

CONSULTATION

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CONSULTATION WITHIN THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

What is the purpose of Bahá'í consultation?

... consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 72

What are the attributes required of those who engage in Bahá'í consultation?

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

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 21

What are the necessary conditions to assure proper consultation?

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught.

The second condition is that the members of the assembly should unitedly elect a chairman and lay down guide-lines and by-laws for their meetings and discussions. The chairman should have charge of such rules and regulations and protect and enforce them; the other members should be submissive, and refrain from conversing on superfluous and extraneous matters. They must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honoured members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced.

In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness.... If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One.... Should they endeavour to fulfil these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the centre of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of Spirit.

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

What are the major principles to be kept in mind during consultation?

The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in Bahá'í Administration, p. 21

How should Bahá'ís approach consultation?

Consultation is an art that requires considerable skill. :

In its own meetings it must endeavour to develop skill in the difficult but highly rewarding art of Bahá'í consultation, a process which will require great self-discipline on the part of all members and complete reliance on the power of Bahá'u'lláh.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 March 1970

Patience and restraint, however, should at all times characterize the discussions and deliberations of the elected representatives of the local community, and no fruitless strifes and hair-splitting discussions indulged in, under any circumstances.

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

As well as grasping the spirit and fundamentals of consultation, the members of an Assembly should strive to develop a calm objectivity and a detachment from their own views. Consider the following guidance from 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

... consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 72

This further passage is also illuminating in this respect:

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

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

Under what circumstances can consultation take place online or in person?

With respect to National and Local Spiritual Assembly meetings, the House of Justice feels that the gathering of Assembly members in one place provides for much richer

consultation and strengthens the bonds of love and unity among them, and is therefore greatly beneficial. There is no objection to Bahá'í institutions using videoconferencing to conduct their meetings when they consider it necessary to do so, or in order to supplement their in-person meetings, provided that this practice does not supplant the predominant pattern of meeting and consulting in person, which is clearly preferable. There is also no objection to one or more Assembly members joining an in-person meeting remotely, using conference calls or videoconferencing, should circumstances prevent them from being physically present. However, with regard to conventions, the House of Justice has previously advised against the holding of national and unit conventions online.

Other Bahá'í meetings and gatherings which may include joint online and in-person participation are areas of ongoing learning in many Bahá'í communities around the world, particularly in relation to facilitating the inclusion of those who, for various reasons, may otherwise be unable to attend meetings in person. The House of Justice does not wish to provide specific guidance in this respect at this time and encourages your Assemblies to exercise wisdom and discretion in determining a way forward which maximises in-person participation in community activities while at the same time recognizes the opportunities that online meetings may provide for the widest possible inclusion and participation of the members of your communities

From a letter dated 17 March 2023 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to selected National Spiritual Assemblies

How is a decision arrived at?

The Universal House of Justice has clearly stated that:

The ideal of Bahá'í consultation is to arrive at a unanimous decision.

Letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 March 1970

Although unanimity is to be preferred wherever possible, it is not obligatory. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said:

... if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 64

Therefore, if the members are not agreed, the decision must be put to the vote. At this point, the Universal House of Justice states:

When it is proposed to put a matter to the vote, a member of the Assembly may feel that there are additional facts or views which must be sought before he can make up his mind and intelligently vote on the proposition. He should express this feeling to the Assembly, and it is for the Assembly to decide whether or not further consultation is needed before voting.

Letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 March 1970

If the Assembly chooses to re-open consultation, it may find that, with fresh ideas and information, it is now able to reach a consensus. If the Assembly chooses not to re-open

consultation, a vote must be taken and the majority opinion prevails. The instructions of Shoghi Effendi must be kept in mind at this point:

And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority...

Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 64

Can a member abstain from voting?

This issue does not arise in Bahá'í voting as explained in this passage:

Whenever it is decided to vote on a proposition all that is required is to ascertain how many of the members are in favour of it; if this is a majority of those present, the motion is carried; if it is a minority, the motion is defeated. Thus the whole question of 'abstaining' does not arise in Bahá'í voting. member who does not vote in favour of a proposition is, in effect, voting against it, even if at that moment he himself feels that he has been unable to make up his mind on the matter.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 March 1970

In the case of a decision by majority vote, what should be the attitude of those members whose opinions were in the minority?

