as everywhere throughout the world, these tides roll in with insistent urgency and tumultuous force. They are not merely at the door of the house, but rise up irresistibly through its floors. They cannot be diverted. They will not be denied.”¹²³

In all such messages, then, we see how uppermost in the mind of the House of Justice is “the preservation of human honor”, to which it is called upon to “give attention”. Its 1985 message to the peoples of the world, to take but one example, lays much of the blame for the lamentable situation in the world today and for the abasement of humankind on materialism:

“The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the ‘new world’ promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace to whose ideals they proclaim their devotion? Where are the breakthroughs into new realms of cultural achievement produced by the aggrandizement of this race, of that nation or of a particular class? Why is the vast majority of the world’s peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?

“Most particularly, it is in the glorification of material pursuits, at once the progenitor and common feature of all such ideologies, that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive. It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants.

“That materialistic ideals have, in the light of experience, failed to satisfy the needs of mankind calls for an honest acknowledgement that a fresh effort must now be made to find the solutions to the agonizing problems of the planet. The intolerable conditions pervading society bespeak a common failure of all, a circumstance which tends to incite rather than relieve the entrenchment on every side. Clearly, a common remedial effort is urgently required. It is primarily a matter of attitude. Will humanity continue in its waywardness, holding to outworn concepts and unworkable assumptions? Or will its leaders, regardless of ideology, step forth and, with a resolute will, consult together in a united search for appropriate solutions?

“Those who care for the future of the human race may well ponder this advice. ‘If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.’”¹²⁴

So it is that, in messages to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh across the globe, the House of Justice draws our attention time and again to “the accelerated disintegration, fitful but relentless, of a world order lamentably defective”. But it also constantly reminds us, as it did in its Ridván 2011 message, that

“. . . discernible too is its counterpart, the constructive process that the Guardian associated with ‘the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh’ and described as ‘the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish.’ Its indirect effects can be seen in the outpouring of feeling, especially from the young, that springs from a longing to contribute to societal development. It is a bounty accorded to the followers of the Ancient Beauty that this longing, which wells up inexorably from the human spirit in every land, is able to find such eloquent expression in the work the Bahá'í community is carrying out to build capacity for effective action amongst the diverse populations of the planet. Can any privilege compare with this?”¹²⁵

“To usher in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh”—whose “watchword is unity,” whose “animating power is the force of Justice,” whose “directive purpose is the reign of righteousness and truth,” and whose “supreme glory is the complete, the undisturbed and everlasting felicity of the whole of humankind”—is among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested. We are, of course, well familiar with its guidance in this connection, as so many of its messages to the Bahá'í community are related, in one way or another, to the establishment of the Order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh. Among such messages are those that the House of Justice addresses to Bahá'í youth from time to time describing the responsibilities which each generation must shoulder in this ongoing enterprise. Two of these have been selected with which to conclude our study. Below are its words to the participants in a series of youth conferences held across Latin America in 2000:

“At the end of the twentieth century, the majority of the population of Latin America is under the age of 30. As this generation of youth assumes the responsibilities of conducting the affairs of society, it will encounter a landscape of bewildering contrast. On the one hand, the region can justly boast brilliant achievements in the intellectual, technological and economic spheres. On the other, it has failed to reduce widespread poverty or to avoid a rising sea of violence that threatens to submerge its peoples. Why—and the question needs to be asked plainly—has this society been impotent, despite its great wealth, to remove the injustices that are tearing its fiber apart?

“The answer to this question, as amply evidenced by decades of contentious history, cannot be found in political passion, conflicting expressions of class interest, or technical recipes. What is called for is a spiritual revival, as a prerequisite to the successful application of political, economic and technological instruments. But there is a need for a catalyst. Be assured that, in spite of your small numbers, you are the channels through which such a catalyst can be provided.

“Be not dismayed if your endeavors are dismissed as utopian by the voices that would oppose any suggestion of fundamental change. Trust in the capacity of this generation to disentangle itself from the embroilments of a divided society. To discharge your responsibilities, you will have to show forth courage, the courage of those who cling to standards of rectitude, whose lives are characterized by purity of

thought and action, and whose purpose is directed by love and indomitable faith. As you dedicate yourselves to healing the wounds with which your peoples have been afflicted, you will become invincible champions of justice.”¹²⁶

And, in a message announcing the convocation of a series of youth conferences which were held in 2013 in some one hundred locations spanning the globe, the Universal House of Justice writes:

“Beloved friends: To every generation of young believers comes an opportunity to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity, unique to their time of life. For the present generation, the moment has come to reflect, to commit, to steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we entreat the Ancient Beauty that, from out a distracted and bewildered humanity, He may distil pure souls endowed with clear sight: youth whose integrity and uprightness are not undermined by dwelling on the faults of others and who are not immobilized by any shortcomings of their own; youth who will look to the Master and ‘bring those who have been excluded into the circle of intimate friends’; youth whose consciousness of the failings of society impels them to work for its transformation, not to distance themselves from it; youth who, whatever the cost, will refuse to pass by inequity in its many incarnations and will labor, instead, that ‘the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world.’”¹²⁷

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