

# BAHÁ'Í MARRIAGE

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## What is the meaning of Bahá'í marriage?

*The true marriage of Bahá'ís is this, that husband and wife should be united both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God. This is Bahá'í marriage.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 118

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh states that the purpose of marriage is to establish a family:

*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.*

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 41

However, it is made clear that:

*Marriage is highly recommended but not obligatory*

Synopsis and Codification, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 149

## What is the age of maturity for marriage?

The age of maturity for marriage, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is 15 years (Kitáb-i-Aqdas p. 149). It is against Bahá'í law for a Bahá'í couple to become engaged if either party has not reached the age of maturity.

The minimum legal age for marriage in the UK is 16 years old. In England and Wales the written consent of the parents or guardians is required for persons who have not reached 18 years old and have not been previously married. If either of the persons is younger than 18, a birth certificate must be produced. It is preferred that all persons produce such evidence. In Northern Ireland a young person under 18 cannot marry without the consent of certain people. In Scotland, civil law does not require young people aged between 16 and 18 to have parental consent to get married.

## What is the role of the Assembly in marriage deepening?

The Local Spiritual Assembly has an on-going responsibility to deepen its community in the marriage laws:

*Local Assemblies are responsible for making certain that the members of their community understand both the requirements of Bahá'í marriage law and the nature of the sanctions which can be imposed when the laws are violated – (it should be noted that this is not a matter of information to be checked at the time of enrolment, but rather represents a continuing Local Spiritual Assembly responsibility for deepening the Bahá'í community.)*

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

The Assembly might wish to refer to the following works for deepening materials on marriage:

- *Family Life* compilation by the Universal House of Justice.
- *Marriage* compilation by the Universal House of Justice.
- *Marriage, A Fortress for Well-Being*.
- *Prescription for Living* by Rúhíyyih Rabbáni.

### **What prohibitions apply to marriage between relatives?**

Marriage between a person and their sibling, stepmother, stepfather and certain other relatives is forbidden in Bahá'í law:

*The House of Justice has clearly stated that it is not permissible for a Bahá'í to marry his or her mother or father and their siblings and forebears, brothers or sisters and their descendents, or sons or daughters and their descendents. It is also not permissible to marry some corresponding categories of relations formed by bonds of marriage – such as the stepmother, stepfather, stepdaughter, or stepson, or the daughter-in-law, son-in-law, mother-in-law, or father-in-law – or similar categories of relations formed by legal and social bonds that create a shared family life, for example through adoption. Beyond these prohibitions, Bahá'ís should ensure they do not contract a marriage that would violate the customs or laws of the country in which they reside. While the House of Justice has refrained, at this stage, from defining other categories of relations with whom marriage is prohibited, it is important for believers everywhere to be mindful of this clear statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:*

*In marriage the more distant the blood-relationship the better, for such distance in family ties between husband and wife provideth the basis for the well-being of humanity and is conducive to fellowship among mankind.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, 24 November 2014

### **What are the requirements for a Bahá'í marriage?**

There are three major requirements:

- The consent of both parties.
- The consent of all living natural parents.
- The performance of a Bahá'í marriage ceremony.

All three requirements are overseen and approved, as required, by a Local Spiritual Assembly. The loss of voting rights will generally result if the involved parties

intentionally disregard these requirements. Note that the second requirement has particular exceptions discussed later in this guidance note.

## CONSENT OF BOTH PARTIES

### Is the consent of both parties necessary?

Yes.

*It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes. Thus hath Our commandment been ordained.*

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 42

### Do the parties involved consent to be married to each other prior to obtaining parental consent?

Yes. On this point 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to an enquirer:

*As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother. Before thou makest thy choice, they have no right to interfere.*

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118

This advice does not forbid individuals seeking advice from their parents concerning choices to be made.

## CONSENT OF PARENTS

### Whose consent must be obtained and why?

The consent of all living natural parents must be obtained, no matter what the age of the couple intending to marry.

*Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years, or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published in U.S. *Bahá'í News*, No. 202, December 1947, p. 2

It is the duty of the responsible Local Assembly to ensure that the parents have given their consent freely, before the marriage can take place:

*With reference to the matter of the consent of the parents to a Bahá'í marriage: as this is a vital binding obligation, it is the duty of the Assemblies to ascertain, before*

*giving their sanction, that the consent obtained has been given freely by the parents themselves.*

Shoghi Effendi, in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 59

## To what are the parents consenting?

The parents consent only to the marriage itself. The required consent does not have to extend to the holding of a Bahá'í wedding ceremony; however, if consent is made conditional on a Bahá'í ceremony not being held, the marriage cannot take place:

*Although a Bahá'í ceremony is required, it is not necessary that the parents consent to the ceremony; the only requirement is that they consent to the marriage. However, if consent be withheld because a Bahá'í ceremony is to be conducted, this must be accepted. The freedom of the parents in giving or refusing consent is unrestricted and unconditioned. They may refuse consent on any ground and they are responsible to God alone.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 18 January 1972

## How should parental consent be expressed?

Parents need only provide their blessing of the union or express approval of the plans for marriage and this can be done in any number of ways [see the question below 'Should the consents be given in writing?']. This consent can be obtained in a simple way and need not, in the case of non-Bahá'í parents, involve an explanation of the implications of parental consent within the Faith:

*...Perhaps a different climate can be created so that, without violating any of her religious convictions, a happy family relationship can be established by Mrs — simply saying that she approves of — being married to —*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,  
16 September 1981

Although the required consent does not have to extend to the approval of a Bahá'í wedding ceremony, if the parents make their consent conditional on a Bahá'í ceremony not being held, the marriage cannot take place. If the parents consent to the marriage of the two parties while disapproving of a Bahá'í ceremony, the marriage may still occur provided that the consent to the marriage is not withdrawn as a result. It is important, therefore, that it is not suggested to the parents that they are being asked to authorize a Bahá'í marriage ceremony or to observe Bahá'í laws:

*If it had been understood that Bahá'í law requires parental consent to marriage and not to the Bahá'í ceremony, Mrs. — consent might have been asked for in such a way as not to have incurred her displeasure. The request could have been quite casual without her son's even mentioning that he had to have it to fulfil a requirement of Bahá'í law...*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,  
16 September 1981

## Should the consents be given in writing?

It is preferable that consent of parents be given in writing; however, if this is not possible, verbal consent may be given in the presence of two persons acceptable to the Spiritual Assembly. Written statements of these witnesses should be filed by the Spiritual Assembly in place of the written consent. The witnesses do not need to be Bahá'ís:

*It is not necessary for the consent to be in writing if you are satisfied with verbal consent given in the presence of witnesses acceptable to your National Assembly.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
12 December 1965

Written consent may be as simple as a parent writing to express happiness at the forthcoming marriage or giving their blessing to the union. It does not, in other words, have to be a formal document provided the Local Assembly is happy that the consent has been given.

