

CURRENT APPROACHES FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF AN ASSEMBLY'S AFFAIRS

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PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES

What is the significance of the Bahá'í Administrative Order?

Shoghi Effendi explains the significance of the Administrative Order as follows:

The Administrative Order, which ever since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension has evolved and is taking shape under our very eyes ... will, as its component parts, its organic institutions, begin to function with efficiency and vigour, assert its claim and demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind.

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 144

What is the distinction between an administrative principle and a procedure or approach to the work?

The principles governing the Administrative Order are an integral part of the Teachings themselves:

To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian Teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 5

Principles are divine in origin and essentially the same in Bahá'í communities around the world. A procedure or approach, on the other hand, is a means of conducting the affairs of an Assembly or community. To enable the institutions 'to function with efficiency', certain approaches are adopted from time to time. Such approaches can differ from country to country and indeed from community to community. It is within the realm of each National Spiritual Assembly's authority to introduce certain procedures for the efficient functioning of its national community. Likewise, it is within the realm of each local Spiritual Assembly's authority to introduce certain procedures for the efficient functioning of its Local community, so long as these are in no way contrary to those already established by the National Assembly, and are always in conformity with the spirit of Bahá'í principles.

What principles apply to the establishment of any approach or procedure to the work of the Assembly?

In this respect the following guidance of the Universal House of Justice is imperative:

In setting out for you in these pages developments we are eager to see in the administrative work of the Faith during the next Five Year Plan, we are reminded of the repeated warnings raised by the Guardian in this regard. 'Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause,' he stated, 'we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created.' The Bahá'í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, 'is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself'. It is intended, he made clear, 'to serve a twofold purpose'. On the one hand, 'it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion' of the Cause 'along lines that are at once broad, sound and

universal.’ On the other, ‘it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved.’ And he went on to explain: ‘It should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá’í community.’

Universal House of Justice, to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellor,
28 December 2010

The following principles may also be helpful when considering putting in place a procedure or adopting an approach:

Administrative efficiency should be accompanied by an equal degree of love; both are essential to the work of the Assembly.

1. There should be uniformity in fundamentals but diversity in the solving of Local situations.

In matters of principle, therefore, there should be uniformity, while in matters of detail and procedure not only is diversity permitted, it is also encouraged. As condition vary from country to country and, indeed, can vary from community to community within the country, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly advised the friends that they should be uncompromising in principle but flexible in subsidiary details.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Burundi, 22 October 1986

2. Preferably, situations should be dealt with as they arise on a case by case basis, with a minimum of procedures laid down in advance.

He has no objection to your getting out a book on Bahá’í Procedure similar to the synopsis you enclosed for his information. He wishes you, however, to stick to essentials and, as far as possible, avoid – not only in the book but in your Assembly’s decisions – binding the friends by a lot of procedure on minor matters which he always urges should be, as much as possible, dealt with according to each case that comes up. He wishes to keep the administration of the Cause as flexible as possible and not impede the work by a codified set of rules.

Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá’í Community*, p. 213

3. Over-administration can be worse than under-administration.

As the new National Assemblies are being formed, he feels it incumbent upon him to issue a word of warning to avoid rules and regulations and tying the believers’ work up in red tape. Over-administration can be even worse for the Faith at this time than under-administration. The believers are, for the most part, young in the Cause, and if they make mistakes it is not half as important as if their spirit is crushed by being told all the time – do this and don’t do that! ... Individual cases should be dealt with as they arise, according to the Teachings, of which the believers have quite sufficient available to handle all of their problems at this time, and no more additional rules and regulations need be introduced.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska,
30 June 1957

4. The Assemblies should direct their attention to the teaching work rather than to the issuing of rules and regulations:

The whole purpose of the Bahá'í administrative bodies at this time is to teach ... not to create rules and regulations and impede the work through unnecessary red tape ...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 5 July 1957

MEASURING AN ASSEMBLY'S MATURITY

How might a Local Assembly measure its Maturity?

