

ADMINISTRATION OF BAHÁ'Í LAW

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GENERAL PRINCIPLES

What is the purpose of Bahá'í law?

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, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 5

The Laws of God are not imposition of will, or of power, or pleasure, but the resolutions of truth, reason and justice.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 154

What is meant by the 'laws' of the Faith?

The Universal House of Justice explains this as follows:

- ... the 'laws' of the Faith must be regarded in various lights. There are laws, ordinances, exhortations and principles, all of which are sometimes loosely referred to as 'laws'.
- All are very important for the life of the community and the spiritual life of the individual, but they are applied differently.
- Some affect the society and the social relationships, and the Spiritual Assemblies are responsible for their enforcement. If a believer breaks such a law, he is subject to the imposition of sanctions.
- Others, although of very great importance, are not sanctionable, because their observance is a matter of conscience between the individual and God; among these fall the laws of prayer and fasting and the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh.
- Then there are those high ethical standards to which Bahá'u'lláh calls His followers, such as trustworthiness, abstention from backbiting, and so on; generally speaking, obedience to these is a matter for individual conscience, and the Assemblies should not pry into people's lives to see whether or not they are following them; nevertheless, if a believer's conduct falls so far below the standard set by Bahá'u'lláh that it becomes a flagrant disgrace and brings the name of the Faith into disrepute, the Assembly would have to intervene, to encourage the believer to correct his ways, to warn him of the consequences of continued misconduct, and possibly, if he does not respond, to deprive him of his administrative rights.
- ... Assemblies ... should distinguish clearly between those laws which it is their duty to enforce, those which should be left strictly to the conscience of the individual, and those in which it may have to intervene if the misbehaviour is blatant and injurious to the good name of the Faith.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 12 August 1984

Which laws are not yet universally binding on Bahá'ís?

Not all Bahá'í laws are applicable at present to all Bahá'ís everywhere. The Universal House of Justice wrote to all National Spiritual Assemblies on 8 February 2001 clarifying the laws not currently universally binding upon the Bahá'ís, particularly those in the West. These are:

- The laws governing betrothal.
- The law concerning the payment of a dowry by the groom to the bride on marriage.
- The laws concerning the travelling of a husband away from his wife.
- The laws relating to the virginity of the wife.
- That part of the divorce law relating to the fines payable to the House of Justice.
- The law of inheritance. This is normally covered by civil laws of intestacy at the present time.
- The law of pilgrimage.
- The law of the *Mashriq'l-Adhkár* is gradually being put into effect.
- The age of maturity applies only to Bahá'í religious duties as yet. On other matters it is subject to the civil law of each country. Regarding administrative duties in the Bahá'í community, the age at which one can vote in Bahá'í elections is fixed at 18, while the age at which one can be elected to serve is fixed at 21.
- For the burial of the dead the only requirements now binding in the West are to bury the body (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a distance of one hour's journey from the place of death and to say the Prayer for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.
- The law of tithes.
- The law concerning the hunting of animals.
- The laws relating to the finding of lost property, the disposition of treasure trove, the disposal of objects held in trust and compensation for manslaughter are all designed for a future state of society. These matters are usually covered by the civil law for each country.
- Arson, adultery, murder, and theft are all forbidden to Bahá'ís, but the punishments prescribed for them in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are designed for a future state of society. Such matters are usually covered in the civil laws of each country.
- The laws prohibiting the use of the type of pools which used to be found in Persian baths, the plunging of one's hand in food, the shaving of one's head and the growth of men's hair below the lobe of the ear.

Are any laws binding on Persian Bahá'ís but not western Bahá'ís?

Yes, part of the law of betrothal:

... the Universal House of Justice instructs us to say that according to its ruling, 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.

*Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
31 October 1977*

For further details about how this law applies, and to whom, please refer to the Local Assembly guidance notes on *Marriage*.

ADMINISTERING BAHÁ'Í LAW AND VIOLATIONS OF BAHÁ'Í LAW

This section deals with those laws the Local Spiritual Assembly has a duty to enforce and with those situations in which it may have to intervene if an individual's behaviour is injurious to the Faith.

What are the duties of the Local Assembly towards its community regarding the application of Bahá'í law?

The general duties of the Local Assembly are set out in the By-Laws of a Local Spiritual Assembly, a copy of which can be found in *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 20. pp. 720–23. Local Assemblies are to:

- apply the laws of Bahá'u'lláh with justice and firmness
- increase the believers' understanding of and devotion to these laws
- provide both counsel and education for the believers

It is a vital and urgent duty of the Assemblies, both National and Local, not only to apply the Laws of Bahá'u'lláh with justice and firmness, but to increase the believers' understanding of and devotion to these Laws. In this way they will obey them not through fear of punishment but out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and because their whole lives have been transformed and re-oriented in the Way of God.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 11 October 1965

In a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice ... it was pointed out that it was the task of the institutions to provide both counsel and education for the believers, and thereafter it is for the individual Bahá'í to determine his course of conduct in relation to the situations of his daily life.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 March 1983

How might the Local Spiritual Assembly go about discharging its educational responsibilities with respect to the Laws of the Faith?

While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavours, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them.

One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with 'the feet of detachment'. The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through 'active, whole-hearted and continued participation' in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: 'Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe from the Teachings.' 'By becoming a real part of that living organism', the letter went on, 'you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá'í Teachings.' Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet, when the desire to uphold the Bahá'í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unfailing love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.

Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá'ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring to achieve the Bahá'í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá'í community; nor do judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness.

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: 'A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects – a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.' The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.

Apart from the measures noted above, which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá'í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a

callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behaviour contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

From the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 April 2013

Do Local Spiritual Assemblies oversee the adherence of Bahá'ís to all Bahá'í laws?

No.

There are certain teachings and exhortations the observance of which is solely between the individual and God; the non-observance of other laws and ordinances incurs some form of sanction.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

The violation of which Bahá'í laws might Local Spiritual Assemblies be asked to investigate?

The National Spiritual Assembly may ask a Local Spiritual Assembly to investigate the violation of any Bahá'í law that attracts some form of sanction. The present Notes for Guidance for Local Spiritual Assemblies deals with those which have occurred from time to time in the UK Bahá'í community, e.g. laws of personal status (marriage), the use of alcohol and illegal drugs, violence and abuse, disunity, backbiting, immorality, partisan political activity, criminal convictions (see page 24 below) and membership of other religious organizations.

How does a Local Assembly find out that a Bahá'í is breaking a Bahá'í law?

It is not the business either of the believers or of the Spiritual Assemblies to pry into the lives of individual friends to ascertain the degree to which they are living up to the standards of the Cause. Only if misbehaviour becomes blatant and flagrant does it become a matter for action, and then it is a matter for action by the Assembly and not by individuals. Even then the Assembly must be loving and patient, and exhort the believer to follow the Path of the Cause, but, if he persists in openly and flagrantly flouting Bahá'í law, the Assembly has no alternative to ultimately depriving him of his voting rights.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 22 July 1981

What should an individual do if he or she becomes aware of the misconduct of another believer?