Whilst it is permissible for consent to be given at the wedding itself, it is strongly recommended that consent be obtained beforehand. This is to ensure that no difficulty arises through, for example, unforeseen transport difficulties that prevent any of the parents attending the wedding.

## What if the parents do not name the spouse in the letter of consent?

Such a letter may be accepted by the Spiritual Assembly:

*...the responsibility of the parents in giving their consent is unrestricted and unconditioned, but in discharging this duty they are responsible for their decision to God. Should the parents in their letter of consent ... not name a specific future spouse, the House of Justice states that it could be accepted and it would be permissible to perform a Bahá'í marriage ceremony on the basis of such a letter.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,  
9 October 1975

## Must parental consents be obtained if one of the parties to the marriage is a non-Bahá'í?

Yes. The consent of all parents is required so that the Bahá'í party can fulfil their obligation under Bahá'í law:

*Regarding the question whether it is necessary to obtain the consent of the parents of a non-Bahá'í participant in a marriage with a Bahá'í; as Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the consent of the parents of both parties is required in order to promote unity and avoid friction, and as the Aqdas does not specify any exceptions to this rule, the Guardian feels that under all circumstances the consent of the parents of both parties is required...*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 13

## Must consents be obtained if the parents are non-Bahá'ís or have been

## divorced for years?

Yes. Shoghi Effendi states:

*This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years, or not.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *U.S. Bahá'í News*, No. 202, December 1947, p. 2

## Must consents be obtained in the event of a second marriage?

Yes:

*About the consent of parents for marriage... It is also required in the event of a second marriage, after the dissolution of the first whether through death or through divorce.*

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 10 October 1936

## What is to be done if the whereabouts of the parent is unknown?

Consent must be obtained unless the parent is dead. This law is not conditional on the relationship the parent has with the child:

*... As long as the parents are alive, the consent must be obtained; it is not conditioned on their relationship to their children. If the whereabouts of the parents is not known legally, in other words, if they are legally dead, then it is not necessary for the children to obtain their consent, obviously. It is not a question of the child not knowing the present whereabouts of its parents, it is a question of a legal thing – if the parents are alive, they must be asked.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Messages to Canada*, pp. 59–60

The child has an obligation to exhaust every possible way of finding his or her parent, before the requirement to gain that parent's consent can be waived:

*Since there is evidence to presume that his father is alive, there is no alternative but for Mr — to continue efforts to locate the father through all avenues of investigation which may be open to him, including advertising. The investigation should continue until the only conclusion which can be reached is that the father is dead.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 March 1965

*In the case of a parent who abandons his family and disappears without trace or support, this does not constitute disowning a child. Every effort should be made to trace the parent and secure consent for marriage. If, however, the Assembly is satisfied that every avenue of search has been exhausted and the missing parent has not been found, the marriage can take place.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 March 1987

If need be, advice from the National Spiritual Assembly should be sought in particular cases.

## What is to be done if the parent is deceased?

The officiating Spiritual Assembly may, at its discretion, want to see a copy of the death certificate or some other form of proof of death of a parent, although there is no formal requirement for this in the guidance. Where the deceased parent was a Bahá'í in Iran, it may be possible for the National Spiritual Assembly to obtain proof of their death through the appropriate channels. However, the officiating Assembly should be aware that obtaining such proof from overseas can be time-consuming and difficult.

## Does consent need to be sought from a parent who suffers from dementia or another disabling mental illness?

If a parent suffers from dementia or another disabling mental illness, a letter from their GP or another competent medical advisor is necessary. This letter should confirm that their mental state is such that they would not have the capacity to give consent.

## What is to be done if the identity of the father is uncertain?

In UK law, a father is only legally considered as the parent if he is named on the birth certificate. Therefore if the father is not named, this may be considered as a case of disownment. However,

*If the name of the father given on the birth certificate is not a conclusive presumption of parenthood and if the man in question has always denied that he is the father of the child, the child is not required to seek the consent of this man unless it has been legally established that he is the father notwithstanding the denial.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
24 October 1965

If doubts arise as to the correct course of action in any particular situation, the advice of the National Spiritual Assembly should be sought well in advance of the wedding date.

## What if it is dangerous to contact the parents to get their consent?

Since a Bahá'í must get the consent of his or her parents, arrangements may be made to get in contact with the parents through other people:

*Please inform Mr. — that it is necessary that he have the consent of his parents as long as they are alive. We agree that it is dangerous for him to attempt to contact them himself, but we suggest the possibility of securing their consent through others. There are Bahá'ís who make trips to —, and these are known to the National Assembly of —. Please assist Mr. — in contacting that National Assembly and in making arrangements for someone who is going to — to see his parents on his behalf and secure their consent.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 3 August 1965

## What should be done about parental consents where one of the parties to

## **a marriage is adopted?**

Under UK adoption law, adoption involves legal severance of all parental rights and obligations in regard to the child, voluntarily enacted by one or both parents. This being so, there is no need to obtain consents from the natural parents of the adopted child:

*We are asked to say that if the adoption law cuts all ties between the child and its parents... there is no need to obtain parental consent.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, 23 March 1987

The changes to adoption laws in the UK which allow adopted children access to the names of their natural parents do not affect the matter. It is the nature of the original adoption, which cuts all ties, that makes it unnecessary for the adopted person to obtain the consent of his or her parents. The fact that the names of these parents may now be discovered is irrelevant. It is not necessary to obtain the consent of the adopting parents, although the child may do so if he or she wishes. The right to grant consent to a marriage can never be transferred to anyone else by the natural parents. If only one of the parties to a proposed marriage is adopted, then the consents of the parents of the other party are still required.

## **What should be done about parental consents where one of the parties to a marriage is fostered?**

Parental consents are still required in the case of one party to the marriage having been fostered:

*...[concerning] the situation where parents have had their children fostered by another family by an agreement under which they do not give up their rights and obligations as natural parents. Under such a situation the consents of the natural parents would be required. In no circumstances can the responsibility for giving or withholding consent for marriage be transferred to the foster parents.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
18 November 1986

## **What if a Bahá'í has been born of artificial insemination?**

A Bahá'í parent is permitted to use artificial insemination only if the husband of the mother is the donor. In these circumstances there is no doubt as to the identity of the natural parents and their consent is required.