On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfil these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itsself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

Universal House of Justice, to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2010

MEETINGS OF THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

What is the focus of the work of an Assembly at this stage in the development of the Faith?

When an Assembly understands what the focus of its work is at any moment in time, it will be better able to decide on the approaches, methods and instruments it should adopt to ensure that its work is carried out with efficiency and love. The 28 December 2010 message of the Universal House of Justice sets out very clearly the arena of work of a local Assembly at this time, and the following passages in this section are taken from this letter:

How can the work of a Local Assembly best be understood?

Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

What are the matters that an Assembly should give attention to and consult upon in its meetings?

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.

How are the first and subsequent meetings of the Local Spiritual Assembly called?

The Articles of Association state that the first meeting of a newly-formed Assembly will be called by the member elected by the highest number of votes, or in the event of a tie, by the member selected by lot from among those members elected by the highest number of votes; and that member shall preside until a chairman is elected.

It is helpful if a local Spiritual Assembly establishes a regular time for its meetings. The Secretary is responsible for ensuring that all members are notified of the meeting in advance.

How is a meeting of the Local Spiritual Assembly conducted?

The Secretary prepares the agenda for the meeting in consultation with the Chairman. It is normally reviewed and approved by the Assembly at the commencement of the meeting to ensure that it is in accordance with its wishes.

How often should the Assembly meet?

The Spiritual Assembly should meet as often as necessary to properly carry out its functions:

The Spiritual Assembly should decide how often it should meet in order to properly handle the affairs of the Cause under its jurisdiction. Twice a week or twice a month is not the point, the point is that it should be alert and carry on the work adequately.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 23 October 1949

As a Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for the organisation of Nineteen Day Feasts, and is expected to make a report of its activities to the community at the Feast, in addition to responding to suggestions submitted to it, a Local Assembly should meet at least once a Bahá'í month. However, the Universal House of Justice does not wish to draw hard and fast rules in this matter, and prefers to leave this question to the discretion of each National Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 15 February 1982

It is left to the discretion of each Local Spiritual Assembly how often to meet, asking that they take note of the guidance contained in the above letter from the House of Justice. It is preferable that Local Spiritual Assemblies not meet on Bahá'í Holy Days; however, should a meeting be necessary, it is permissible.

What is a quorum?

A quorum is formed by five members of the Assembly, the majority of the nine members. The presence of a quorum is necessary for decisions to be made on behalf of the Local Spiritual Assembly by majority vote:

A majority vote of those present and constituting a quorum shall be sufficient for the conduct of business, except as otherwise provided in these Articles, but the chairman shall have due regard to the principles of consultation applicable to the institution of a Spiritual Assembly.

[Article 22 of the Model Articles]

Thus, if only five members of the Assembly are present at a meeting, a majority vote of three is sufficient. However, it is desirable that all nine members of a Local Spiritual Assembly be present at every meeting. Indeed, there may be times when the Assembly prefers that all nine members be present before making certain decisions.

Could meetings of a Local Spiritual Assembly be held online?

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.

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

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do if it is unable to achieve a quorum?

If the Assembly knows in advance that there are likely to be occasions when it is unable to achieve a quorum, thereby delaying the work of the Assembly, it may delegate authority for carrying out essential work, e.g. organising Feasts. The Assembly must be careful to ensure that individuals given such responsibility do not overstep the guidelines established by the Assembly and take on the work of the Assembly itself.

If a local Spiritual Assembly is having difficulty achieving a quorum it is encouraged to contact the assistants to its Auxiliary Board members for advice. If the difficulty continues over a prolonged period of time it must advise the National Spiritual Assembly.

What procedures may a Local Spiritual Assembly put in place for taking routine action between Assembly meetings?

The Secretary and Treasurer, as the executive officers of the Assembly, should be empowered to make minor routine decisions between meetings which would be based on policy guidelines or precedent. These enable the routine work of the Assembly to continue without unnecessary delays. They also relieve the Assembly of having to make time-consuming minor decisions while in session.