The way in which an individual should behave in any given situation is dependent upon the circumstances of that situation. In regard to situations that involve the abuse of children, however, there is separate and detailed guidance (see page 26 below and link):

While it can be a severe test to a Bahá'í to see fellow believers violating Bahá'í laws or engaging in conduct inimical to the welfare and best interests of the Faith, there is no fixed

rule that a believer must follow when such conduct comes to his notice. A great deal depends upon the seriousness of the offence and upon the relationship which exists between him and the offender.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

This letter goes on to describe actions an individual may take:

- If the misconduct is blatant and flagrant or threatens the interests of the Faith the believer to whose attention it comes should immediately report it to the Local Spiritual Assembly. Once it is in the hands of the Assembly the believer's obligation is discharged and he should do no more than pray for the offender and continue to show him friendship and encouragement – unless, of course, the Spiritual Assembly asks him to take specific action.
- Sometimes ... the matter does not seem grave enough to warrant reporting to the Spiritual Assembly, in which case it may be best to ignore it altogether.
- ... he could foster friendly relations with the individual concerned, tactfully drawing him into Bahá'í activities in the hope that, as his knowledge of the Teachings and awareness of the Faith deepens, he will spontaneously improve his patterns of conduct.
- ... perhaps the relationship is such that he can tactfully draw the offender's attention to the Teachings on the subject – but here he must be very careful not to give the impression of prying into a fellow-believer's private affairs or of telling him what he must do, which would not only be wrong in itself but might well produce the reverse of the desired reaction.
- If a believer faced with knowledge of another Bahá'í's misconduct is unsure what course to take, he can, of course, always consult his Local Spiritual Assembly for advice. If, for some reason, he is reluctant at that stage to inform his Spiritual Assembly, he can consult an Auxiliary Board member or assistant.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

What actions are not appropriate for a believer to take?

Bahá'ís must not spread gossip about any situation or discuss it with others behind the person's back:

Whatever steps are taken, it is vital that the believers refrain from gossip and backbiting, for this can only harm the Faith, causing perhaps more damage than would have been caused by the original offence.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

At what point should a Local Assembly become concerned about a breach of Bahá'í law such that it needs to intervene to protect the community and uphold the law?

When a Bahá'í's conduct is:

- disgraceful
- flagrantly contrary to Bahá'í teachings
- blatantly and flagrantly immoral

- in open opposition to the administrative functions of the Faith
- bringing disgrace upon the name of the Faith, or
- when a Bahá'í disregards the laws of personal status (e.g. marriage laws)

In sum, 'cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community.'

From the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 April 2013

The following guidance will be helpful:

He feels that your Assembly must keep before its eyes the balance specified by Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, in other words, justice, reward and retribution. Although the Cause is still young and tender, and many of the believers inexperienced, and therefore loving forbearance is often called for in the place of harsh measures, this does not mean that a National Spiritual Assembly can under any circumstances tolerate disgraceful conduct, flagrantly contrary to our Teachings, on the part of any of its members, whoever they may be and from wherever they come. You should vigilantly watch over and protect the interests of the Bahá'í Community, and the moment you see that any Bahá'ís ... are acting in a way to bring disgrace upon the name of the Faith, warn them, and if necessary, deprive them immediately of their voting rights if they refuse to change their ways. Only in this way can the purity of the Faith be preserved.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 August 1957

Apart from the measures ... which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá'í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behaviour contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

From the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly 23 April 2013

What does a Local Assembly do when a Bahá'í violates a Bahá'í law?

The Local Assembly is to undertake a series of tasks to prevent and then deal with violations of Bahá'í law. The Local Assembly should:

- after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues,
 - offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved.
 - in most cases determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards.

- In general, provide dispassionate counselling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law.
- act as a loving father rather than as a stern judge in such matters
- urge the Bahá'í concerned to reform his conduct
- warn him/her of the consequences if (s)he does not mend his/her ways
- if the Bahá'í persists in the misconduct, advise the National Spiritual Assembly so that it can consider depriving him/her of administrative rights.

The following guidance will be helpful:

It is the task of Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that the friends are deepened in their understanding of the teachings, and are exhorted to apply them in their lives. In caring for its community, a Spiritual Assembly should act as a loving father rather than as a stern judge in such matters. Nevertheless, if a believer's behaviour is blatantly and flagrantly immoral and, therefore, is harmful to the good name of the Faith, the Assembly must counsel him (or her), urge him to reform his conduct, warn him of the consequences if he does not mend his ways and, ultimately, if the believer persists in misbehaviour, the Assembly must deprive him of his administrative rights. This deprivation remains in force until such time that he has rectified his behaviour.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 5 June 1986

Should the conduct of a believer become so blatant as to attract the attention of the Assembly, it would want, after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues, to offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved. In most cases it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards. Dispassionate counselling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law is generally required. So, too, is patience needed, and he or she should be given sufficient time to bring about a change. The Assembly, often aided by the Counsellors or the members of the Auxiliary Boards, may have to help the individual reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options. In deciding on what approach to take, the Assembly should be guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá'í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards. When a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation, continued patience and loving guidance are in order. All throughout, of course, care is taken to ensure that an individual's struggles do not become a source of backbiting or disunity in the community. In this the members of the community need to remember that they should each focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.

Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection.... In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be

elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community.... Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, 'although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline,' this prerogative of the National Assembly 'should be used only in extreme cases.' If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, 'it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá'ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Bahá'u'lláh,' which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, 'create an impossible and ridiculous situation.'

From the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly – 23 April 2013

How should the Local Spiritual Assembly proceed when required to investigate and administer a violation of Bahá'í law?

There is no fixed procedure. The Assembly:

- is guided and constrained by the Teachings
- is committed to protect and preserve the rights of both the individual and the community
- must make a diligent and persistent effort to ascertain the facts
- must encourage and secure the wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth.
- should remind the believers of their responsibility to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so.

The following guidance will be helpful:

The Administrative Order has not adopted a formal set of procedures to be applied universally in the Bahá'í community for dealing with infringements of Bahá'í law. Rather, the Spiritual Assembly in its operation is guided and constrained by the Teachings and committed to protect and preserve the rights of both the individual and the community. Hence, while there is no fixed procedure for the discovery of facts necessary for the adjudication of a case, it is a matter of principle that Assemblies must, before passing judgement, acquaint themselves, through means they themselves devise, with the facts of any case. The principle motive is not to condemn and punish the individual but to assist him, if necessary, to bring his behaviour into conformity with the Teachings and also to protect the community.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 20 July 1988, included with a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 January 1989

The aim of any Spiritual Assembly should be to develop a warm and loving relationship with the believers in its community, so that it can most effectively nurture and encourage them in the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the teachings, and can assist them to follow the Bahá'í principles in their personal conduct. The Assembly should aspire to be regarded by the members of the community as a loving parent, wise in its understanding of the varying degrees of maturity of those entrusted to its care, compassionate in dealing with the problems which arise as a result of any shortcomings, ever prepared to guide them to

the correct path, and very patient as they strive to effect the necessary changes in their behaviour. Such an approach is far removed from the harshly judgmental and punitive approach which so often characterizes the administration of law in the wider society. The Bahá'í application of justice, firmly rooted in spiritual principle and animated by the desire to foster the spiritual development of the members of the community, will increasingly be seen as a distinctive and highly attractive feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Such an attitude of forbearance, restraint, and patience toward believers who are striving to change practices and attitudes acquired in the years before they entered the sanctuary of the Cause of God should not blind a National Assembly to the fact that, at this stage in the development of the Faith, there may well be some believers in the community whose behaviour necessitates that they be treated in a firm and uncompromising manner. The following passage from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian is of broad applicability:

He feels that your Assembly must keep before its eyes the balance specified by Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, in other words, justice, reward and retribution. Although the Cause is still young and tender, and many of the believers inexperienced, and therefore loving forbearance is often called for in the place of harsh measures, this does not mean that a National Spiritual Assembly can under any circumstances tolerate disgraceful conduct, flagrantly contrary to our Teachings, on the part of any of its members, whoever they may be and from wherever they may come....