In other circumstances, where sperm has come from a sperm bank, doubt may arise as to the identity of the father. A mother may have become a Bahá'í after the birth of her child or a Bahá'í mother may not know of the ruling of using only her husband's sperm before becoming pregnant. Advice from the National Spiritual Assembly should be sought in uncertain cases.



## Are there any circumstances under which parental consents are not required?

This issue is clarified in the following letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 19 January 2010 to a National Spiritual Assembly:

*With respect to your email letter of 16 November 2009, the Universal House of Justice has had the opportunity to consider issues concerning the application of the requirement of consent of parents to marriage, and it has asked us to respond as follows.*

*In stipulating His law of marriage, Bahá'u'lláh included a requirement for the consent of the parents. He states:*

*It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes. Thus hath Our commandment been ordained.*

*The intent of the requirement is further elucidated in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian.*

*Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of the children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator.*

*However, in a letter dated 15 November 1940 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Persia written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, the following statement was made.*

*... in some cases it is permissible under the law of God either for the parents or for the children to disown the other, to deprive the other of certain rights, to sever family ties and to renounce their responsibilities. However, the law thereof is to be decided by the Universal House of Justice.*

*The House of Justice has concluded that it is timely to further clarify the range of circumstances in which a child may seek to be free of the requirement to obtain parental consent for marriage. Three areas have been identified in this respect.*

*First, a child may be permitted to marry without seeking the consent of a man who denies paternity and never assumed the responsibilities of parenthood. Marriage is also permitted without seeking the consent of a parent who abandoned the child from infancy. Furthermore, a child conceived as a consequence of rape is not obliged to seek consent of the male offender.*

*Second, the consent of a parent is not required if he or she engaged, or was complicit, in the sexual or physical abuse of a child. The application of this decision will require careful investigation and wisdom on the part of the responsible Bahá'í institutions. While many forms of treatment of a child may be considered unfair or harsh, the institutions cannot diminish the standard for*

*defining or assessing abuse, lest the parents be deprived too easily of their right to consent. Parents are liable to err and might be immoderate in the exercise of physical or verbal chastisement. In a permissive age, strict discipline or authoritarian behavior can be perceived as a form of abuse, even by some psychologists. Furthermore, if an individual finds it impossible to change the decision of a parent unwilling to give consent, he or she might be tempted to circumvent the requirement by exaggerating past behavior of the parent to make it seem like abuse. Nevertheless, it is unjust to require a true victim of abuse to renew ties with, or submit to the will of, an abuser. In order to deprive the parent of the right to consent, the Assembly must be satisfied that abuse has actually occurred. To this end, it may find it necessary to seek corroboration from reliable witnesses or the views of qualified professionals.*

*Finally, the right of the parent to consent can be forfeited if he or she seeks to use the requirement for consent in a manner which subverts the spirit and intent of the law or obstructs an individual's right as a believer in Bahá'u'lláh to marry in accordance with the provisions of Bahá'í law. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, 'As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother.' Yet, in some instances, a parent has refused consent in order to deprive the child of the right to choose and to force the child to marry someone of the parent's choosing. In other instances, a parent has denied consent in order to try to prevent the child from marrying anyone.*

*A parent also violates the spirit of the marriage law if he or she uses the requirement for consent to exert unjustifiable control over factors that are unrelated to the prospective marriage. An example of this transgression is a parent who threatens to withhold consent as a means of manipulating the child's behavior to create estrangement between the child and the other parent. Another example is a parent who misuses the law to extract financial benefits or other concessions from the child or the child's other parent.*

*It is important for an Assembly to distinguish such violations of the spirit of the law from the reasons a parent might have for denying consent to marry in a particular instance. Parents have a wide degree of latitude to determine how they choose to exercise their responsibility. As long as the spirit of the law is not violated they may refuse consent, and their conclusion is binding, even if it appears to the children or to others that they are being unreasonable or are acting out of prejudice. Ultimately, parents are responsible before God for their decision.*

*When cases arise involving any of the circumstances discussed above, a Local Spiritual Assembly should ascertain all relevant facts and refer the matter for consideration to your National Spiritual Assembly. You should exercise care not to unduly invalidate the rights of the parents; yet, while children have the obligation to abide by the Bahá'í marriage law, they also have the right to be protected from the excesses imposed by parents that violate the spirit and intent of that law. Should particular situations arise for which no clear solution is apparent, you should refer the matter to the House of Justice.*

Any cases arising which may seem to be covered by this guidance should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly.

## **What happens if the parent adopts the attitude that the child is an adult**

## and should be free to choose?

*However, a quite different situation exists when a parent adopts the point of view that the child is an adult, free to marry whomsoever he or she wishes, and the parent sees no reason for being asked for consent. Such an attitude, if clearly established, is tantamount to the parent's renunciation of the right to give or withhold consent and can be accepted by the Assembly as freeing the child from the requirement to obtain consent from that parent. Another possibility is that parents state that they have such confidence in their children that they have given them general consent to marry whomsoever they wish; in this instance, such general consent would suffice to satisfy the requirements for Bahá'í marriage. In neither circumstances is there disownment, but the statement of the parent opens the way for the requirement of Bahá'í law to be satisfied.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of  
Australia, 5 September 1993

## If consent of parents to a marriage is conditional on a church wedding taking place, and the couple are both Bahá'ís, can the couple proceed with the marriage?

No. If the couple are both Bahá'ís and consent is withheld because there is not going to be a church wedding, the marriage cannot take place:

*We have considered your letter of 13 August 1971 asking about the consent of parents to a marriage which is given on the condition that a church wedding take place. The instruction of the beloved Guardian in the letter to your Assembly as quoted in your letter is controlling. The Guardian stated over and over again that there must be no commingling of the old forms with the new, and that where two Bahá'ís are to be married there can be no religious ceremony except the Bahá'í ceremony. Likewise, the freedom of parents in giving or refusing consent is unrestricted and unconditioned. They may refuse consent on any ground, and they are responsible to God alone. While the parties are free to appeal to the parents to give consent without the condition, if consent is withheld because no church ceremony is to take place, this must be respected by the parties.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
29 August 1971

It is permissible to attend a church in order to pray for the success of the marriage, provided the couple do not go through a form of marriage ceremony:

*If the parents of a Bahá'í couple are, for example, Christians, there is no objection to their attending church with their parents and their parents' friends and relations, if their parents so wish, in order to pray for the future of the marriage, but such attendance should not involve any form of marriage ceremony or simulated marriage ceremony.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
19 January 1975

## What is the situation of Bahá'ís if they cannot obtain the consent for marriage of one or more parents?

Bahá'ís who cannot obtain the consent for marriage of one or more parents may consult with their Local Spiritual Assembly to see if they have any suggestions for changing the attitudes of the parents involved. If no way can be found to change the parents' attitudes, however, a believer should strive to trust in God and abide by His will.

