

THE ROLE OF A LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY IN THE CARE & PROTECTION OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY

DEEPENING PROGRAMME – 173 B.E.



The work of Local Assemblies, whilst centred on teaching and propagation, is not limited to this, and there is a distinct relationship between the propagation and the protection of the Faith.

“ . . . for the protection of the Faith is intimately linked to its propagation.”
(The Institution of the Counsellors, p. 14)

In this light the National Spiritual Assembly — following the deepening “Developing the Capacity of Local Spiritual Assemblies”, that reflects on the role of the institution in the support and advancement of the teaching work — has created this deepening programme to assist Spiritual Assemblies to gain a deeper understanding of the areas of its work pertaining to the protection and loving care of the community and the individuals within it.

It is intended for collective study by Assembly members, ideally in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board member and assistants.

It is hoped that, conscious of the renewal of this institution each Ridván, this six hour deepening, that can be held over say two evenings, can serve as an ongoing resource for every Assembly’s practice of continued study, consultation and reflection on actions taken and new understandings achieved.

The National Spiritual Assembly also encourages all Local Spiritual Assemblies to diligently study the guidance of the Universal House of Justice that relates to the current Plan, and ensure that the believers under their jurisdiction are enabled to do so. This habit of ongoing study will surely help to bring about unity of vision and a sense of a common mission, which in themselves contribute to the spiritual health of the community. The Faith is constantly evolving and developing, and familiarity with the current guidance is essential if we are to properly fulfil our duties as members of institutions.

“These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His Wings. What bounty is there greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.”

(*'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 80*)

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1 THE NATURE AND ROLE OF A SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY AND ITS MEMBERS

Please read the following passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and excerpts from the messages of the Universal House of Justice, to help a collective deepening on:

- The vision of the institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly
- The attitudes and qualities of Assembly members who are elected to institutional service
- The relationship of the Local Assembly as an institution, with the community and individuals

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Baha, and should it exceed this number it does not matter... It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God, the Gracious, the Pardoner, commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 13)

The divinely ordained institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly operates at the first levels of human society and is the basic administrative unit of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. It is concerned with individuals and families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock.

(From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, Naw-Rúz 1974 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they "must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal.

(Universal House of Justice, letter to the Conference of Counsellors date 28 December 2010)

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 42)

Reflections:

- In relation to the Institution: How can we describe the purpose a Local Assembly and its sacred duty towards the individuals and community it has been elected to serve? Who are the individuals and the community it has been elected to serve?
- In relation to membership: What do you think it means for Assembly members “to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth.” ? What are some of the requisite qualities and attitudes of Assembly members and why are these important for those serving in this capacity?

2 INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

As our Bahá'í institutions strive to develop beyond an embryonic stage, many sacred duties must be fulfilled, which will stretch the capacities of the institution and its members. The qualities of patience, calm determination and systemic functioning will be necessary for institutional capacity to be developed. The following areas seem to be vital for the functioning of a Local Assembly, to guide the decision-making process as well as the manner and means by which these are communicated with individual / community.

1. The Assembly's search for truth through the mystery of consultation and in unity
2. The Assembly's focus on guidance in order to identify the spiritual principles related to a matter
3. The Assembly's reliance on a dynamic mode of learning as a vital process for capacity building
4. The Assembly's refinement of communications and sharing guidance or decisions

Each area can now be further explored with pertinent quotations and questions to guide your reflections:

2.1 SEEKING TRUTH AND CONFIRMATIONS THROUGH CONSULTATION AND IN A SPIRIT OF UNITY

The following passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, provides clear guidance to Assembly members on the Bahá'í approach to consultation and adherence to Assembly decisions:

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition ... They must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honoured members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness....

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 87)

- How does the guidance provided by the Master enable an Assembly to search for truth and reach a unified decision? How will this enable difficult matters to be raised and consulted upon, and a plan of action to be devised and implemented effectively by an Assembly?