The National Assembly is the guardian of the welfare of the Faith, a most sacred and heavy responsibility and one which is inescapable. They must be ever vigilant, ever on the look-out, ever ready to take action, and, on all matters of fundamental principle, refuse to compromise for an instant. Only in this way can the body of the Faith be free of disease.

...we should not confuse the true believers with those who are not quickened with the spirit of faith, have some ulterior motive, or are indifferent to the reputation they have personally, and the damage they may do the Cause in the eyes of the public. There is all the difference in the world between these two categories, and your Assembly must be ever watchful and ready to take action when necessary.

A survey of the letters written on behalf of the Guardian shows that he advised the National Spiritual Assemblies that they should resort to the severe sanction of deprivation of a believer's administrative rights only for such matters as 'disgraceful conduct, flagrantly contrary to our Teachings', 'seriously injuring the Faith in the eyes of the public through his conduct or flagrantly breaking the laws of God', 'gross immorality and open opposition to the administrative functions of the Faith, and disregard for the laws of personal status', 'conduct which is disgracing the Cause', and 'breaking of laws, such as the consent of parents to marriage', or 'acts of such an immoral character as to damage the good name of the Faith'.

It is clear that the removal of voting rights is a serious action which an Assembly should take reluctantly when the circumstances require that the Bahá'í community or its reputation in the eyes of the public must be protected from the effects of an individual's behaviour, and where the authority of the laws of the Faith must be upheld. It should be the hope and prayer of the Assembly that the believer who has been administratively expelled from membership in the Bahá'í community will come to see that his behaviour is in violation of the teachings, will endeavour to rectify his conduct, and will thus open the way to being welcomed back into the community so that he can lend his support to the vital and glorious task of establishing the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá'í law, irrespective of the consequence in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all

concerned in the search for truth. Believers called upon to provide information should, if necessary, be reminded of the responsibility they bear to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts: ‘Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness, progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired.’

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 9 December 1991

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do if it is not certain whether a believer has committed the misconduct brought to its attention?

A Local Spiritual Assembly is not required to decide whether a person is ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’ in any given case. The responsibility of the Assembly is to take whatever action it feels is justified based on the evidence before it:

... the House of Justice asks us to point out that a Spiritual Assembly, unlike a civil court of law, is not required to return a verdict of ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’ in such cases. It would be perfectly in order for you to say to such a person that, in view of the evidence before you, you feel that there is a strong probability that he acted as described, which justifies your issuing a warning to him. If, as he maintains, he is innocent, all the better, but you are responsible to take the action that you deem to be justified in the circumstances.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, 7 November 1989

Why should a Local Assembly take action when a believer is in flagrant violation of a Bahá’í law?

If the Assembly does not take action, the situation might:

- become a source of backbiting among the Bahá’ís
- deteriorate into the loss of dignity of the teachings in the eyes of Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís
- cause the inactivity of a believer
- result in an attitude of increasing disregard of these laws on the part of the believers.

Whenever it becomes known that one of the believers is flagrantly disobeying the Teachings of the Faith, whether spiritual, ethical, moral or administrative, the Assemblies should not allow such a situation to become a source of backbiting among the friends or deteriorate into either the loss of dignity of the Teachings in the eyes of the Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís, or the eventual inactivity of the believer.

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

It is obvious that a continuous condoning of acts of disobedience of the Laws of God on the part of the Administration will result in an attitude of increasing disregard of these laws on the part of the believers.

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

LOSS OF ADMINISTRATIVE (VOTING) RIGHTS

What penalties apply to those who violate a Bahá'í law?

The general basis for the deprivation of voting rights is of course gross immorality and open opposition to the administrative functions of the Faith, and disregard for the laws of personal status; and even then it is the duty of the National Assembly, before exercising this sanction, to confer with the individuals involved in a loving manner to help them overcome the problems; second, to warn them that they must desist; three, to issue further warning if the original warnings are not followed; and finally, if there seems no other way to handle the matter, then a person may be deprived of voting rights.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 7 March 1955

There are certain teachings and exhortations the observance of which is solely between the individual and God; the non-observance of other laws and ordinances incurs some form of sanction. Some of these violations incur punishment for a single offense, while others are punished only after repeated warnings have failed to remedy the violation. It is not possible to establish a single rule applicable automatically and invariably. Every case is different, and there is more than one variable consideration to take into account, for example, the circumstances of the individual, the degree to which the good name of the Faith is involved, whether the offense is blatant and flagrant.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection ... In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community.... Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, 'although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline,' this prerogative of the National Assembly 'should be used only in extreme cases.' If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, 'it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá'ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Bahá'u'lláh,' which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, 'create an impossible and ridiculous situation.'

From the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly – 23 April 2013

Can a Local Assembly remove a person's administrative rights?

No. At present, this is the responsibility of the National Spiritual Assembly only.

It will be noted that the model By-Laws for Local Spiritual Assemblies ... provide for Local Assemblies to exercise [the] function of withdrawing or restoring voting rights of individual believers under their jurisdiction. This provision was made in the By-Laws because this is inherently a Local Assembly function. However, for the present, National Assemblies should continue to exercise this function ...

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 5 January 1965

Does the Local Spiritual Assembly have any role in the removal of a person's administrative rights?

Yes. It is one of the institutions that is to 'provide both counsel and education for the believers':

As you no doubt know, deprivation of administrative rights is a very serious sanction, and the beloved Guardian repeatedly cautioned that it should be exercised only in extreme situations. In a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to another National Spiritual Assembly which asked similar questions, it was pointed out that it was the task of the institutions to provide both counsel and education for the believers, and thereafter it is for the individual Bahá'í to determine his course of conduct in relation to the situations of his daily life.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 March 1983

The Local Assembly should therefore:

- ensure that the Bahá'ís are aware of the Bahá'í laws
- urge them to obey the laws
- remind the Bahá'ís about the consequences of failure to do so
- counsel individual Bahá'ís who are failing to obey the laws.

If an individual fails to respond to this guidance and repeatedly flouts a Bahá'í law, the Local Assembly can recommend to National Spiritual Assembly that it consider the removal of the person's administrative rights.

At present, it is not the role of the Local Spiritual Assembly to remove the administrative rights of any Bahá'í.

What will the National Spiritual Assembly do upon receiving a recommendation from the Local Spiritual Assembly about the flagrant breach of Bahá'í law by an individual?

The National Spiritual Assembly will:

- bear in mind that the removal of administrative rights is a heavy sanction
- determine for itself the point at which conduct is blatant and flagrant or is harmful to the name of the Faith
- determine whether the believer has been given sufficient warning before the imposition of sanctions

- remove such administrative rights as are proportionate to the breach of Bahá'í Law in question
- in some exceptional cases, such as for the community's protection, immediately remove the person's administrative rights

Over and over again the beloved Guardian urged Assemblies to be extremely patient and forbearing in dealing with the friends. He pointed out on many occasions that removal of administrative rights is the heaviest sanction which Assemblies may impose at the present time... . In all such cases it is for the Assembly to determine at what point the conduct is blatant and flagrant or is harmful to the name of the Faith. They must determine whether the believer has been given sufficient warning before the imposition of sanctions.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 20 February 1977

The principle that an Assembly should repeatedly warn an offender to correct his ways before it deprives him of his voting rights applies to such continuing offenses as flagrant immorality, or membership in non-Bahá'í religious organizations. It cannot be applied in the same way to a one-time offence such as breach of Bahá'í marriage laws.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 20 May 1971

What does deprivation of administrative rights mean to the individual?

The Universal House of Justice has explained the deprivation of voting rights in two letters which are complementary. It is important to be aware of the stipulations in the 1985 letter while implementing them in the spirit of the 2013 explanation given below.