*Bahá'ís who cannot marry because of lack of consent of one or more parents could consult with their Local Spiritual Assembly, to see whether it may suggest a way to change the attitude of any of the parents involved. The believers, when faced with such problems, should put their trust in Bahá'u'lláh, devote more time to the service, the teaching and the promotion of His Faith, be absolutely faithful to His injunctions on the observance of an unsullied, chaste life, and rely upon Him to open the way and remove the obstacle, or make known His will.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, September 9, 1969

*While we have the greatest sympathy for the individuals involved in these unfortunate circumstances, we can reach no other conclusion but that consent of parents must be obtained in all cases before marriage can take place. Obedience to the laws of Bahá'u'lláh will necessarily impose hardships in individual cases. No one should expect, upon becoming a Bahá'í, that his faith will not be tested, and to our finite understanding of such matters these tests may occasionally seem unbearable. But we are aware of the assurance which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has given the believers that they will never be called upon to meet a test greater than their capacity to endure.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
29 January 1970

## How should consent be obtained from a parent living in Iran?

Where consent is to be received from a parent who is resident in Iran, guidance should be sought from the National Spiritual Assembly about the most appropriate means for doing so.

## BAHÁ'Í ENGAGEMENT

### When does the Bahá'í engagement period commence?

The Bahá'í engagement period commences when the couple and their parents have signified their consent in a form which is then determined to be acceptable to a Local Spiritual Assembly. Once the engagement commences, couples are encouraged to promptly notify relevant Local Assemblies of their plans for marriage.

### Does the law set out in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas regarding the 95 day period of engagement apply in the UK?

The law regarding the 95 day engagement period applies to Persian Bahá'ís in the UK only at present. It also applies to the children of Persian believers if they have been brought up in the Persian tradition. Where the engagement is between a Persian and non-

Persian believer, it does not apply. Regarding the Persian believers, the Universal House of Justice has said:

*...the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that the lapse of time between engagement and marriage should not exceed ninety-five days is binding on Persian believers wherever they reside, if both parties are Persian. This law is not applicable, however, if one of the parties is a western believer.*

*Concerning the question as to how the term 'Persian believer' should be defined in applying this law, you should be guided as follows. The law applies to Persian believers wherever they have established residence after leaving Iran ... in cases where children born to such parents are brought up in the Persian tradition, speak Persian, and are thoroughly conversant with the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, they will obviously feel an obligation, and should be assisted, to observe this and other laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as circumstances permit.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
23 October 1987

The Universal House of Justice has offered the following guidance in the circumstance of a planned marriage between a Persian Bahá'í and a Persian non-Bahá'í:

*When a Persian Bahá'í is contemplating marriage to a non-Bahá'í Persian, the Bahá'í should endeavour to persuade the other party to agree that the duration of engagement not exceed ninety-five days. However if agreement is not reached on this matter, it is permissible to extend the period of engagement beyond ninety-five days, according to the wishes of the non-Bahá'í partner.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, 27 February 1997

### **For those believers who are required to observe it, is it permitted to break or extend the 95 day period?**

Yes:

*...the breaking of an engagement, though not always desirable, does not violate Bahá'í Marriage Law.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
11 November 1969

If the reason for breaking or extending the engagement period is judged valid by the Local Spiritual Assembly, it should extend every assistance to the couple to resolve the problem so that the marriage can proceed according to Bahá'í Law. If, however, the decision to break or extend the engagement does not seem valid to the Assembly, the matter should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly, which in turn must consult on the validity of the reasons offered and decide whether an extension of time should be permitted. All cases of doubt should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly:

*In principle, according to the decisive text of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the period of ninety-five days should commence only when the two parties have been betrothed, and the marriage is agreed. Therefore, the breaking of an engagement, although possible, should rarely occur. The Assemblies should, when the reason for breaking, or extending, the fixed period of engagement is valid, render every*

*assistance to the parties involved to remove their difficulties and facilitate their observance of the ordinance of the Book. However, if the revoking, extending, or renewing of engagement, in the judgement of the Assembly, is an intentional disregard of the law of the Book, then the National Spiritual Assembly should, in each case, carefully consult and carry out whatever action they may decide...*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
29 June 1971

## **DOWRY**

### **Is the giving of the dowry specified in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas binding in the UK?**

*If both parties are Persians giving of dowry is binding, but at this time Bahá'í institutions should not involve themselves in such matters.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
15 July 1986

### **When should the dowry be paid?**

The dowry should be paid during the 95 day engagement period:

*Following the agreement for marriage and its official public announcement, that is, the statement to the effect that the two parties have been betrothed, the period of engagement must not exceed ninety-five days during which marriage should take place, and the verse be recited, and the dowry paid.*

Extract from a Tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Universal House of Justice compilation,  
*Requirements for Bahá'í Marriage*

### **How much dowry should be paid?**

According to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (p. 42), the dowry is fixed at 19 mithqáls of pure gold for city-dwellers and 19 mithqáls of silver for village-dwellers. The place of residence for the purpose of calculating the dowry is that of the husband. It is forbidden to pay more than 95 mithqáls. It is preferable that a man content himself with 19 mithqáls of silver. If full payment of the dowry is not possible it is permissible to issue a promissory note. One mithqál is equivalent to a little over three and a half grammes. Calculation of the appropriate amount of dowry can be made on this basis.

### **To whom should the dowry be paid?**

*...the dowry is to be paid by the bridegroom to the bride.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
15 November 1988

## THE NATURE OF THE BAHÁ'Í MARRIAGE CEREMONY

### What is the vow to be spoken?

*...the bride and groom, before two witnesses, must state 'We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.'*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
8 August, 1969

It is acceptable for the Bahá'í vows to be said in the original Arabic as long as the witnesses understand it and the Bahá'í Marriage Celebrant recognises the vow. It is recommended that the Local Assembly be consulted by the couple if the vow is to be said in any language other than English.

