

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY AND THE COMMUNITY

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Do we have a clear picture of the ideal relationship between the Local Assembly, the community and the individuals within it?

No. It is evident that we are still in the early stages of an emerging picture in which the relationships between the three are profoundly changing

The individual, the institutions, and the community – the three protagonists in the Divine Plan – are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010

What should be the characteristics of the consultation between the Local Spiritual Assembly and the community?

The Assembly must maintain an open and honest relationship with the community, frequently seeking its advice and giving regard to its wishes. The Assembly must never act in a dictatorial manner, or create an air of secrecy about its work. Bearing the above principles in mind, it is up to the Assembly to determine the extent to which the local community should be involved in its duties. The deliberations of the Assembly are confidential and it alone makes the final decision on any issue. However the Assembly should consult with anyone it feels may be of assistance up to the time of making a decision. Shoghi Effendi explains what the Assembly's attitude to the community should be in the following statement:

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are 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. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour, by their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of a wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 64

The principal occasion on which consultation occurs between the Assembly and the community is the Nineteen Day Feast. Here the Assembly shares its news and receives suggestions from the community. Recommendations may be given to the Assembly after they have been passed by a majority vote of the believers present or noted by the Secretary during the consultation. It is for the Assembly to decide, bearing in mind the size and nature of the community, which approach would be most appropriate.

What is the responsibility of the community with respect to decisions made by the Local Spiritual Assembly?

Community members are obliged to obey the decisions of the Assembly, even if they are not convinced that a decision is right. The principle of unity overrides the importance of being right:

The Assembly may make a mistake, but, as the Master pointed out, if the Community does not abide by its decisions, or the individual Bahá'í, the result is worse, as it undermines the very institution which must be strengthened in order to uphold the principles and laws of the Faith. He tells us God will right the wrongs done. We must have confidence in this and obey our Assemblies. He therefore strongly urges you to work directly under your Bahá'í Assembly, to accept your responsibilities as a voting member, and do your utmost to create harmony within the community.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 1949

This is not to say, however, that the believers cannot offer constructive criticism to the Assembly to improve existing conditions in the community. Indeed, they have a duty to do this. The appropriate occasion, as previously noted, is the Nineteen Day Feast. What should be ensured is that this is done in a constructive spirit which serves to develop the relationship between the assembly, the community and the individuals:

Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy; it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers... But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 13 December 1939

If an individual is severely unhappy with a decision of the Assembly, he or she should take the matter up with the Assembly privately. If the matter is still not resolved an appeal against the decision can be made to the National Spiritual Assembly. The decision of the Assembly must continue to be obeyed while the appeal is in progress:

... even if an Assembly makes an ill-advised decision it must be upheld in order to preserve the unity of the community. Appeal can be made from the Local Assembly's decision to the National Assembly ... But the principle of authority invested in our elected bodies must be upheld. This is not something which can be learned without trial and test.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 30 June 1949

If the community is really unhappy with the functioning of its Assembly, the appropriate response is to make changes at the next election:

The elections, especially when annual, give the community a good opportunity to remedy any defect or imperfection from which the Assembly may suffer as a result of

the actions of its members. Thus a safe method has been established whereby the quality of membership in Bahá'í Assemblies can be continually raised and improved.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 15 November 1935

How important is the relationship between individual believers and a local assembly?

The relationship is a critical one Shoghi Effendi has said:

There is no task more urgently necessary than the assurance of perfect harmony and fellowship among the friends, especially between the Local Assemblies and individual believers. The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly. The two must learn to co-operate, and to realize that only through such a cooperation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function. While obedience to the Local Assembly should be unqualified and whole-hearted, yet that body should enforce its decisions in such a way as to avoid giving the impression that it is animated by dictatorial motives. The spirit of the Cause is one of mutual co-operation, and not that of a dictatorship.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 28 October 1935

On what matters should an individual consult with the Assembly?

In any matter which affects the interests of the Faith, an individual should consult with the Local Assembly. An individual may also take personal matters to the Assembly if he or she so chooses; however, there is no obligation to do so:

When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith ... A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the counsel of individual friends or of professional counsellors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 19 March 1973

The principle that confession is forbidden should also be noted in this context. If an individual takes a problem to the Assembly, he or she does so in order to find a solution to the problem. Talking about our sins and shortcomings merely for the sake of talking serves no good purpose and is forbidden in the Faith. The Universal House of Justice made this clear in the same letter cited below:

It should be borne in mind that all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem and is quite different from the sort of group baring of the soul that is popular in some circles these days and which borders on the kind of confession that is forbidden in the Faith. On the subject of confession the Guardian's Secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer:

We are forbidden to confess to any person, as do the Catholics to their priests, our sins and shortcomings, or to do so in public, as some religious sects do. However, if we spontaneously desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something, or that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so. The Guardian wants to point out, however, that we are not obliged to do so. It rests entirely with the individual.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 19 March 1973

Can an individual bring a problem to the Local Spiritual Assembly if other parties to the problem do not wish to involve the Assembly?