One who has lost his voting rights is considered to be a Bahá'í but not one in good standing. The following restrictions and limitations apply to such a believer:

- a) He cannot attend Nineteen Day Feasts or other meetings for Bahá'ís only, including International Conferences, and therefore cannot take part in consultation on the affairs of the community.
- b) He cannot contribute to the Bahá'í Fund.
- c) He cannot receive newsletters and other bulletins whose circulation is restricted to Bahá'ís
- d) He cannot have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony and therefore is not able to marry a Bahá'í.
- e) He may not have a Bahá'í pilgrimage.
- f) Although he is free to teach the Faith on his own behalf, he should not be used as a teacher or speaker in programmes sponsored by Bahá'ís.
- g) He is debarred from participating in administrative matters, including the right to vote in Bahá'í elections.
- h) He cannot hold office or be appointed to a committee.
- i) He should not be given credentials.

Although generally speaking a believer deprived of his voting rights is not restricted except as stated above, the following privileges have been expressly stipulated as not denied:

- a) He may attend the observances of the nine Holy Days.
- b) He may attend any Bahá'í function open to non-Bahá'ís.
- c) c) He may receive any publication available to non-Bahá'ís.
- d) He is free to teach the Faith as every individual believer has been enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh to teach.
- e) Association with other believers is not forbidden.
- f) He may have the Bahá'í burial service if he or his family requests it, and he may be buried in a Bahá'í cemetery.
- g) Bahá'í charity should not be denied him on the ground that he has lost his voting rights.
- h) Bahá'í institutions may employ him, but should use discretion as to the type of work he is to perform.
- i) He should have access to the Spiritual Assembly.

From an attachment to a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 9 December 1985

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

Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly 23 April 2013

Do the circumstances surrounding the case affect the imposition of administrative sanctions?

Yes.

In deciding whether or not to remove voting rights, every case should be considered on its merits and in the light of the particular circumstances. The purpose of the administrative sanction should be borne clearly in mind in deciding how much weight to give to factors such as the passage of time, the extent to which the individual concerned has experienced an adverse reaction in the Bahá'í community, the degree of suffering and contrition exhibited by the believer whose status is being questioned, his stature in the Bahá'í community or the wider society, and media publicity of his delinquent behaviour. While there is room for compassion, this should not deflect you from giving due consideration to the responsibility you bear to protect the community and its good name, and to uphold the authority of Bahá'í law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 9 December 1991

Is removal of administrative rights the same as expulsion from the Faith for Covenant-breaking?

No. Expulsion from the Faith has grave spiritual implications and the person concerned cannot be considered a Bahá'í. Loss of administrative rights, on the other hand, is merely an administrative sanction and a believer without administrative rights is still a Bahá'í. Only the Universal House of Justice can expel a person from the Bahá'í community.

Concerning your question as to the status of those individuals whom the Local Assembly or the National Spiritual Assembly have considered it necessary to deprive of the voting right and to suspend from local meetings and gatherings; such action which Local and National Assemblies have been empowered to take against such recalcitrant members, however justified and no matter how severe, should under no circumstances be considered as implying the complete expulsion of the individuals affected from the Cause. The suspension of voting and other administrative rights of an individual believer, always conditional and therefore temporary, can never have such far-reaching implications, since it constitutes merely an administrative sanction; whereas his expulsion or ex-communication from the Faith [by the Universal House of Justice] has far-reaching spiritual implications affecting the very soul of that believer.

The former as already stated, is an administrative sanction, whereas the latter is essentially spiritual, involving not only the particular administrative relationship of a believer to his Local or National Assembly, but his very spiritual existence in the Cause. It follows, therefore, that a believer can continue calling himself a Bahá'í even though he may cease to be a voting member of the community.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 8 May 1939

Is it possible for an individual to be barred from some activities but not others?

Yes, but only by the National Spiritual Assembly:

It is also quite permissible for a National Spiritual Assembly to debar an individual believer from serving on a Local Spiritual Assembly without removing his or her voting rights and they may also debar a believer from attending the consultative part of a Nineteen Day Feast.

You may also debar a believer from voting in elections without imposing all the other administrative sanctions involved in administrative expulsion.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 31 January 1972

Limited sanctions are most commonly applied in cases where the individual disrupts the unity of the community, or is mentally unfit. However, their application is not limited to these situations (see the detailed quotation on page 15).

Can a Bahá'í who has lost his or her administrative rights be subject to further sanctions for further violations of Bahá'í law?

No.

A Bahá'í who has lost his administrative rights is administratively expelled from the community and therefore is not subject to the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Assembly in the matter of laws of personal status, such as divorce... His observance of such laws is a matter of conscience and he would not be subject to further sanctions for non-observance of Bahá'í laws during the period he is without voting rights.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 6 April 1982

In the case of partial sanctions, however, it is possible for further sanctions to be applied where some additional infraction occurs.

Can a believer appeal against the loss of administrative rights?

Yes, they can appeal to the National Spiritual Assembly for the restoration of administrative rights.

Is ignorance of the law a valid excuse?

Yes.

In all matters concerning the deprivation of voting rights your Assembly should bear in mind that at the present time, when Bahá'í laws are being progressively applied and when a large proportion of the community consists of newly declared believers, you may accept ignorance of the Bahá'í Law as a valid excuse if your Assembly is fully convinced that such ignorance existed.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 11 October 1965

Can a believer avoid the application of Bahá'í law by resigning from the Faith?

No. It is not permissible for a Bahá'í who still believes in Bahá'u'lláh to resign in order to break Bahá'í law.

REHABILITATION AND RESTORATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE RIGHTS

What responsibility does the Local Spiritual Assembly have towards a believer who has lost his administrative rights?

Every effort should be made to help a believer become a member in good standing:

... if the believer so deprived makes an effort to mend his ways, rectifies his mistakes, or sincerely seeks forgiveness, every effort should be made to help him and enable him to re-establish himself in the Community as a member in good standing.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 May 1948

What should the attitude of the community be towards a believer without administrative rights?

- They should show love, forgiveness and forbearance
- They should not pass judgement
- They should not gossip or backbite

... there is a distinction drawn in the Faith between the attitudes which should characterise individuals in their relationship to other people, namely, loving forgiveness, forbearance, and concern with one's own sins, not the sins of others, and those attitudes which should be shown by the Spiritual Assemblies, whose duty is to administer the law of God with justice.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 6 February 1973

What must a believer do to have his administrative rights restored?

The National Spiritual Assembly must provide clear information to him on the requirements he is to fulfil. These may include:

- the passage of a set period of time
- undertaking certain remedial actions
- changing an attitude or pattern of behaviour

The believer must be repentant but does not need to admit past errors.

Each case is decided on its own merits

When a believer is deprived of his administrative rights, he is entitled to clear information on the requirements to be fulfilled in order that his rights may be restored; these may include the passage of a prescribed period of time, the performance of certain remedial actions, or the alteration of an attitude or pattern of behaviour which is considered unworthy or harmful. A condition for the restoration of voting rights is that the believer be repentant, as evidenced by his statement to that effect or by his demeanour and conduct. A believer should not feel compelled to admit his past errors in order to be regarded as repentant; you can infer repentance from his behaviour, his manifest spirit of cooperation with the Assembly, or his evident desire to scrupulously adhere to the teachings. If he displays a

rebellious or resentful attitude, or be contemptuous of Bahá'í law and the consequence of violation of this provision, you would be justified in denying him the right to re-enter the Bahá'í community.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Assembly, 9 December 1991

Each case must be considered on its own merits and no hard and fast rules can be laid down. It is for your Assembly to determine, in each case, whether the facts justify restoration of voting rights. Restoration of voting rights often requires repentance by the offender ... the repentance required to be shown differs in degree and form from case to case.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 12 July 1979

To which institution should believers apply for restoration of their administrative rights?