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do if an emergency decision is required?

As soon as possible after its election, the Assembly should make provisions which will enable necessary emergency decisions to be taken in between its meetings. The normal procedure is to appoint a sub-committee (often the Secretary and Chairman, but not necessarily) to make decisions on behalf of the Assembly. Such will be within policy

guidelines or precedent set out by the Assembly. Such decisions should be reported to the Assembly at its next meeting for noting and approving.

If there is no precedent or policy guidelines to guide the decision of the sub-committee, then the following approach may be helpful:

- If the matter is very important and cannot wait a special meeting of the Assembly should be called.
- If such a meeting is impractical and the matter cannot wait, the secretary may circulate all members with the background information and a recommendation. This may be done in writing or by telephone. If such a situation is necessary, it is preferable that a decision is reached with unanimity, although this is not absolutely necessary.
- Another option is a Skype or telephone conference call so that all members have the opportunity to consult fully.

What is the approach if an elected officer is absent from a meeting?

In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman chairs the meeting. If the Vice-Chairman is also absent, the Assembly may choose another member to chair the meeting.

Similarly, if the Secretary is absent, the Assembly should appoint another member to take the minutes.

If an office-bearer advises that he or she will be absent from Assembly meetings for a period of time, the Assembly must make other arrangements for ensuring that the necessary work is done. For example, if the Secretary will be absent the Assembly may appoint a temporary Secretary or may divide the Secretary's work among a number of its members. Ideally, such arrangements should be made before the officer becomes absent. If the office-bearer is going to be absent for a very long period of time, the Assembly may consider electing a new office-bearer.

What should a local Spiritual Assembly do if it is dissatisfied with the services of one of its officers?

An Assembly officer cannot be replaced mid-term because of perceived inability or because of a failure to fulfil his or her duties. Such an officer must be kept in place until new Assembly elections are held and every effort made to support them in their work. The first action of a local Assembly would be to consult with the officer to see how their performance might be improved or if there is any way that some of the tasks could be given to others. If the Assembly officer refuses to shoulder the responsibilities of the office and is unwilling to cooperate with the Assembly for the purpose of finding a solution to the problems, then the Assembly should make alternate arrangements to have the duties carried out whilst it consults on this officer's unwillingness.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Are the deliberations of a Local Spiritual Assembly confidential?

Yes, individual Assembly members must not share ‘confidential information’ acquired at an Assembly meeting with anyone else. The Assembly must arrive at a balance between two principles in deciding whether and how much of its deliberations to share with community members. These two principles are:

- The Local Spiritual Assembly must avoid creating an air of secrecy around its work by never sharing anything with the community.
- Community members must be confident that they can take sensitive matters to their Assembly and know that they will remain confidential.

Bearing these two principles in mind the Assembly must decide, in any particular instance, whether to share information or not:

Every institution in the Faith has certain matters which it considers should be kept confidential, and any member who is privy to such confidential information is obliged to preserve the confidentiality within the institution where he learned it. Such matters, however, are but a small portion of the business of any Bahá'í institution. Most subjects dealt with are of common interest and can be discussed openly with anyone. Where no confidentiality is involved the institutions must strive to avoid the stifling atmosphere of secrecy; on the other hand, every believer must know that he can confide a personal problem to an institution of the Faith, with the assurance that knowledge of the matter will remain confidential.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 August 1982

... regarding the extent to which confidential information about believers may be shared with other believers for their protection ... we offer in reply the following considerations:

- 1. Any information which comes to the notice of an Assembly member, solely by reason of his membership on that Assembly may not be divulged by that member, even though the Assembly itself may later decide to share it.*
- 2. The Assembly must itself carefully consider which information should rightly fall in the category of confidential information and which should not be shared with others, and which information may be divulged under special circumstances, and how such information may be divulged. Should confidential matters regarding personal problems be freely shared with others, upon application, the confidence of the believers in the Assembly and its members will obviously be destroyed.*
- 3. It must be remembered that individuals can reform, and a reprehensible past does not necessarily disqualify a believer from building a better future. Within the general framework of these principles, we feel you should be able to handle each case as it may come to your attention. No hard and fast rule should be laid down in such cases, as each case requires careful handling, sound judgment and utmost discretion.*