Once a vote has been taken and a decision made, that decision becomes the decision of the whole Assembly, not merely of those members who were in the majority. Those members who were in the minority must accept the decision and uphold it before the community. They must not seek to undermine the Assembly by telling people they did not agree with the decision. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 21

Obedience to the decisions of the local assembly should be unqualified and whole-hearted, as by this means alone can the community work as a united body and achieve something constructive and enduring.

Shoghi Effendi, The Light of Divine Guidance vol. I, p. 80

Criticism causes disunity. Disunity prevents the decision being effectively put into practice and this in turn prevents the Assembly from receiving feedback that will assist it to do better in the future. The over-riding principle is the necessity of preserving unity.

What if one Assembly member considers the decision of the Assembly to be wrong?

The decision of the Assembly must be obeyed even if a member considers it to be wrong:

We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Bahá'í must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony - even if a mistake has been made - are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Bahá'í way, God will right any wrongs done in the end.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 19 October 1947

A dissenting Assembly member may ask the Assembly to reconsider its decision but, in the words of Shoghi Effendi:

... he has no right to force them or create disharmony because they won't change.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 19 October 1947

Should dissenting votes be recorded in the minutes?

Dissenting votes should not be recorded in the minutes:

There are no dissenting votes in the Cause. When the majority of an Assembly decides a matter, the minority, we are told by the Master, should accept this. To insist on having one's dissenting vote recorded is not good, and achieves no constructive end.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 19 March 1950

What is the role of the Chairman in the consultative process?

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the role of the Chairman in these terms:

... the members of the assembly should unitedly elect a chairman and lay down guidelines and by-laws for their meetings and discussions. The chairman should have charge of such rules and regulations and protect and enforce them; the other members should be submissive, and refrain from conversing on superfluous and extraneous matters.

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

In light of the above passage and the passage quoted from Abdu'l-Bahá in listed below are a few examples that could serve as a guide-line and by-laws for the Chairman to implement.

Members are asked:

1. Not to engage in conversing in superfluous and extraneous matters.
2. To express their views with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation.
3. Not to insist upon their own view or being stubborn or persistent in the expression of their view.
4. To express their thoughts with all freedom and with moderation and should not belittle the thought of another.
5. To be moderate in terms of the length of time taken to present their view.
6. Not to be repetitious in their contributions by either repeating a point already made by them or by another member.

What is the function of the agenda?

A basic function of the agenda is to bring order to consultation by listing items according to priority. The Assembly can then decide how much time should be allowed for the discussion of each issue. The Secretary should prepare the agenda in consultation with the Chairman and

send it out to the other members ahead of time. If this is not possible it should be given to each member or read aloud at the beginning of the meeting. Members should be given the opportunity to add and make changes to the agenda.

The following passages from the Message of the Universal House of Justice clearly sets out the remit for the work of a Local Spiritual Assembly at this stage in the development of the Faith:

What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward: Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member's personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that 'discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word.' Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

Message of the Universal House of Justice 28 December 2010

In light of the above passages, it is clear and without doubt, that the Local Assembly will have to devote some attention to fulfilling its basic administrative functions. These include the following:

- Conducting the Nineteen Day Feast.
- Planning Holy Day observances.

- Taking care of the local fund.
- Holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle.

However, it is also essential for a Local Spiritual Assembly to consult upon specific issues that bear immediate relevance to the life of the community, for example:

- How the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course.
- How the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute.
- How the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment.
- How the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes.

Other matters that can be included as part of the agenda of an Assembly meeting might include:

- Approval of Minutes of previous meeting
- Teaching
- Secretary's Report – correspondence, etc.
- Treasurer's Report
- Recommendations from the last 19 Day Feast
- Committee Reports
- Other Business

Can Assembly members absent themselves from the consultation if the issue under discussion involves them personally?

The relevant guidance is contained in the following statements by the Universal House of Justice:

In your letter of 4 April you inquire further about the principles governing the presence of a member of the National Assembly when a matter concerning him or her personally is being discussed. The first principle to bear in mind is that every member of an Assembly has an absolute and incontrovertible right to be present at every meeting of that body and to be fully informed of every matter coming before it.

The second principle is that of detachment in consultation. The members of an Assembly must learn to express their views frankly, calmly, without passion or rancour. They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offence or belittling the views of another. Bahá'í consultation is not an easy process. It requires love, kindness, moral courage and humility. Thus no member should ever allow himself to be prevented from expressing frankly his view because it may offend a fellow member; and, realizing this, no member should take offence at another member's statements.