In the United Kingdom, to the National Spiritual Assembly.

ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND TOBACCO

May Bahá'ís drink alcohol?

No.

Under no circumstances should Bahá'ís drink. It is so unambiguously forbidden in the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh that there is no excuse for them even touching it in the form of a toast, or in a burning plum pudding; in fact, in any way.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 3 March 1957

May Bahá'ís consume food flavoured with alcohol?

No.

With reference to your question whether those foods which have been flavoured with alcoholic liquors such as brandy, rum, etc. should be classified under the same category as the intoxicating drinks, and consequently be avoided by believers, the Guardian wishes all the friends to know that such foods, or beverages, are strictly prohibited.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 9 January 1939.

Why are Bahá'ís forbidden from consuming alcohol?

Because:

alcohol leadeth the mind astray and causeth the weakening of the body.

'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in 'Notes', Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 227

Can Bahá'ís ever use alcohol?

Yes, when it is:

- used for treatments
- advised by a competent physician
- for emergency use

Concerning your question with regard to the use of alcohol for rubbing; the believers can make any use of alcohol for any such treatments, provided they do not drink it, unless, of course, they are compelled to do so, under the advice of a competent and conscientious physician, who may have to prescribe it for the cure of some special ailment.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 25 July 1938

Concerning your inquiry about a Bahá'í keeping brandy in his home for emergency use on the advice of a doctor, the House of Justice feels there is no objection to this.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 March 1978

May Bahá'ís drink 'non-alcoholic' wines?

Bahá'ís are free to make their own decision.

In the matter of abstaining from intoxicating beverages, as in many other laws, there is a border area between that which is permissible and that which is prohibited where exact definition would lead to hair-splitting and infinite complications. As you point out in your letter, some of the beverages which are now being sold as 'alcohol-free' may not be entirely so, but a greater percentage may well be present naturally in fruit juices which no one would think to query. The friends should be familiar with the principle given in the Bahá'í law and should, at this time, be left free to make their own determination of borderline cases. No issue should be made of the matter in such cases.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 8 October 1987

May Bahá'ís take habit-forming drugs?

No, unless prescribed by a physician:

... in the Book of Aqdas we are definitely forbidden to take not only wine, but everything that deranges the mind. Bahá'ís may not use marijuana, LSD, peyote or any other hallucinogenic agent.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 4 November 1926

... the Universal House of Justice instructs us to say that the word "marijuana" does not appear as such in our Sacred Scriptures. However, marijuana contains the same narcotic as hashish, and the same prohibition applies to its use as applies to the use of hashish.

From a letter dated 3 May 1976 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

Such a chaste and holy life ... requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs.

Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 30

... Bahá'ís should not use hallucinogenic agents, including LSD, peyote and similar substances, except when prescribed for medical treatment. Neither should they become involved in experiments with such substances.

Should new Bahá'ís be required to stop drinking alcohol or taking drugs immediately?

No.

- We cannot expect people to be fully aware and instructed believers before they are enrolled
- The process of becoming a Bahá'í is an evolutionary one, and requires considerable time, and sustained effort on the part of the new believer
- Such questions as abstention from alcohol should not be thrust upon the newcomer, but explained to him gradually, so that he himself may be convinced of the truth underlying this law
- People should not be encouraged to enter the Cause on false pretences and need to be told about this law eventually
- An alcoholic or drug addict may become a Bahá'í
 - He should lovingly be told that the taking of drugs and alcohol is forbidden in Bahá'í law
 - He should be told that he will have to do whatever is necessary to break himself of the addiction.
 - The Local Spiritual may find it necessary and helpful to put him in touch with organizations which specialize in helping such cases.
 - If a case is severe, the Local Assembly may have to warn the person that if he does not overcome this problem within a reasonable time the National Spiritual Assembly may consider removing his voting rights

The Guardian fully shares your view that it would be most unwise, and unfair to those who apply for membership in the Community to require that they should at first accept all the laws of the Faith. Such a requirement would be impossible to carry out as there are many laws in the 'Aqdas' with which even the well-confirmed and long-standing believers are not yet familiar. As you rightly point out the process of becoming a Bahá'í is an evolutionary one, and requires considerable time, and sustained effort on the part of the new believer. Such questions as the withdrawal from Church membership and that of abstention from alcoholic liquors should not be thrust upon the newcomer, but explained to him gradually, so that he himself may be convinced of the truth underlying these ordinances of the Cause.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 17 February 1938

People should not be encouraged to enter the Cause on false pretences. They cannot continue drinking as Bahá'ís, and they should be made to realize this gradually after they become believers, or rather registered members of the community. We cannot expect people to be fully aware and instructed believers before they are enrolled, but certain essentials they must have accepted sooner or later and be willing to make the effort to live up to.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 17 February 1938

[regarding the acceptance into the Faith of alcoholics and drug addicts] ... you should apply the normal guidelines of acceptance of new believers. In such cases, however, you may

have to ensure that special steps are taken to deepen the understanding of the new Bahá'í. A drug addict or alcoholic should, of course, be told that the taking of drugs and alcohol is strictly forbidden in Bahá'í law, and he will have to do whatever is necessary to break himself of the addiction. You may find it necessary and helpful to put him in touch with organizations which specialize in helping such cases. If a case is severe you may have to warn the person that if he does not overcome this problem within a reasonable time you may have to consider depriving him of his voting rights.

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

Should new Bahá'ís be required to stop selling alcohol immediately?

No. The new believer should be given a reasonable time to dispose of the business and only if such time has lapsed and the new believer has made no effort to comply with Bahá'í law, should deprivation of administrative rights be considered:

... as he is a new believer and was engaged in this business before becoming a Bahá'í, he should be given a reasonable opportunity to find another means whereby he can earn a living and should be given every assistance by the National Spiritual Assembly to do so. He should be treated with patience and understanding, especially if he is making efforts to dispose of this business and to seek other employment. However, if after a reasonable time has elapsed and no effort has been made to comply with the Bahá'í law, then, as a last resort, the Assembly would have no alternative but to suspend his administrative rights.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 13 March 1974

Exposure to alcohol as part of one's work

... it would be improper for a Bahá'í in his or her private capacity to use alcoholic beverages in the preparation of food, or to permit this to be done in a business, such as a hotel or restaurant, which is wholly owned by Bahá'ís. A Bahá'í, however, who is in the employment of non-Bahá'ís and, as part of that employment, is expected to serve alcohol or to use alcoholic beverages in the preparation of food, is in a different situation. Although he is not obliged to give up such employment, it is obviously highly desirable for such a believer to minimize the degree to which he is involved in serving alcohol to others, and to seek to transfer, if possible, to other posts where he would not be so involved.

From a letter dated 28 September 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

How should a Local Spiritual Assembly deal with a Bahá'í who drinks alcohol or takes drugs?

The Local Spiritual Assembly must first decide whether the action is flagrant. If it is not flagrant, the Assembly need take no action at all.

Bahá'í standards of behavior are very high, and it is the task of Spiritual Assemblies to assist the friends in their communities to deepen their understanding of the Teachings and to improve the quality of their lives in obedience to Bahá'í laws and principles. At the same time, it is recognized that individuals are imperfect and that we all fall short, in one way or another, of the exalted standard which Bahá'u'lláh has established. Spiritual Assemblies

and individual believers alike are urged to recognize this fact and the need for the friends to assist each other in striving to overcome their imperfections.