Yes. Shoghi Effendi has said:

Regarding consultation: Any person can refer a matter to the Assembly for consultation whether the other person wishes to or not.

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 58

Can a Local Spiritual Assembly intervene in a matter against the will of the parties involved?

Yes. An Assembly can intervene in a situation where action is necessary to protect the Faith as a whole, individual communities or believers:

In matters which affect the Cause the Assembly should, if it deems it necessary, intervene even if both sides do not want it to, because the whole purpose of the Assemblies is to protect the Faith, the Communities, and the individual Bahá'ís as well.

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 58

Can the Assembly delegate a committee or individual to counsel a believer?

Yes:

Although Local Spiritual Assemblies are primarily responsible for counselling believers regarding personal problems, there may be times, when in the judgement of the National or Local Assembly, it would be preferable to assign counselling or advisory duties to individuals or committees. This is within the discretion of the Assembly.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 March 1966

Are there any suggested approaches for a consultation between the Local Spiritual Assembly and an individual?

When consulting an individual, the Assembly's aim is to establish the truth and help that individual find a realistic solution to his or her problem. The advice it gives may be that the individual seek professional advice elsewhere. Or the Assembly may work out a course of action itself for the individual to follow. In either case the Assembly should give the individual moral support and encouragement to carry the solution through.

Taking the following steps would generally help an Assembly when conducting a meeting with an individual:

1. Prior to the consultation with the individual, it is helpful for the Assembly to consult on how it wishes to carry out the meeting. What is the purpose of it? What does it wish to learn from it?
2. Welcome the individual and invite her or him to say a prayer.
3. If necessary, explain the general principles of consultation to the individual. Remind them about the importance of maintaining confidentiality, and mention that comments made by individual Assembly members during the consultation are not to be taken as decisions of the Assembly.
4. If appropriate, the individual might be asked to summarise what they are requesting from the Assembly. Assembly members should avoid giving personal opinions or advice, but ask questions to clarify matters if necessary.
5. Having gathered whatever information the Assembly feels necessary the chairman can thank the individual and ask them to now leave the meeting. Provide assurances to them about the confidentiality of what has been said.
6. Consult on the problem or issue and arrive at and record a decision.
7. Decide how the decision of the Assembly will be communicated to the individual. When communicating the decision, it may be important to point out the spiritual principles involved, and encourage the individual to pray and meditate on these principles.
8. Decide on any follow-up actions, if required, such as asking the individual to report their progress periodically to the Assembly.

The above approach may also be followed when an Assembly itself initiates the consultation. This will occur in cases where, for example, the Assembly wishes to counsel individuals on their behaviour and assist them in obeying the laws of the Faith.

CONSULTATION WITH COMMITTEES

Consultation between the Assembly and one of its committees should broadly follow the same guidance as consultation between the Assembly and an individual.

THE RIGHT OF APPEAL

What procedure must an individual follow for appealing against a decision of the Local Spiritual Assembly?

An individual who is unhappy with a decision of the Local Assembly must first appeal to that Assembly for reconsideration. If he or she is still unhappy with the decision of the Assembly an appeal should be made to the National Spiritual Assembly. Should the National

Assembly's decision not be satisfactory, as a final recourse, appeal can be made to the Universal House of Justice. At all stages the individual should consider whether the matter is so serious that it requires an appeal. At present (2012), Regional Bahá'í Councils are not an authority to which an appeal may be directed.

In all instances, the appeal must be channelled through the Local Assembly and the Assembly is obligated to pass it on. Should it not do so, appellants may take their case directly to the higher authority. The procedure for making an appeal has been established in the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice:

(a) Any member of a local Bahá'í community may appeal from a decision of his Local Spiritual Assembly to the National Spiritual Assembly which shall determine whether it shall take jurisdiction of the matter or refer it back to the Local Spiritual Assembly for reconsideration...

(b) Any Bahá'í may appeal a decision of his National Spiritual Assembly to the Universal House of Justice which shall determine whether it shall take jurisdiction of the matter or leave it within the final jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly.