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 September 1968

A Local Spiritual Assembly has a duty to 'respect requests from individuals who express the wish that certain matters be handled on a confidential basis'.
Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly,
2 March 1987

May a Local Spiritual Assembly member who receives information in confidence as an individual share that information with the Assembly?

No:

Members of Assemblies, whether they are assistants [to Auxiliary Board members] or not, are obviously in a position to receive confidential information as individuals from several sources. It is an important principle of the Faith that one must not promise what one is not going to fulfil. Therefore, if a Bahá'í accepts confidential information either by virtue of his profession (e.g. as a doctor, a lawyer, etc.), or by permitting another person to confide in him, he is in duty bound to preserve that confidentiality.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, August 2, 1982

If the Assembly member confided in feels that such information should come before the Assembly, he or she should encourage the believer concerned to formally take it to the Assembly. If Assembly members receive certain information and do not undertake to keep it confidential, they may share it with the Assembly if they feel this would be in the interests of the Faith, but they are not obliged to do so. Members of the community should not assume that a matter has gone before the Assembly just because several Assembly members know about it:

...It should be clear to the believers that they are not justified in assuming that because a matter is known to individual members of the Assembly it is therefore before the Assembly itself. If a believer wishes to bring a matter to the Assembly's attention he should do so explicitly and officially. If a member of the Assembly knows of a personal problem, and if he has not undertaken to keep it confidential, he may bring it to the Assembly's attention if he feels it would be in the interests of the Faith for him to do so, but he is not obliged to.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 August 1982

Are there any exceptions or special situations which may require the breaching of confidentiality?

Yes, there are certain circumstances in which either civil law requires confidentiality to be breached or there are strong grounds for breaking confidentiality.

Child Abuse

The National Spiritual Assembly has adopted a Child Protection Policy which states that if a complaint or information concerning alleged child abuse (including any form of sexual abuse) comes to the attention of any member of the Bahá'í community, and the individual has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child has been abused or a child or children are at risk of abuse, the individual should report it to the civil authority or police immediately. In many cases it is illegal for someone with a duty of care not to report such

a disclosure to the authorities. This is consistent with guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice:

If a Bahá'í has intimate knowledge of the abuse of a child, either within or outside the Bahá'í community, she has a moral and possibly a legal obligation to report the matter to civil authorities.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
5 October 1992

For detailed guidance on the policy, the procedures for handling child abuse or allegations of child abuse, including the reporting procedure, please refer to the Guidance notes on Safeguarding Children.

Individuals at Risk

In certain other circumstances there may be strong grounds for breaking a commitment to confidentiality. Such strong grounds could be where:

- Someone is at risk of self-harm.
- Others are at risk of harm from another individual.
- A crime has been alleged to have occurred or is likely to occur.

In such circumstances, it may be necessary to disclose the minimal information required to avert risk or to meet one's civil responsibilities. It may be appropriate to always make clear to individuals who are disclosing confidential information to other individuals or the Assembly that there are legal and other limits to confidentiality.

FUNCTIONS OF THE SECRETARY

What are the functions of the Local Spiritual Assembly Secretary?