From a letter dated 16 September 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

A Local Spiritual Assembly should lovingly exhort and warn the believer. If the believer continues to flagrantly violate the law, then the Local Assembly may pass the information National Spiritual Assembly, which may investigate the matter further and consider the removal of administrative rights.

In the case of a believer who continues to take alcoholic drinks the Assembly should decide whether the offence is flagrant, and, if it is, should try to help him to understand the importance of obeying the Bahá'í law. If he does not respond he must be repeatedly warned and, if this is unsuccessful, he is subject to loss of his voting rights. In the case of an alcoholic who is trying to overcome his weakness the Assembly must show especial patience, and may have to suggest professional counselling and assistance. If the offence is not flagrant, the Assembly need take no action at all.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 September 1978

As to those believers who continue to drink, they should be lovingly exhorted, then firmly warned and eventually deprived of their voting rights. The number of times a person is exhorted and warned is a matter left to the discretion of each Local Spiritual Assembly, in consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly.

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

What attitude should the Local Spiritual Assembly take towards a Bahá'í with an alcohol or drug problem?

The Assembly must be gentle and patient with a believer who is trying to overcome an alcohol or drug habit but not tolerate a prolonged and flagrant disregard of the Bahá'í teachings:

The Assemblies must be wise and gentle in dealing with such cases [i.e. Bahá'ís using alcoholic beverages], but at the same time must not tolerate a prolonged and flagrant disregard of the Bahá'í Teachings as regards alcohol.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 June 1956

It must be made clear to the Local Assemblies that they should be willing to cooperate with the believers affected by such drinking habits, when any such believer promises gradually and systematically to reduce his drinking with the objective in mind of entirely abandoning this habit.

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

BEHAVIOUR THAT CAUSES DISUNITY

What is the major cause of disunity in a Bahá'í community?

Backbiting and gossip.

... discussions of the faults of others, behind their backs by unauthorized people who have no authority to take action in the matter, is surely one of the most fertile causes – probably

THE most fertile cause – of disunity, and the importance of putting an end to this practice should be impressed on all Bahá'ís.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 11 February 1925

How should a Local Spiritual Assembly deal with an individual whose behaviour is severely disrupting community life?

The Local Spiritual Assembly should counsel, admonish and warn the individual. If this is not successful, the Local Spiritual Assembly may recommend to the National Spiritual Assembly that partial sanctions be applied.

Limited sanctions (i.e. restrictions on one's eligibility to serve on institutions or participate in community events) are usually imposed in cases where the individual disrupts the unity of the community, or is mentally unfit and unable to exercise judgement or behave responsibly. The Universal House of Justice has clearly indicated that a National Spiritual Assembly may debar an individual from serving on a Local Spiritual Assembly without removing his administrative rights.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice 31 January 1972

If the situation is not so serious as to warrant [the removal of voting rights] but the participation of a believer is causing grave problems for the community, it is permissible for a National Spiritual Assembly to debar him from those activities which are giving rise to the distress of the community: such restrictions could include interdicting his attendance at the Nineteen Day Feast, service on the Local Spiritual Assembly or committees or representing the Faith in public.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 June 1987

BUSINESS ETHICS

Is the Local Assembly responsible for enforcing ethical behaviour of Bahá'ís in their business practices?

No, but it should counsel a Bahá'í whose behaviour is blatantly immoral:

It is certainly not the duty of a Spiritual Assembly to pry into the business activities of all the friends to ensure that they are striving to live up to it. However, whenever the behaviour of a Bahá'í causes damage to the good name of the Faith – that is to say, when the behaviour is blatantly immoral – the Assembly should intervene and counsel the friend in question, as it would do in any other case of violation of Bahá'í principles.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 7 December 1995

What should a Local Assembly do if there are business disputes between believers?

Refer the matter to the National Spiritual Assembly, which may implement guidance of the Universal House of Justice regarding arbitration or mediation.

VIOLENCE, ABUSE & CONVICTIONS

Ye have been forbidden in the Book of God to engage in contention and conflict, to strike another, or to commit similar acts whereby hearts and souls may be saddened ... and walk not in the ways of the oppressor.

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 148

O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned.

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Notes', Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 239

How should a Local Spiritual Assembly deal with domestic violence matters?

Domestic violence is never acceptable, and the National Assembly has a detailed policy entitled *Domestic Abuse Policy and Guidelines*, that is available from the National Bahá'í Centre, for how a Local Spiritual Assembly should deal with any such matter that comes to its attention.

... the stress laid in the statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on love and harmony as the hallmark of marriage, and in view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that each member of the family must uphold the rights of the others, makes it clear that violence in the family is contrary to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned. It is clear that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical. Such a reprehensible action would be the very antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings – a relationship governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of any form of abuse, including force, to compel obedience to one's will.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 12 April 1990

Should a survivor or perpetrator of domestic violence take the problem to the Local Spiritual Assembly?

Yes. There is a detailed set of guidance notes available from the National Office or downloadable from the website for the assistance of the Local Spiritual Assembly in these matters and Bahá'ís are encouraged to turn to their Local Spiritual Assembly for solutions to their problems, and individuals may take a problem to their Local Assembly even if other parties to the problem do not wish to involve the Assembly:

When a Bahá'í wife finds herself in such a situation [of domestic violence] and feels it cannot be resolved through consultation with her husband, she could well turn to the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance ...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 12 April 1990

Can a Local Spiritual Assembly intervene in a domestic violence conflict against the will of the parties involved?

Yes. An Assembly can intervene in matters that affect the protection of individuals:

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

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 17 October 1944

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do when it learns that a Bahá'í is being violent or abusive towards another person?

The National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom has guidelines regarding domestic violence which should be followed by the Local Spiritual Assembly. See the relevant guidelines.

It should investigate the matter diligently, persistently and sensitively:

When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá'í law, irrespective of the consequence in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 9 December 1991

If the [perpetrator] is also a Bahá'í, the Local Spiritual Assembly can bring to his attention the need to avoid abusive behaviour and can, if necessary, take firmer measures to compel him to conform to the admonitions of the Teachings.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 August 1989

What immediate action should an Assembly take to assist a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?

The National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom has guidelines regarding domestic violence which should be followed by the Local Spiritual Assembly. Local Assemblies should study these guidelines as soon as they receive them, and every year thereafter with each incoming Local Spiritual Assembly if there has been a change of membership. They should not wait for a case to arise. When a situation occurs, swift action is often necessary and would be unduly delayed by the need for members to study the policy in detail first. The Assembly may, in fact, wish to consult on the policy in session and appoint a small task force of appropriate people to act on its behalf should the need arise.

What is the procedure when the abuse of a child or young person is reported to the Assembly?

The National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom has a Child Protection Policy, again available from the National Office, which must be followed by the Local Spiritual Assembly.

What is the procedure when a believer has been convicted of a criminal offence?

The guidance that follows is to be taken as supplementary to the policies and guidance concerning abuse of various kinds and domestic violence. While the main burden of action in such situations

rests upon the National Spiritual Assembly, it is likely that some of the investigatory processes might need to be delegated to a Local Spiritual Assembly.

. . . . you have enquired about believers convicted of an offence in the civil courts. As you know, the Bahá'í institutions do not have a responsibility to enforce the criminal laws of a nation, although they do quite properly exhort the believers to obedience to government, which includes obedience to its laws. Violations of criminal law are handled by the civil courts of a country and enforced by its civil administration. The fact that a believer has been charged with a criminal offence, or is suspected of having committed such an offence, or is convicted by the court, should not automatically result in the application of Bahá'í sanctions. Each case is to be considered on its own merits, and in the light of the aforementioned considerations pertaining to the effect on the Bahá'í community and its reputation. For example, an Assembly would be most unlikely to consider imposition of sanctions on a Bahá'í convicted of violating the laws regulating automobile traffic flow, but it might well consider that a person known to be a Bahá'í convicted of selling narcotic drugs had brought disgrace to the name of the Faith and damaged its reputation before the public.