### If a party to the marriage is an atheist must he/she say the Bahá'í vow?

Yes. In a letter written in response to a letter from a National Spiritual Assembly regarding an atheist who agreed to the Bahá'í ceremony but, since he did not believe in God, did not wish to repeat the marriage verse using the name of God, the Universal House of Justice stated:

*The laws conditioning Bahá'í marriage are found in the 'Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas' under C, Laws of Personal Status beginning on page 39 of that publication. No Bahá'í marriage can be valid without the recitation of the prescribed verse by both parties.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 19 December 1974

An extract from a memorandum from the Research Department to The Universal House of Justice, dated 19 July 2006, states:

*...The following comments...on the translation and intent of the marriage verse may be helpful, however, in assisting an atheist to come to an understanding of the implications of reciting the verse.*

*According to the Bahá'í teachings, both the bride and groom must, in the presence of witnesses, recite a verse revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for the ceremony. A letter written on behalf of the House of Justice clarifies 'that the recitation of this prescribed verse by both parties is a requirement for the Bahá'í ceremony, and that as all believers wishing to marry must have a Bahá'í ceremony, if the non-Bahá'í party is unwilling to recite this verse it is not possible for you to marry him.'*

*The determination as to whether the verses to be said by the bride and groom at*

*the Bahá'í marriage ceremony constitute a vow would appear to be a matter of personal interpretation. There are two versions of the wording of the verse in English from which one can choose, as explained in the following extract from a letter dated 15 March 1973 written by the House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly:*

*The specifically revealed verse as translated by the Guardian is: 'We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God'. Another version which has been used by*

some is: 'Verily, we are content with the Will of God'. When asked by the British National Assembly about which one to use, the Guardian's Secretary replied on his behalf, '...the two versions mean practically the same thing, and either may be used'.

Thus, the original words could well imply either a pledge to abide by or a description of a state of contentment in the Will of God. Both meanings would appear to be inherent in the verse.

It should also be noted that if the verse had been intended to be a clear statement of future action, it would have been worded, 'We shall all, verily, abide by the Will of God'. The use of the wording 'We will all...' implies wish and desire, not an absolute statement of future behaviour.

Another factor for consideration is that the word 'we' used in the verse does not refer exclusively to the parties to the marriage. It is clear from the grammatical construction of the verse in the original Arabic language that the words 'We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God' do not refer only to two people, but to more than two. The transliteration of the verse is as follows:

For men: Inná kullun li'lláh-i-ráqún

For women: Inná kullun li'lláh-i-ráqíyát

In Arabic grammar, differences of gender affect the declension of verbs, nouns, and the like. The 'we' in the marriage verse refers to we of the male gender and we of the female gender. The Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate any statements in the Bahá'í Teachings which explain the reason for the use of plural pronouns in the Bahá'í marriage verse. Nevertheless, it is clear that the verse recited as part of the ceremony by an individual is something other than a direct personal vow.

It may be worthwhile to reflect upon one additional aspect of the verse, the Bahá'í understanding of the concept of God. The following extracts are from letters addressed to National Spiritual Assemblies, which asked about counselling couples in situations similar to that of ...

In counselling a particular couple your Assembly will, of course, have to use understanding and wisdom, while ensuring that the point is made quite clear. The House of Justice suggests that it could be of considerable help if the Bahá'í teachings about the nature of God, the unknowability of His Essence, and His relationship to His creation were explained to an atheist who finds himself in the situation you instance.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 28 October 1985

... the House of Justice feels that the problem may be overcome by explaining to him the Bahá'í concept of God as that Unknowable Essence of Essences described in the Bahá'í Writings. In other words, it should be made clear that the word 'God' for a Bahá'í has a very different meaning from that which is current in European society. Undoubtedly you can find appropriate quotations from 'Gleanings' and other Writings with which to indicate this.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 9 October 1989



## Who should witness the marriage?

There are two elements to the witnessing of a marriage, the civil requirements and the Bahá'í requirements. Both under the civil and the Bahá'í requirements, the witnesses are witnessing the recitation of marriage vows. In England and Wales there is no requirement for the witnesses to be the same people for both ceremonies. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, however, the Bahá'í ceremony is carried out in conjunction with the civil requirements (see below).

The Local Spiritual Assembly with responsibility for the marriage appoints two witnesses, acceptable to it, to witness the recitation of the Bahá'í marriage vows. The couple may recommend to the responsible Spiritual Assembly certain persons to be appointed as the two witnesses, but the Assembly has the final responsibility. Parents of the parties may act as witnesses. The witnesses may be Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís but it is the policy of this National Assembly that they must be at least 15 years old. Concerning the witnesses, the Universal House of Justice has said:

*...you state that the two witnesses at the marriage must be Bahá'ís. Although this is the usual practice, it is not essential. The witnesses can be any two trustworthy people whose testimony is acceptable to the Spiritual Assembly under whose jurisdiction the marriage is performed. This fact makes it possible for a lone pioneer in a remote post to have a Bahá'í marriage.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 8 August 1969

## What form should the ceremony take?

The ceremony should remain as simple as possible and there should be no mixing of old marriage ceremony forms with the new one of Bahá'u'lláh:

*As you know there is no ritual, according to the Aqdas, and the Guardian is very anxious that none should be introduced at present and no general form accepted. He believes this ceremony should be as simple as possible, the parties using the words ordained by Bahá'u'lláh [quoted above], and excerpts from the writings and prayers being read if desired. There should be no commingling of the old forms with the new and simple one of Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'ís should not be married in the Church or any other acknowledged place of worship of the followers of other Faiths.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 13 March 1944

## May the friends include the so-called 'Marriage Tablet' in the programme?

Yes, but they should be aware of the following guidance:

*With regard to your question concerning the so-called Marriage Tablet printed on page 47 of the supplement of the British prayer book, this is not a Tablet, but a talk ascribed to the Master by Mirzá Ahmad Sohrab. It cannot be regarded as Bahá'í scripture as 'nothing can be considered as scripture for which we do not have an original text' as the beloved Guardian pointed out. The friends may use this talk, but it is not to be considered as scripture.*

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of South and West Africa, 18 January 1971

## Is exchange of rings a necessary part of the ceremony?

No. The exchange of rings is not required by Bahá'í law, but may be included in the programme if the couple wish this.

## Can marriages be held on Bahá'í Holy Days?

There is nothing in the Writings prohibiting the celebration of a Bahá'í marriage on any day, but the Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated 28 November 1983, states that:

*...it would be inappropriate for Bahá'í celebrants to schedule a marriage on such sad occasions as the day for the observance of the Martyrdom of the Báb or of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh.*

## IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A BAHÁ'Í MARRIAGE CEREMONY AND A CIVIL CEREMONY

### Must a Bahá'í have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony?

*When a Bahá'í marries, he must have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony.*

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

*The instructions of the beloved Guardian are clear on this point. When two Bahá'ís are married they may not be married by the religious ceremony of another Faith.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
20 May 1968

### Is it necessary to have a civil ceremony or is the Bahá'í marriage vow acceptable to the requirements of government?

It is essential to have a civil ceremony in England and Wales.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland Bahá'í Marriage Celebrants have been appointed to oversee the statutory civil requirements as well as Bahá'í requirements of the wedding ceremony, so that both requirements are met in the one wedding.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland it is necessary to have a separate registry office wedding in addition to the Bahá'í ceremony only if a Marriage Celebrant is not going to be involved in the Bahá'í wedding.