2.2 FOCUSING ON GUIDANCE TO IDENTIFY SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES RELATED TO A MATTER

There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of governments and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them.

(The Universal House of Justice, 1985 Oct, The Promise of World Peace, p. 3)

When an Assembly is called to consider a matter it will need to identify the pertinent spiritual principles that will guide its subsequent consultations and decisions. These principles need to be considered prayerfully through the study of guidance from Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice or the National Spiritual Assembly. There is often more than one principle that is relevant to a particular issue. As members collectively explore and focus on the relevant guidance, clarity of thought and unity of vision and action emerges in the Assembly's search for truth.

- Why is it important for Assembly members to explore truth by sharing views in light of guidance rather than personal opinions drawn from experience alone? How can this help to develop unity and enable the Spiritual Assembly to search for truth?

2.3 RELYING ON A DYNAMIC MODE OF LEARNING

...the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.

(From a letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 24 July 2013 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- How might an Assembly work systematically in this manner, to fulfil its responsibilities to care for the members of its community, such as addressing a matter related to an individual believer or the community at large? How does this mode of learning help an Assembly build capacity in reaching wise decisions and in the follow-up implementation and communication of decisions arrived at?

2.4 COMMUNICATING GUIDANCE OR SHARING DECISIONS WITH INDIVIDUALS / COMMUNITY

A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding....

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 289)

The successful exercise of authority in the Bahá'í community implies the recognition of separate mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities between the institutions and the friends in general, a recognition that in turn welcomes the need for cooperation between these two interactive forces of society. As was stated in advice given by Shoghi Effendi: "The individuals and assembles must learn to cooperate intelligently, if they desire to adequately

discharge their duties and obligations towards the Faith. And no such cooperation is possible without mutual confidence and trust.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1994 from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. ... Animating the Baha'i effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Baha'u'llah, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. ... In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.

(2 March 2013, Universal House of Justice Message to the Baha'is of Iran)

- Once the Local Assembly has reflected on guidance or reached a decision, an appropriate means for communicating this with the individual/s or community, may be necessary. What are the various means of communication that can be used in different situations? Does your Assembly use these?
- How do channels of communication assist in building a spirit of mutual cooperation, confidence and trust? In light of this, discuss how an Assembly might convey guidance or decisions to a believer/s or community and any further steps it may wish to consider in this regard?
- How might the guidance influence the tone, style and content of your Local Assembly's communications?

3 CARE AND PROTECTION OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY

The protection and care of a community has always been a central role of Local Spiritual Assemblies, and service to others is the aim of every individual Bahá'í. As our community learns to welcome a growing variety of contributions, institutions are developing the capacity to increasingly aid the spiritual and personal needs of individuals at a local level. The following five areas seem to be vital for the relationship of a Local Assembly, with the members and community under its jurisdiction.

1. The Power of the Covenant and building Unity in the Community
2. Creating an environment of encouragement for all and promoting universal participation
3. Reaching out to those who feel distant from community life and being attentive to specific needs e.g. of the elderly, the sick, those with young children
4. The Assembly's sincere spirit of accompaniment in serving others
5. Helping believers in their understanding of Bahá'í laws and principles and enabling the standards of the Faith to be upheld

Each area can now be further explored with pertinent quotations and questions to guide your reflections:

3.1 THE POWER OF THE COVENANT AND BUILDING UNITY IN THE COMMUNITY

It is indubitably clear, that the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.... The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth. The light of the Covenant, in like manner, is the educator of the minds, the spirits, the hearts and souls of men.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in "God Passes By", pp. 238-39)

The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstanding and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers. And this they can adequately achieve provided they are motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with firm determination to act with justice in all cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.

(From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, March 9, 1934: The Local Spiritual Assembly, p. 23)

Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God. Flee them, through the power of God and His sovereign aid, and strive to knit together the hearts of men, in His Name, the Unifier, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise."

