

RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION ABOUT SIGNATURES ON LETTERS FROM KEN BOWERS

Dear Barbara,

This is in response to the questions posed by the friends regarding the manner of signing the correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly. The first point is to understand the range of responsibility given to the Secretary, which is quite broad – the Secretary is chief spokesperson for the NSA as well as the person responsible for carrying out its decisions and ensuring the functioning of all operations. The House of Justice described the role in these terms:

"...the National Assembly should realize that its Secretary is its chief executive officer, and as such acts not only as liaison with the national committees, the Local Spiritual Assemblies and all the friends, but generally represents the National Spiritual Assembly and the Faith itself to the non-Bahá'í world, a duty becoming ever more important as the Cause becomes more widely known.", "Lights of Guidance", 1.105.1

Given this role, in most cases official letters are signed by the Secretary, who is entrusted by the Assembly to speak on its behalf. Once a policy has been decided or a decision taken, the Secretary can then send a letter based upon that. In most cases the letters are drafted and sent without going back to the NSA for review. The Universal House of Justice also wrote about this:

"The National Assembly secretary should be empowered to take the initiative in matters of a routine nature. It is not normally necessary for the secretary's letters to be scrutinized by other members of the Assembly although they may always have access to such correspondence.", "Lights of Guidance", 1.104.2

So the vast majority of letters are signed by the Secretary, and in our case the Secretary also write all major letters personally, such as the Feast messages. But in some instances it is appropriate for the NSA to sign letters as an institution. This can be for one or more of several reasons; for example, the annual report is signed by the NSA, which is certainly correct. The recent public statement of the NSA on race is another example, because it is important for the whole institution to be associated with such a statement. There are other times when the matter is of such significance that the NSA decides to sign as an institution, and the letter to the POTE conference is an example of that. Previous examples include the series of letters on race and the Plan that have been published since 2017. In all of these cases the letters were considered as significant enough to be signed by the entire institution, and this also means that they were approved by all members. This does not make such letters more "official," but they do indicate a different context or occasion.

There are no cases I know of when the NSA members have signed a letter as nine individuals. This is because the institution is considered to be an entity apart from and above the individual members composing it. By the same reasoning we never see a letter signed by the nine individual members of the Universal House of Justice. They also sign them as the institution. But it is important to note that most of the correspondence from that institution is signed by the Department of the Secretariat. This does not mean that members are not approving these letters, but they apparently do not rise to the level at which they deem it necessary for the institutional signature. As you know, the House of Justice is the one elected institution in the Faith which does not have officers, including a Secretary. But they have been very clear that NSA's and LSA's must have officers with specific roles.

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These practices are part of a new Order that Baha'u'llah has brought, and we are still learning about it. Of course we can all draw our own individual conclusions about why we do things in this way, but in general it seems to me to be an important means of reinforcing the notion that institutions and not individuals are the focus of our administration.

I hope that this is helpful, and please convey my loving greetings to the friends.

Loving regards,

Ken