See the separate Notes for Guidance on Marriage in Scotland and Marriage in Northern Ireland in this regard.

### Where there are to be two marriage ceremonies, what are the legal

## requirements?

A Bahá'í wishing to marry is obliged to have a Bahá'í ceremony, even if the other partner is not a Bahá'í. As Bahá'í marriage has not yet been given legal recognition in England and Wales, a legally recognised ceremony must be held **on the same day**. If there is the ceremony of another religion which is recognised in UK law, this is acceptable, otherwise a civil wedding will also have to take place on the same day.

## Does the civil ceremony have to be held first?

*As far as Bahá'í law is concerned, the Bahá'í marriage ceremony may be held either before or after the civil one. It is possible, however, that the civil law may require the civil one to be held first.*

From an e-mail written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom, 11 August 1999

Please note that in England and Wales the civil law does not require the civil wedding to take place first.

## Can two non-Bahá'ís be married according to the Bahá'í ceremony?

Yes:

*There is no objection to performing a Bahá'í marriage for two non-Bahá'ís, if they desire to have our simple ceremony. This, on the contrary, is yet another way of demonstrating our liberality.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 25 October 1947

If a non-Bahá'í couple choose to have a Bahá'í ceremony they must also comply with the Bahá'í law of obtaining parental consents.

## Where one party is a non-Bahá'í, may the Bahá'í participate in the religious ceremony of the non-Bahá'í partner?

Yes, provided the Bahá'í does not make a vow contrary to Bahá'í law, or forfeit the right to bring up the children as Bahá'ís. There must be a Bahá'í ceremony; however, Bahá'í law does not specify that it must be the publicly observed ceremony:

*There is no objection to a Bahá'í participating in a religious ceremony of the non-Bahá'í partner provided that the Bahá'í does not undertake a vow contrary to Bahá'í law as, for example, a vow to raise the children of the marriage in the Catholic Faith. Furthermore, there must be a Bahá'í ceremony... There is no requirement that the Bahá'í ceremony... be the public ceremony...*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 September 1972

It must be made perfectly clear that the Bahá'í partner is not taking on the religion of the non-Bahá'í partner. The Bahá'í cannot make a declaration of faith in any religion other than the Bahá'í Faith:

*If a Bahá'í marries a non-Bahá'í who wishes to have the religious ceremony of his own sect carried out, it must be quite clear that, first, the Bahá'í partner is understood to be a Bahá'í by religion, and not to accept the religion of the other party to the marriage through having his or her religious ceremony; and second, the ceremony must be of a nature which does not commit the Bahá'í to any declaration of faith in a religion other than his own.*

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
20 June 1954

## Where two ceremonies are held, must they both be held on the same day?

Yes:

*As to the holding of the Bahá'í and civil marriage ceremonies on the same day, as consummation of the marriage should not take place until both ceremonies have been held, a night should not intervene between the two ceremonies.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 23 April 1971

## Meaning of Consummation of Marriage

*The consummation of marriage by a couple is, as you aptly state, an intimate and private matter outside the scrutiny of others. While consummation normally implies a sexual relationship, the Bahá'í law requiring consummation to take place within twenty-four hours of the ceremony can be considered as fulfilled if the couple has commenced cohabitation with the intention of setting up the family relationship.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,  
29 July 1978

## Are there any exceptions to the 'same day' rule?

*The House of Justice has determined that, in addition to the Bahá'í ceremony, when it is necessary to hold a civil or other religious marriage, all ceremonies must be held on the same day – that is, within twenty-four hours – and precede the consummation of the marriage. It is within the discretion of your National Assembly to fix the time at which the twenty-four hour period is to begin.*

From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the  
United Kingdom 30 December, 2012

**Important note:** Every effort must be made to arrange the weddings on the same day with no night intervening (i.e. between midnight and midnight). It is only in very exceptional circumstances that the National Assembly may consider fixing the start of the twenty-four hour period at any time other than midnight. All such cases must be referred to the National Assembly for a decision well in advance of the wedding day.

## What are the consequences of not obeying the Bahá'í marriage laws?

It should be realised that non-compliance with a marriage law of Bahá'u'lláh can lead to loss of Bahá'í administrative status – a most serious deprivation. Voting rights may be lost in the following circumstances, where:

1. marriage takes place without a parent's consent;
2. there is only a civil marriage ceremony, and no Bahá'í ceremony;
3. a Bahá'í undertakes a marriage vow contrary to Bahá'í principles;
4. a Bahá'í dissimulates his or her faith in order to have the marriage ceremony of another faith;
5. other Bahá'í marriage laws are not obeyed, e.g. by allowing more than twenty-four hours to intervene between another ceremony and the Bahá'í ceremony.

If the parents aid or assist their child in breaking Bahá'í law, they too may lose their voting rights.

Only the National Spiritual Assembly can remove the voting rights of a believer. Where a believer is found to have been in real ignorance of a particular law, the National Assembly may excuse the transgression. But where there is a knowing violation of the marriage laws in relation to either parental consent or the Bahá'í marriage ceremony the National Assembly will be obligated to remove administrative rights.

### **What are the necessary conditions for the restoration of voting rights lost as a result of disobedience of Bahá'í marriage laws?**

The conditions necessary for restoration of voting rights lost because of disobedience to Bahá'í marriage law depend on the particular law or laws broken. In any case, the believer must show true regret involving actions aimed at rectifying the situation. If the voting rights were lost for failure to have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony, the arrangement of a Bahá'í ceremony by the Local Assembly may be required for the restoration of voting rights:

*In cases involving only a civil ceremony, voting rights may be restored if the Assembly feels that the believer is truly repentant and wishes to comply with the Bahá'í law previously broken. The civil marriage ceremony itself is not contrary to Bahá'í law, and therefore the dissolution of the civil marriage is not a prerequisite to restoration of full voting rights. In such cases the Bahá'í marriage ceremony may take place if the parents now give their consent to the marriage and the Assembly is satisfied that the consent has been genuinely and freely given and is not conditioned by the fact that the parties have already had a civil ceremony. In such cases the Assembly would restore the voting rights immediately before the Bahá'í ceremony on the condition that it be performed. Should ... apply for restoration of his voting rights, and should your Assembly feel that he is truly repentant, you should offer assistance in arranging the other details including helping him in obtaining the consents of parents.*

From a Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
18 November 1971

The necessary conditions for the restoration of voting rights in any particular situation must be set by the National Assembly.