(Compilations, Baha'i World Faith, p. 125)

If any differences arise amongst you, behold Me standing before your face, and overlook the faults of one another for My name's sake and as a token of your love for My manifest and resplendent Cause. We love to see you at all times consorting in amity and concord within the paradise of My good-pleasure, and to inhale from your acts the fragrance of friendliness and unity, of loving-kindness and fellowship."

(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 315)

Strive ye by day and night to cultivate your unity to the fullest degree. Let your thoughts dwell on your own spiritual development, and close your eyes to the deficiencies of other souls. Act ye in such wise, showing forth pure and goodly deeds, and modesty and humility, that ye will cause others to be awakened.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 203)

The believers must be tolerant of each other's weaknesses and mistakes, and ever ready to forgive and forget the past because inharmony - whatever the cause - is sure to prevent the community from growing.

(26 September 1943, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- What should be a fundamental aim of the administrators of God in their service to a community?
- What qualities are needed within an Assembly for it to foster unity within the community?
- What does it mean to be “*motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with firm determination to act with justice in all cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.*”
- Why is the spirit of unity and forgiveness a vital characteristic of a healthy, growing community?

3.2 CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR ALL AND PROMOTING UNIVERSAL PARTICIPATION

... No less vital is its [an Assembly's] ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly's mind. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.”

(Universal House of Justice, letter to the Conference of Counsellors date 28 December 2010)

- Discuss what it means to have the “spiritual well-being of the community” uppermost in an Assembly's considerations. Give some practical examples of these.
- Why is it important for all members of the community to feel able to “naturally turn to it for assistance”? How may this be connected with “upholding at all times the standard of justice”?
- How might a Spiritual Assembly strive to learn “how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations upholding at all time the standard of justice.”?

3.3 REACHING THOSE WHO FEEL DISTANT FROM COMMUNITY LIFE AND BEING ATTENTIVE TO SPECIFIC NEEDS E.G. OF THE ELDERLY, THE SICK, THOSE WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

You must love and be kind to everybody, care for the poor, protect the weak, heal the sick, teach and educate the ignorant.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 92)

...The importance of the Bahá’í administration is its values in serving as a facilitator of the emergence and maintenance of community life in a wholly new mode, and in catering to the requirements of the spiritual relationships which flow from love and unity among the friends. This touches upon a distinguishing characteristic of Bahá’í life which such spiritual relationships foster, namely, the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in service to the Cause, to friends and to humanity as a whole. The attitude of the individual as a servant, an attitude pre-eminently exemplified in the life and person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is a dynamic that permeates the activities of the Faith; it acquires collective, transformative force in the normal functioning of a community. In this regard, the Institutions of the Faith stand as channels for the promotion of this salient characteristic.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1994 from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

There are many reasons why souls may feel alienated or distant from community life. Some may find it difficult to leave their homes due to illness or age. For others, evening activities may not enable their attendance with young children. The working patterns of some may place undue strain on their time and energies, and others may have family commitments that limit their involvement. A culture of care in the community requires that all are loved and remembered. Home-visits are a wonderful way of expressing our sincere love for all. Where communities are relatively strong, the sick, elderly or otherwise isolated friends receive visits for fellowship and prayer, and the community arranges its activities to meet the social and spiritual needs of its members, so that everyone feels included and spiritual friendships are nurtured.

- How is the Local Assembly developing its capacity to care for all the friends under its jurisdiction and to encourage this culture of care in the community? How will this capacity enable distinctive Bahá’í communities to develop?
- Can you think of friends in the community who have specific needs that can be met through a simple and systematic plan for care? Eg. Home-visits, calls, arranging lifts, arranging day-time gatherings? Can a simple plan be made to assist a number of these friends?
- In some very unfortunate cases, disunity or estrangement may feel an insurmountable hurdle to overcome and debilitate a soul’s participation. The quotations in Section C 1 & 2 addresses this.