(c) An appellant, whether institution or individual, shall in the first instance make appeal to the Assembly whose decision is questioned, either for reconsideration of the case by that Assembly or for submission to a higher body. In the latter case the Assembly is in duty bound to submit the appeal together with full particulars of the matter. If an Assembly refuses to submit the appeal, or fails to do so within a reasonable time, the appellant may take the case directly to the higher authority.

The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice, pp. 14-15

What procedure must a Local Spiritual Assembly follow for appealing against a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly?

A Local Spiritual Assembly does not have the right to publicly criticise a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly. If, however, the Assembly has reason to believe that an action of the National Spiritual Assembly is adversely affecting the welfare of its community, it should approach the National Assembly to resolve the difference of opinion. If the Local Assembly is still not satisfied with the outcome of these consultations it may, as a final recourse, appeal to the Universal House of Justice. The appeal must be channelled through the National Spiritual Assembly.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Should mental illness be regarded as a primarily spiritual condition requiring only spiritual treatment such as prayer?

No. The guidance clearly indicates that, as in the case of most sicknesses, a careful balance of physical and spiritual treatments is required.

Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning-place of His shining and glorious Cause.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 60

As Bahá'u'lláh has urged us to avail ourselves of good physicians Bahá'ís are certainly not only free to turn psychiatry for assistance but should, when advisable, do so.

Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles,
15 June 1950

Such hindrances (i.e. illness and other difficulties) no matter how severe and insuperable they may at first seem, can and should be effectively overcome through the combined and sustained power of prayer and of determined and continued effort.

Shoghi Effendi, *Throne of the Inner Temple*, p. 69

There are a great many as you know mental diseases and troubles at present, and the one thing Bahá'ís must not do is take a defeatist attitude toward them. The power in the Faith is such that it can sustain us on a much higher level in spite of whatever our ailments might be, than other people who are denied it.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 12 January 1957

Disease is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Take for instance, a cut hand; if you pray for the cut to be healed and do not stop its bleeding, you will not do much good; a material remedy is needed. Sometimes if the nervous system is paralysed through fear, a spiritual remedy is necessary. Madness, incurable otherwise, can be cured through prayer. It often happens that sorrow makes one ill; this can be cured by spiritual means.

'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, *Notes of Conversations*, 1982 ed., p. 65

Is mental health a reason for resigning from the Local Spiritual Assembly?

In some circumstances this may be appropriate after the election has taken place.

With reference to your question whether it would be permissible for a believer to resign from the Local Assembly; under special circumstances, such as illness, one may do so, but only after, and never before one has been elected to the membership of the Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 18 April 1939

Should someone suffering from mental illness have their voting rights removed?

This should only be done in exceptional circumstances and only after careful consideration of the matter.

Regarding persons whose condition (i.e., mental condition) has not been defined by the civil authorities after medical diagnosis, the Assembly on the spot must investigate every case that arises and, after consultation with experts, deliver its verdict. Such a verdict however, should, in important cases, be preceded by consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly. No doubt, the power of prayer is very great, yet consultation with experts is enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh. Should these experts believe that an abnormal case exists, the with-holding of voting rights is justified.

Letter of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 30 May, 1936: *Bahá'í News*, No. 153, June 1942, p. 12

Regarding the interpretation of mental unfitness, this is not the same as being physically incapacitated. By the latter is meant a condition much more serious than any temperamental deficiency or disinclination to conform to the principle of majority rule. Only in rare cases when a person is actually unbalanced, and is admittedly proved to be so, should the right of membership be denied him. The greatest care and restraint should be exercised in this matter.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 15 May, 1940: *Bahá'í Procedure*, p. 20

If someone is deprived of administrative rights because of mental illness, is this to be regarded as a sanction for misbehaviour?

This is clearly not the case.

The statement that 'only the spiritually ill experience psychiatric disorders' is entirely without foundation.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 2 February 1994

The withdrawal of administrative rights from a person who is suffering from a mental illness is not a sanction, but merely a recognition of the fact that the believer's condition renders him incapable of exercising those rights. From this you will see that the mental incapacity must be very serious for this step to be taken, and would normally be dependent upon a certification of insanity by medical authorities or confinement in a mental hospital. Again, depending upon the kind of mental illness, such suspension of voting rights may or may not involve non-receipt of Bahá'í newsletters, inability to attend Nineteen Day Feasts, etc.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria, 12 May 1982

Let us hope . . . scientists will find better and permanent cures for the mentally afflicted. But in this world such an illness is truly a heavy burden to bear!

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 12 April 1948