When an Assembly is aware that a believer is charged with a criminal offence, normally it should not pass judgment on the matter until a decision has been given in the courts, at which time it would consider whether it should impose administrative sanctions. There may be cases, however, when an Assembly is justified in taking certain actions to protect the interests of the Cause. Generally, the Assembly would regard the decision of the court as being valid in determining whether or not the Bahá'í was guilty of the stated offence, and would not undertake its own independent investigation. However, there may be special circumstances associated with a particular case, or with the reputation of the civil judicial system, which would incline an Assembly to decide that the verdict of the court should not be accepted as a basis for Bahá'í administrative action without further investigation by the Assembly; it is left to the Assembly to make that determination.

When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá'í law, irrespective of the consequence in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth. Believers called upon to provide information should, if necessary, be reminded of the responsibility they bear to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts,

Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired.

If this 'holy attribute' should adorn the behaviour of believers toward others, how much more should it characterize the statements which a Bahá'í makes to a divinely ordained institution.

Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 9 December 1991

MORALITY

What standard of morality must Bahá'ís uphold?

The Bahá'í standard is one of strict chastity before marriage and complete faithfulness to one's spouse after marriage, a standard, as the Universal House of Justice explains, best achieved within the context of a dynamic, inclusive and loving Bahá'í community:

Chastity implies both before and after marriage an unsullied, chaste sex life. Before marriage absolutely chaste, after marriage absolutely faithful to one's chosen companion. Faithful in all sexual acts, faithful in word and in deed.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 28 September 1941

How can Bahá'í institutions promote an environment conducive to cultivating a Bahá'í life?

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: 'A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.' The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly 13 April 2013

What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá'í life – an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of

individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

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

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to individuals 19 April 2013

How should the Local Spiritual Assembly deal with immorality within the community?

The Local Spiritual Assembly:

- should not pry into people's affairs
- should be patient and allow time for people to change their behaviour
- should be loving rather than sternly judgemental
- has a duty to deepen the Bahá'ís in the moral teachings of the Faith and to exhort them to follow them
- if a believer's conduct is blatantly and flagrantly immoral and all attempts at counselling and warning have failed, the Assembly may recommend to the National Spiritual Assembly that sanctions be applied

We wish to emphasise ... that although all immorality is condemned in the Teachings, it is only flagrant immorality that is sanctionable. You should not pry into people's affairs, and only in cases of flagrant immorality should you consider imposing sanctions, and then only after you have patiently explained to the believers concerned the Bahá'í Laws involved and given them ample time to comply.

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

In sexual morality, as in other realms of behaviour, people often stumble and fall short of the ideal. It is the task of Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that the friends are deepened in their understanding of the teachings, and are exhorted to apply them in their lives. In caring for its community, a Spiritual Assembly should act as a loving father rather than as a stern judge in such matters. Nevertheless, if a believer's behaviour is blatantly and flagrantly immoral and, therefore, is harmful to the good name of the Faith, the Assembly must counsel him (or her), urge him to reform his conduct, warn him of the consequences if he does not mend his ways and, ultimately, if the believer persists in misbehaviour, the Assembly must deprive him of his administrative rights. This deprivation remains in force until such time that he has rectified his behaviour.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 5 June 1986

What is meant by ‘flagrant’ immorality?

‘Flagrant’ means ‘glaring’, ‘notorious’, ‘blatant’.

As to deprivation of voting rights for immorality ... it should be clear that sanctions should not be imposed for isolated acts of immorality. Only extreme cases involving acts of blatant and flagrant immorality reflecting on the name of the Faith and repeated time after time in spite of warnings should be taken as a basis for suspension of voting rights.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 June 1967

If the acts of immorality are not generally known and are discoverable only on investigation, a serious question is raised as to whether this immorality is ‘flagrant’.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 20 August 1969

How should the Local Spiritual Assembly advise believers who are living in an immoral relationship?

The Local Assembly should

- counsel them
- warn them to correct their conduct by either separating or having a Bahá’í marriage ceremony

... it is not permissible for Bahá’ís to enter into such an immoral relationship and ... any believers who do so must be counselled by the Assembly and warned to correct their conduct, either by separating or by having a Bahá’í marriage ceremony in accordance with the provision of Bahá’í Law. If, after repeated warnings, the believers concerned do not conform to Bahá’í Law, the Assembly has no choice but to deprive them of their voting rights.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 7 September 1981

Is it permissible under some circumstances for unmarried men and women to share accommodation?

Yes, under some circumstances mixed sex accommodation is acceptable.

With respect to Bahá’ís living in the same residence with a person of the opposite sex, such an arrangement would by no means be automatically considered unacceptable. It is not uncommon, for example, for a person to let out bed-sitting rooms in his or her house to students, vacationers, or others. Similarly a man or woman may employ a housekeeper or servant of the opposite sex. What is considered proper in such arrangements varies from country to country. The laws and principles of our Faith, on the other hand, are meant to apply across all cultures, and what Bahá’ís would consider immoral is people who are not married living together as husband and wife, and indulging in sexual relations.

Beyond this, however, even if the relationship between a Bahá’í man and woman is entirely innocent, it is vitally important that they should not live together in a way that would give the wrong impression. If there is any doubt about the perceived morality of a particular situation they should unhesitatingly avoid it and seek alternative arrangements in order to preserve the good name of the Faith. In following the standards of the Faith, the

friends must be not only righteous, but also wise. Naiveté can do great harm, especially in the present unstable condition of social morals in the world at large.

*Letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe,
10 August 2000*

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

What is the general principle with regard to the involvement of Bahá'ís in politics?

... no loyal believer should under any circumstances commit himself in any way to a political programme or policy formulated and upheld by a political party for affiliation with such a party necessarily entails repudiation of some principles and teachings of the Cause, or partial recognition of some of its fundamental verities. The friends should, therefore, keep aloof from party politics. What they should mainly keep away from under all circumstances and in all its forms is partisanship.

Letter written of behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 17 December 1935

You are, of course, well aware of the principle of noninvolvement in politics enunciated by Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'ís are to 'refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programmes of parties and factions'. They 'assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests' of the Faith and eschew 'the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician'. They are to 'rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world'. This principle, which demands strict avoidance of any type of partisan political activity, must be scrupulously upheld. However, as society and its political processes evolve and as the Faith grows, the interaction between the two becomes increasingly complex. The House of Justice will provide the necessary guidance over time to apply this principle to existing circumstances.

The term 'politics' can have a broad meaning, and therefore it is important to distinguish between partisan political activity and the discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. While the former is proscribed, the latter is enjoined; indeed, a central purpose of the Bahá'í community is social transformation.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise 'The Secret of Divine Civilization' amply demonstrates the Faith's commitment to promoting social change without entering into the arena of partisan politics. So too, innumerable passages in the Bahá'í Writings encourage the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world., 'Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,' Bahá'u'lláh states, 'and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges the friends to 'become distinguished for loving humanity, for unity and accord, for love and justice. In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world – for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace'. Further, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explains that 'much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings'.

Are Bahá'ís permitted to become involved in any political activities?

A Bahá'í may not participate in any partisan political activity of any kind. To do so risks the removal of his administrative rights.

A Bahá'í may participate in civic activities, provided they are not partisan and he can do so without identifying himself with a political party.