3.4 THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF OTHERS WITH A SINCERE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

Show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another. Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 7)

Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore, do not look at the shortcomings of anybody; see with the sight of forgiveness. The imperfect eye beholds

imperfections. The eye that covers faults looks toward the Creator of souls. He created them, trains and provides for them, endows them with capacity and life, sight and hearing; therefore, they are the signs of His grandeur.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 92)

...the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, to be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.

(September 1968, published in Wellspring of Guidance, p.39)

- Why is it vital to have a sin-covering eye as we strive to accompany others in the community? Why are the qualities of love and encouragement by the members of an Assembly so vital for the strengthening of the community and its work?

3.5 HELPING BELIEVERS IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF BAHÁ'Í LAW AND ENABLING THE STANDARDS OF THE FAITH TO BE UPHELD

From My laws the sweet smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: 'Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.' ...Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, pg. 120)

Wherever a Bahá'í community exists, whether large or small, let it be distinguished for its abiding sense of security and faith, its high standard of rectitude, its complete freedom from all forms of prejudice, the spirit of love among its members, and for the closely knit fabric of its social life. The acute distinction between this and the present-day society will inevitably arouse the interest of the more enlightened, and as the world's gloom deepens the light of Bahá'í life will shine brighter and brighter until its brilliance must eventually attract the disillusioned masses and cause them to enter the haven of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, Who alone can bring them peace and justice and an ordered life.

(August 1968, Message to the Oceanic Conference, Palermo, Sicily, published in Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968, p.147)

Bahá'í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us that "when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire's distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it." As He averred, "ye must in this matter--that is, the serving of humankind--lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice."

(Universal House of Justice, letter to the Conference of Counsellors date 28 December 2010)

An exploration of this most important theme is addressed in Book 8 (Unit 3) of the Institute Courses. Within the limitations of this introduction, Local Assemblies may wish to reflect on the following questions:

- What is the essential nature and purpose of Bahá'í law? How would an Assembly inspire an appreciation for this in the way it is described?
- What is the “ethos that pervades Bahá'í institutional identity” as described by the Guardian?
- How would the Local Assembly exercise its authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities?
- How do you see the relationship between upholding the laws and principles of the Faith in our individual and collective lives, and the growth of the Cause?

4 SOME CASE STUDY SCENARIOS

The application of the principles outlined in the preceding sections, are many and varied. As Assemblies strive to reinforce the process of Expansion and Consolidation of the Faith, an increasing awareness of its protection through a healthy pattern of community life is required, governed by the leadership of the Local Institution. Assemblies need to ensure that its basic responsibilities pertaining to the life of a community are adequately met, and to also have a readiness to tend to specific matters that may arise. Below are a list of questions that may prompt thought on case study scenarios:

- Bahá'í Marriage

It has come to the attention of the Assembly that two friends in the community wish to be married. The Local Assembly would naturally wish to contact them to offer support at the early stages of this process. What are some of the areas it needs to explore with the couple, in order to enable the marriage to be administered according to Bahá'í Law and in conformity with the principles of the Faith? How does the Local Assembly see its role initially in this process of marriage between the couple and their families? And is there any longer-term involvement?

- Addressing Isolation

A friend has missed a number of community gatherings, including the last Feast and 3 of the fortnightly devotionals that take place in her neighbourhood. The community has missed her contributions and Assembly members have been mindful of her absence. In order to know how best to be of service, the Assembly were eager to learn of any relevant issue that may have resulted in this, and asked one of the members to call this friend. Very quickly they learned that this friend's work has been more demanding recently and she is exhausted, especially as she looking after her toddler on her own too. She would very much appreciate prayers and a chat with her Baha'i friends and assistance with her little boy. What might be the role of the Local Assembly in assisting this friend and her son?

- Birth / Baby registrations

The Local Assembly is delighted to learn that a friend in the community has had a new baby. Her spouse is not a registered Bahá'í but has been very supportive of the Faith and community activities. How may the Local Assembly consider its role in accompanying the couple to consider the registration of the baby into the Bahá'í community? What may this contact and conversation look like?