## **What is the situation when two Bahá'ís who were married before they became Bahá'ís now wish to have a Bahá'í marriage?**

Marriages entered into under civil, religious or tribal law are generally recognised as valid under Bahá'í law, therefore, there is no need to hold a Bahá'í ceremony after a couple become Bahá'ís. In fact, it is forbidden under Bahá'í law:

*...there is no question of a couple's having a Bahá'í wedding ceremony subsequently because, as the Guardian says, 'Bahá'í marriage is something you perform when you are going to be united for the first time, not long after the union takes place.' If, however, such a couple would like to have a meeting of their friends at which Bahá'í prayers and readings are said on behalf of their marriage now that they are Bahá'ís, there is no objection to their doing so, although it must be understood that this does not constitute a Bahá'í marriage ceremony.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
23 June 1969

*In general marriages entered into by parties prior to their enrolment in the Faith are recognised as valid under Bahá'í law, and in such cases an additional Bahá'í marriage ceremony is not permitted. This applies whether the marriage was established under civil or religious law or under tribal custom.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
5 March 1978

## **What is the position when, through ignorance of Bahá'í law, two Bahá'ís fail to have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony?**

Bahá'ís who, through true ignorance of the law, marry without having a Bahá'í marriage ceremony should be considered married and are not required to rectify the omission by having a Bahá'í ceremony at a later date:

*At the present state in the development of the Bahá'í Community, Bahá'ís who failed to have a Bahá'í marriage through ignorance of the law are in a different category altogether from those who wittingly broke the law. The latter must have a Bahá'í ceremony in order to regain their voting rights; but the former should be treated in the same manner as those Bahá'ís who married before they entered the Faith and those Bahá'ís who married without a Bahá'í ceremony before the law was applied; they should be considered married and not be required to have a Bahá'í ceremony.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
20 January 1966

## **Is it appropriate for Bahá'ís to attend weddings of Bahá'ís who are marrying contrary to Bahá'í Law?**

No:

*If it is known beforehand that a believer is violating such laws, it would be inappropriate for the friends to attend the ceremony. This is out of respect for Bahá'í Law. However, if without realising the situation believers find themselves in attendance at a ceremony in the course of which it is apparent that such a violation is occurring, they should not make an issue of it.*

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE MARRIAGE**

### **Which Bahá'í Institution is the responsible body?**

The Local Spiritual Assembly within whose area of jurisdiction the marriage is to take place is the Institution responsible for the marriage. Therefore, if the couple live within the jurisdiction of one Local Spiritual Assembly, but get married within the jurisdiction of another Local Spiritual Assembly, the responsible Institution is the latter. As marriage affects the status of the parties, however, the Assembly or Assemblies in whose area(s) the couple reside will vouch to the responsible Assembly for the status of the couple. After the marriage, the responsible Assembly will notify the Local Spiritual Assembly where the couple are to reside that the Bahá'í requirements have been met.

If the marriage is to take place in an area where there is no Local Spiritual Assembly, the National Spiritual Assembly must assume responsibility for the marriage and fulfil the obligations, listed below, that fall to the Local Spiritual Assembly. The National Spiritual Assembly may choose to do this by delegating the responsibility for this marriage to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly or an experienced and mature individual believer.

If a couple intends to marry in an area outside their own area of residence, they should be encouraged by their Local Spiritual Assembly or Assemblies to contact, as soon as possible, the Assembly within whose area of jurisdiction they intend marrying.

### **What specific functions must the responsible Local Spiritual Assembly perform?**

The specific functions of the Assembly are as follows:

1. Ascertain that Bahá'ís wishing to be married are in good standing.
2. Ascertain whether the couple have consented to the marriage (usually done by observation).
3. Ensure that the couple understand the spiritual and administrative principles applying to marriage and, if the circumstances require it, are aware of the sanctions that they may incur if they do not obey the administrative requirements.
4. If two Persian believers are being married, ensure that they understand that the 95 days engagement period applies.
5. Ascertain consent of all living natural parents.

6. The Local Spiritual Assembly should advise and encourage believers to make arrangements for the civil ceremony well in advance to ensure there are no problems with holding it on the same date as the Bahá'í wedding.
7. Approve two witnesses to the marriage whose purpose is to witness the recitation of the Bahá'í marriage vows. These witnesses can be chosen by the couple but must be approved by the Assembly.
8. If either party has been divorced, the Local Spiritual Assembly must ensure that all Bahá'í and civil divorce requirements have been fulfilled. In the case of the civil divorce they would need to see the Decree Absolute document; for the Bahá'í divorce it would be a letter from the Assembly which oversaw that Bahá'í divorce. If no record of Bahá'í divorce is available, the National Spiritual Assembly should be contacted for advice.
9. The Local Spiritual Assembly has responsibility for assisting the couple in planning the ceremony and the Bahá'í requirements in particular. The Assembly should check that the Bahá'í vows and signing of the wedding certificates have been appropriately scheduled in the program.
10. The Assembly must ensure that the wedding certificates have been duly signed
11. The above steps must be recorded in the Assembly's minutes and also record the marriage in the Assembly's marriage register.
12. Fill in a 'Marriage Notification' form, advising the new address of the couple and any change of name for the bride, and return to the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **May a Local Spiritual Assembly refuse to perform a marriage, or delay it?**

The Local Spiritual Assembly has exclusive authority to conduct Bahá'í marriage ceremonies within its area of jurisdiction. This authority does not include the responsibility of determining whether the marriage should take place or not, as this is a matter left entirely to the discretion of the couple concerned and their parents. The Assembly's responsibility is to ensure only that the civil and Bahá'í requirements for the marriage are met:

*The obligation of the Spiritual Assembly is to ascertain that all requirements of civil and Bahá'í law have been complied with, and having done so, the Assembly may neither refuse to perform the marriage ceremony nor delay it.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
30 March 1967

### **What responsibility does the Local Spiritual Assembly have concerning the style of the marriage ceremony?**

Regarding arrangements for the wedding itself, the Universal House of Justice has said that these should be left to the bride and groom without interference from the Assembly,



unless the Assembly is quite certain that the Cause will really be harmed if it does not intervene:

*An Assembly has the overriding duty to protect the good name of the Faith in relation to any activity of the friends, but it should always exercise great care not to restrict the individual's freedom of action unnecessarily. Normally the size of the wedding celebration, the place in which it is to be held and who is to be invited are all left entirely to the discretion of the bride and groom and an Assembly should interpose an objection only if it is quite certain that the Cause will really be injured if it does not do so.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
20 January 1966

## **BAHÁ'Í MARRIAGE CERTIFICATES**

There are six different types of marriage certificate, depending on the location and which Institution is officiating. The officiating Assembly should contact the National Spiritual Assembly to request the appropriate type.

- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place anywhere in the UK, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, in the area of jurisdiction of a local Spiritual Assembly, except when it is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 or the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003; i.e. where there is a Bahá'í ceremony and a separate civil ceremony. This certificate is also used where a wedding is officiated by a local Spiritual Assembly outside its area of jurisdiction.
- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place anywhere in the UK, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, outside the area of jurisdiction of a local Spiritual Assembly when such a Bahá'í marriage is conducted under the jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly, except when it is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 or the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, i.e. where there is a Bahá'í ceremony overseen by the National Assembly as well as a separate civil ceremony.
- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place in Scotland under the jurisdiction of a local Spiritual Assembly and is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 by a legally recognised Bahá'í marriage officer of the National Spiritual Assembly.
- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place in Northern Ireland under the jurisdiction of a local Spiritual Assembly and is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 by a legally recognised Bahá'í marriage officer of the National Spiritual Assembly.
- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place in Scotland under the jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly and is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 by a legally recognised Bahá'í marriage officer of the National Spiritual Assembly.

- For a Bahá'í marriage that takes place in Northern Ireland under the jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly and is solemnised in accordance with the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 by a legally recognised Bahá'í marriage officer of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Unless the bride and bridegroom specially ask for additional copies, the National Spiritual Assembly usually supplies an original plus two copies of the marriage certificate where a marriage takes place in the area of jurisdiction of a Local Spiritual Assembly, or an original plus one where a Local Assembly is not involved.

The relevant certificates plus the Marriage Notification Form will be sent from the National Assembly to the Institution or individual officiating.

After the wedding, the completed certificates should be distributed as follows:

- The thick, parchment copy for the couple.
- One thin, paper copy for the Local Assembly's files.
- One thin, paper copy for the National Bahá'í Centre.

## DE FACTO RELATIONSHIPS

### What constitutes a de facto relationship under Bahá'í law?

The Universal House of Justice distinguishes a de facto relationship from that of companionate marriage or temporary liaison, and recognises under certain conditions such a relationship as legitimate under Bahá'í law. These conditions include the requirement that the de facto relationship was established before any of the parties to it became Bahá'ís:

*[A de facto relationship is accepted under Bahá'í law] where a person enters the Faith at a time when he is part of a relationship in which the couple, although unmarried, have been living together and have established firm ties of union which have stood the test of time. In such a case, the couple are regarded as married in the eyes of Bahá'í law. It should be noted that this is a special case applicable only when the conditions described here have been satisfied.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
3 May 1987

The de facto condition should have no bearing on the acceptance of individuals who enter the Faith in such a relationship and have made a commitment to uphold the law of Bahá'u'lláh and apply it to their behaviour as members of the Bahá'í community.

### What is the difference between an immoral relationship unacceptable under Bahá'í law and a de facto relationship?

Although there are cases where the de facto relationship is acceptable under Bahá'í law when it is established before the couple or one of the individuals accepts the Faith, it does

not imply the acceptability of other relationships, such as companionate marriage or a temporary liaison:

*A couple living together merely as man and mistress when either or both become Bahá'ís are not married in the eyes of Bahá'í law, and must either have a Bahá'í marriage in accordance with the provisions of Bahá'í law, or cease living together. In other words, the Assembly must deal with the situation as it would any other case of immoral behaviour, explaining the requirements of the law, giving repeated warnings, and ultimately, if the offender does not comply, he must forfeit his voting rights.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,  
5 March 1978

Local Assemblies should bear in mind that this is a particularly sensitive issue. The Assembly must ensure, on the one hand, that it does not countenance thoroughly immoral behaviour, thus making a mockery of Bahá'í law and principles. On the other hand, it must not apply Bahá'í standards so strictly that it causes the break-up of what is in fact, if not in law, a well-established family. All cases of doubt should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **Should a couple who commenced living in a de facto relationship before becoming Bahá'ís be obliged to have a Bahá'í wedding ceremony after becoming Bahá'ís?**

No. The Universal House of Justice says that in this case, the couple should be accepted as married under Bahá'í law. They should, however, be encouraged to have a civil ceremony:

*In such cases where the situation, although immoral, is settled and accepted, the Assembly should not attempt to go back into the past and undo a union that was cemented before the couple became Bahá'ís, but should accept their condition as being a marriage in the eyes of Bahá'í law. To compel them to separate, or to celebrate a Bahá'í ceremony at such a late date, could cause serious injustice; it might well be impossible for the couple, for example, to obtain parental consent and a united, happy family could thus be disrupted, the very opposite of the intention of the law. When a situation is thus recognised as a marriage in the eyes of Bahá'í law, the question of having a Bahá'í ceremony does not arise. If, however, the couple are able to regularise their situation in the eyes of the civil law by having a civil ceremony, they should be encouraged to do so for the sake of the good name of the Faith.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assembly,  
5 March 1978

### **What is meant by 'companionate marriage'?**

*Concerning the three definitions of 'companionate marriage' which you give in your letter, the first, which is defined as living together without being married, on either a trial or immoral basis, is obviously unacceptable in Bahá'í teachings and is, moreover, an offence which, if persisted in, could call for deprivation of voting rights. The second and third, namely (2) a marriage where the couple agree ahead of time that they will not have children, ever, and (3) a marriage in which the couple would not have children until they are sure that they wish to stay married,*

*divorce by mutual consent being envisaged before children are born, are private situations which would be undetectable by anyone who has not been confided in by either the husband or the wife. Thus, unlike the first type of 'companionate marriage' they do not constitute blatant immorality and no question of removal of voting rights would arise. Nevertheless they are also both contrary to the spirit of Bahá'í Law. The Bahá'í Teachings do not contemplate any form of 'trial marriage'. A couple should study each other's character and spend time getting to know each other before they decide to marry, and when they do marry it should be with the intention of establishing an eternal bond. They should realize, moreover, that the primary purpose of marriage is the procreation of children. A couple who are physically incapable of having children may, of course, marry, since the procreation of children is not the only purpose of marriage. However, it would be contrary to the spirit of the Teachings for a couple to decide voluntarily never to have any children.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,  
3 November 1982

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