The third principle is that if a believer feels that he has been done an injustice by the Assembly, he should appeal the decision in the normal way.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 August 1965

We note on page 2 that ... left the room while the National Assembly discussed ways and means of helping her. Naturally, if one wishes to absent himself while his own situation is being discussed by the National Assembly, there is no objection. The National

Assembly cannot require a member to remove himself from the consultation, and he is fully entitled to remain.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 February 1965

It should also be understood that a member may wish to absent himself from a meeting at which subjects in which he is personally involved are to be discussed. In such cases he may do so unless the Assembly requires him to be present.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre, 22 January 1975

It is clear from the above statements that Assembly members have the right to remain present at all meetings of the Assembly, regardless of whether the issue under discussion involves them personally. Naturally, they must remember the principle of not allowing oneself to be upset by the opinions of others, while the other Assembly members must keep in mind the importance of discussing the problem, not the person. If, however, Assembly members prefer to absent themselves they have the right to do so, unless the Assembly specifically asks them to remain. An Assembly member who feels unjustly treated by an Assembly has the right to appeal against its decision in the usual way.

Can people who are not members of the Assembly attend meetings?

The Assembly is free to consult with anyone it chooses, including youth and children, when gathering information on an issue, but they will obviously have no right to vote. Shoghi Effendi clearly recognised the need to seek advice from non-Assembly members when, in a letter written on his behalf, he said:

Concerning the attendance of certain individuals at the meeting of the Assemblies and at the invitation of that body. This, Shoghi Effendi considers to be as expert advice which is absolutely necessary for good administration. The members of the Assembly are not supposed to know everything on every subject, so they can invite a person, versed in that question, to attend their meetings and explain his views. But naturally he will have no right to vote.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 October 1926

How can we solve problems that arise in consultation?

Bahá'í consultation is about effective communication between a diverse group of individuals in order to achieve certain tasks. In any such situation there is the possibility of conflicts of personality. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out that:

Bahá'í consultation is not an easy process. It requires love, kindness, moral courage and humility.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 August 1965

When conflicts do arise the solution is not to resign or stop attending the meetings of an Assembly:

The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a

whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule. The believers, loving the Cause above all else and putting its interests first, must be ready to bear the hardships entailed, of whatever nature they may be. Only through such persistence and self-sacrifice can we ever hope to preserve on the one hand our divine institutions intact, and on the other force ourselves to become nobler, better instruments to serve this glorious Faith.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 20 November 1941

The Assembly members must not take sides:

The Bahá'ís must learn to forget personalities and to overcome the desire – so natural in people – to take sides and fight about it.

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

Remember there are no 'sides' in Bahá'í consultation, only different points of view.

Whatever problems arise, the Assembly members must be prepared to put the good of the Cause before their own interests and must strive to maintain the unity of the Assembly at all costs. Without unity the Assembly cannot hope to function effectively. Problems must be solved within this context.

In trying to resolve issues, it is suggested that the Assembly may wish to study together some of the passages from the Writings on Bahá'í consultation, such as those quoted above from 'Abdu'l-Bahá which delineates the prime requisites and the two conditions for effective consultation. Other passages may also be studied.

How helpful it is also to remember that 'Abdu'l-Bahá promises to be with any Assembly that is functioning with devotion and firmness:

'Abdu'l-Bahá is constantly engaged in ideal communication with any Spiritual Assembly which is instituted through the divine bounty, and the members of which, in the utmost devotion, turn to the divine Kingdom and are firm in the Covenant. To them he is whole-heartedly attached and with them he is linked by everlasting ties. Thus correspondence with that gathering is sincere, constant and uninterrupted.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 89

NOTES FOR REGISTERED GROUPS

The consultation within a Registered Group does not cover the wide field covered by an Assembly. Its main concern is advancing teaching work so that the group may attain Assembly status. It does not consult on many items which may be considered by Assemblies, such as marriage, divorce, personal problems, status of believers, etc. As the same principles of consultation do apply, however, the group members should use their consultation as a means of obtaining invaluable experience.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Universal House of Justice, *Bahá'í Consultation, The Lamp of Guidance* (compilation), Bahá'í Publishing Trust, UK.

Universal House of Justice, *Local Spiritual Assemblies* (compilation), Bahá'í Publishing Trust, UK. 1970.