- Alcohol

A newly declared Bahá'í has shared with his friends that he is struggling with the law of prohibition of alcohol and this is becoming a test to his Bahá'í identity. One of the friends turns to the Local Assembly for guidance. How may the Assembly wish to assist in this matter? What are the various means by which this friend can be supported and the community can also develop capacity to assist?

- Death and Burial

After years of prolonged sickness, a dear elderly Bahá'í in the community passes away and her daughter immediately notifies the Local Assembly. What would be the appropriate course of action for the Local Assembly to take, a) to ensure that an appropriate level of emotional and practical

support reaches this friend b) that the laws associated with burial are clear and she can be accompanied during this difficult time.

- Year of Patience and / or Divorce

A Bahá'í friend confides in an Assembly member (as a friend), about some challenges she is having in her marital relationship, and that the couple are considering separation. The Assembly member immediately encourages her to share this in confidence with the Local Assembly and to allow the Institutions to assist in a constructive process of a Year of Patience. How may the Local Assembly proceed in its understanding of the purpose and administration of a Year of Patience? How might this be distinct from administering a Divorce? Where would it find relevant guidance? With which other Institutions may it wish to consult?

- Chastity

A youth in the community writes to the Local Assembly to seek guidance on whether she can share a house of multiple-occupancy with a friend with whom she is growing close, with a view to marriage? How may the Local Assembly address this communication from this youth? Where will it find guidance on this subject? How may it approach a subsequent consultative process? Aside from the laws around chastity, what other principles may be helpful for the youth and her friend to consider?

- Disunity and Backbiting

There has been an unfortunate incident of disunity and backbiting between 2 families between whom a misunderstanding has occurred. Not only is this painful for these families, but it is unfortunately becoming apparent in the life of the community, at gatherings such as the 19-Day Feast. How would the Local Assembly serve to quickly cease this behaviour and re-build unity?

- The Elderly / Immobile / Sick

An elderly friend in the community is increasingly immobile and cannot attend many gatherings. She is feeling particularly isolated and lonely as there has been very little contact with her over months. She is a devoted believer and longs to feel part of community life and especially to meet younger members of the community. She would also be deeply appreciative of assistance with practical matters such as a lift, or help with shopping as she has very little other support. What duty of care does a Local Assembly have to such a soul and how can a community be enabled to assist?

- Encouraging participation

A single mother with 3 children has recently become a Bahá'í. She is involved in the Institute process but has little contact with the community at large as all of the community gatherings are in the evenings and it is impossible for her to attend with the children. What principles may the Local Assembly wish to reflect on to enable the participation of all and to be especially mindful of all segments of the community?

In consulting on the above, you may wish to reflect on a range of approaches and a range of spiritual qualities that might be applied.

- a. Sincere love for all
- b. Sincere service to others

- c. Justice
- d. Accompaniment
- e. Seeking the truth of a matter
- f. Disregard of one's likes and dislikes
- g. Exercise of the spiritual authority of the Assembly in an ethos of loving service to the community and individuals
- h. Sacrifice
- i. Compassion
- j. Patience and long-suffering
- k. Tools of consultation
- l. Finding the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations
- m. Nurturing the seeds of unity when they are identified
- n. Forgiveness
- o. Detachment
- p. Obedience to decisions of the Assembly regardless of personal opinion.

5 FURTHER RESOURCES

These materials are not of course comprehensive. Local Assemblies can refer to publications or online resources, as and when particular questions arise. Guidance Notes are available for Local Assemblies on the UK Bahá'í Downloads Website, and we encourage the members of Local Assemblies to register for this site and use this resource.

- <https://bahaidata.com/welcome/>

Examples of other suitable resources include:

- *Bahá'í Administration*, Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968).
- http://bahai-library.com/compilation_local_spiritual_assemblies

In addition, Local Assemblies should always feel free to contact the National Office (nsa@bahai.org.uk) or their Auxiliary Board members or their assistants.