A Bahá'í may:

- vote in civic elections if he can do it without identifying himself with one party or another and bears in mind that he is voting on the merits of the individual, rather than because he belongs to one party or another
- undertake non-political administrative work with governments
- hold appointive posts which are not political in character
- serve on local or village councils or as mayor if he does not campaign for office and is not required to undertake partisan political activities
- include his name on nomination papers if required by law in an election
- if elected, he should make his position very clear: that he has accepted the post only in order to serve the people.

A Bahá'í may not:

- identify himself with any political party
- enter into party politics
- campaign for a political candidate
- work for the ascendancy of one party over another
- seek nomination for election to office
- campaign to promote his election, if he is nominated by non-Bahá'ís and accepts the nomination, although others—that is, non-Bahá'ís—cannot be prevented from doing so on his behalf.

As regards the non-political character of the Faith ... The friends may vote, if they can do it without identifying themselves with one party or another. To enter the arena of party politics is surely detrimental to the best interests of the Faith and will harm the Cause. It remains for the individuals to so use their right to vote as to keep aloof from party politics, and always bear in mind that they are voting on the merits of the individual, rather than because he belongs to one party or another. The matter must be made perfectly clear to the individuals who will be left free to exercise their discretion and judgement.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 16 March 1933

In reply to your letter of 30 September 1986 the Universal House of Justice instructs us to say that if the office is not political in character, Bahá'ís may serve on Local Councils provided they do not campaign for office and are not required to take part in partisan

political activities. If a Bahá'í is nominated for the office and accepts the nomination, although he may not himself campaign for election, others – that is, non-Bahá'ís – cannot be prevented from doing so on his behalf.

The full circumstances of each case and any minor details are left entirely to your discretion.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom, 28 October 1986

... in general, Bahá'ís may freely undertake non-political administrative work with governments, may hold appointive posts which are not political in character, and may serve on local or village councils or as mayors if they do not campaign for office and are not required to undertake partisan political activities. However, a Bahá'í should not seek nomination for election to office. If he is nominated by non-Bahá'ís and accepts the nomination, he cannot himself campaign to promote his election, although others – that is, non-Bahá'ís – cannot be prevented from doing so on his behalf. If he is elected, he should make his position very clear: that he has accepted the post only in order to serve the people.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 15 February 2004

There is no objection to allowing one's name to be placed in nomination if required by law. If nominations are not obligatory and the voter is allowed to write on the ballot paper and vote for the names of those he wishes to be elected, this procedure should be followed by the Bahá'ís.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assembly, 24 April 1972

What are the consequences for a Bahá'í who is involved in party politics?

... if a certain person does enter into party politics and labours for the ascendancy of one party over another, and continues to do it against the expressed appeals and warnings of the Assembly, then the Assembly has the right to refuse him the right to vote in Bahá'í elections.

Letter written on the behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 16 March 1933

What should a Local Assembly do to help Bahá'ís stay away from party politics?

The Local Assembly should:

- deepen the believers in the relevant principles
- ensure new believers know they need to withdraw from partisan organizations and activities before enrolling in the Faith or within a reasonable time afterwards

What should a Local Assembly do if a Bahá'í involves himself in party politics?

The Local Assembly should:

- consider each case on its own merits
- give the person a reasonable time to withdraw from partisan organizations or activities
- should a believer refuse to withdraw within a reasonable time, advise the National Spiritual Assembly, which will consider whether the person's administrative rights should be removed or curtailed

Your Assembly is advised to carefully inform the friends of these principles and to deepen them in their understanding and appreciation of them. Having made certain that all friends, especially those directly concerned, have been so deepened, your Assembly should then set a time limit by which the friends must obey your directive to withdraw their membership in the organization. Each case will have to be considered on its own merits. Some of the friends may have to fulfil certain commitments as officers before they can withdraw with honour. The time limit should make allowance in such cases. Whereas persistence in membership in these and in similar organizations is ample ground for deprivation of voting rights, your Assembly is advised to give sufficient time for each of the friends to be thoroughly deepened, and to comply with the principles before any disciplinary action is taken.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 December 1963

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

May a Bahá'í belong to a church or other religious organization?

No.

Concerning membership in non-Bahá'í religious associations. The Guardian wishes to re-emphasize the general principle ... that no Bahá'í who wishes to be a whole hearted and sincere upholder of the distinguishing principles of the Cause can accept full membership in any non-Bahá'í ecclesiastical organization. For such an act would necessarily imply only a partial acceptance of the Teachings and the laws of the Faith, and an incomplete recognition of its independent status, and would thus be tantamount to an act of disloyalty to the verities it enshrines. For it is only too obvious that in most of its fundamental assumptions the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is completely at variance with outworn creeds, ceremonies and institutions. To be a Bahá'í and at the same time accept membership in another religious body is simply an act of contradiction that no sincere and logically-minded person can possibly accept. To follow Bahá'u'lláh does not mean accepting some of His Teaching and rejecting the rest. Allegiance to his Cause must be uncompromising and whole-hearted ...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 15 June 1935

... we, as Bahá'ís, must not have any affiliations with churches or political parties. But he feels certain that when you meditate on this matter you yourselves will see the wisdom of it. We, as Bahá'ís, can never be known as hypocrites or as people insincere in their protestations and because of this we cannot subscribe to both the faith of Bahá'u'lláh and ordinary church dogma ... there is no Christian church today whose dogmas we, as Bahá'ís, can truthfully say we accept in their entirety – therefore to remain a member of the Church is not proper for us, for we do so under false pretences. We should, therefore, withdraw from our churches but continue to associate, if we wish to, with the church members and ministers.

Our belief in Christ, as Bahá'ís, is so firm, so unshakeable and so exalted in nature that very few Christians are to be found now-a-days who love Him and reverence Him and have the faith in Him that we have. It is only from the dogmas and creeds of the churches that we dissociate ourselves; not from the spirit of Christianity.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Bahá'í community, 24 June 1947

What should a Local Assembly do to help Bahá'ís withdraw from church or other

religious affiliations?

The Local Assembly should:

- make clear to seekers in the course of teaching them the Faith that one cannot be a Bahá'í and also a member of another religious organization
- satisfy itself, as it deems best in each case, that the new believer has already resigned from the church, or does so within a reasonable time of his declaration.
- tactfully, and in a kindly way, make the Bahá'í position clear to those Bahá'ís who are still members of a church or other religious organization and gently persuade them to resign from these

If a person is registered as a member of a church or similar religious organization he should withdraw from it on becoming a Bahá'í.

In the case of new believers, it should be made clear to them in the course of teaching them the Faith that one cannot be a Bahá'í and also a member of another religious organization. This is simply a matter of straight-forwardness and honesty. A great part of the teaching of Jesus Christ concerned His Second Coming and the preparation of His followers to be ready for it. The Bahá'ís believe He has come. No Christian Church believes this; on the contrary, they either look for Him still, or have ceased to believe that He will come. For a Bahá'í to be a member of a community which holds such beliefs is disloyalty to Christ and hypocrisy towards the Christians.

... It should be left to the Local Spiritual Assembly which is accepting the declaration to satisfy itself, as it deems best in each case, that the new believer has already resigned from the church, or does so within a reasonable time of his declaration.

In regard to the old believers, your Assembly should tactfully, and in a kindly way, make the Bahá'í position clear to them and gently persuade them to resign from their former churches. This is a matter for great tact and discretion.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 21 November 1968

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do if a Bahá'í, after deepening and warning, fails to withdraw his membership from a church or other religious organization?

The Local Assembly should inform the National Spiritual Assembly, which will consider whether the person's administrative rights should be removed or curtailed

If such a believer remains adamant you will have to consider depriving him of his voting rights.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 21 November 1968