In brief, the functions of the Local Spiritual Assembly Secretary are as follows:

1. preparation of the agenda for meetings, in conjunction with the Chairman;
2. bringing to Assembly meetings the files and letters relating to the business of the meeting;
3. recording the minutes of meetings;
4. executing the decisions of the Local Assembly;
5. writing the local Spiritual Assembly's correspondence, including the Annual Report and reports required by the National Spiritual Assembly;
6. liaising with the Area Teaching Committee and cluster coordinators as necessary;
7. keeping abreast of the activities in the community so as to understand how the Assembly may lend its encouragement and support;

8. ensuring that the register of births, marriages and deaths for the Local community is maintained as well as maintaining the community membership list and notifying the National Office of any changes to the membership list;
9. calling community meetings, including Assembly meetings, Nineteen Day Feasts, Holy Days, the Ridván meeting, and other community gatherings;
10. distribution of newsletters to the community;
11. being aware of reporting requirements to Companies House if the Assembly is incorporated (and to the Charity Commission if the Assembly, in addition to being incorporated, is established as a charity);
12. keeping track of items from previous minutes that require further action and other matters of an on-going nature, including responses to correspondence sent out;
13. receiving correspondence for the Assembly;
14. reporting from the Assembly to the community at the Nineteen Day Feast;
15. taking notes of recommendations received at the Nineteen Day Feast;
16. watching for receipt of reports and minutes from local committees, ensuring that they are functioning effectively;
17. being aware of due dates for reports, coming Bahá'í events, and so on;
18. carrying out routine work between meetings, if the Assembly delegates such authority to the Secretary;
19. maintenance of a permanent records management and filing system for the Local Assembly's records;
20. maintenance of the Local Assembly's archives.

Some of the work of the Secretary may be delegated to other Assembly members or persons in the community if the Assembly so decides. For example, a recording secretary may be appointed to take the minutes.

Is it permissible for the Secretary to receive assistance from someone not on the Assembly?

Yes:

In reply to your letter of November 7th, 1973 there is no objection whatsoever to a non-member of the National Spiritual Assembly typing your Minutes or such other confidential reports. Many National Spiritual Assemblies employ typists in their national offices who are intimately connected with all the work of the National Spiritual Assembly. Of course, the person so employed should enjoy the confidence of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
20 November 1973

It is preferable that the assistant be a Bahá'í. The appointed assistant should be approved by the Local Spiritual Assembly and the issue of confidentiality discussed with them.

MINUTES

What are the minutes?

The minutes of the Spiritual Assembly are the permanent and official record of the on-going business of the Assembly as well as of the history of the development of the community. The Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for ensuring their accuracy.

What should be recorded in the minutes?

The following information might usefully be recorded in the minutes:

1. name of the Assembly, venue and date of the meeting (if the Assembly is incorporated it is particularly important that the full name of the Assembly be recorded);
2. opening devotions and time the meeting began;
3. names of the Assembly members present and those who were absent (with reasons, if known); any apologies (with reasons) received;
4. corrections to previous minutes and approval of same;
5. results of any by-elections or any changes in officers;
6. all actions and decisions taken by the Assembly at the meeting, together with a brief background so that the matter can be fully understood;
7. recommendations from the Feast and decisions of the Assembly arising from them;
8. report of decisions made by the Assembly's subcommittee appointed to make decisions between meetings and a record of the approval of these decisions by the Assembly;
9. financial report of the Treasurer;
10. date, time and venue of the next Assembly meeting.

The following points should be noted:

- When recording the names of Assembly members and any other names in the minutes, the full name must be used, e.g. Tom Brown (not just Tom).
- Generally, only actions and decisions agreed upon should be recorded in the minutes, but important unresolved matters could also be included.

- Background information should be brief but in sufficient detail that anyone reading the minutes who was not at the meeting will understand the decision which follows.
- Minute numbering might be sequential throughout the Bahá'í year, including the year in the minute number. Thus, in the Bahá'í year 170, a minute number might read 'Minute 170-34'.

Must the minutes be written in English?

Yes. The Universal House of Justice advised a National Spiritual Assembly that:

Local Spiritual Assembly meetings should be conducted in English or French, as the case may be, since these are the languages of your country...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 7 February 1984

How might the minutes be distributed?

The following guidance provided to a National Spiritual Assembly is equally applicable to Local Spiritual Assemblies:

1. *Every member of the National Spiritual Assembly is entitled to have access to the minutes of the National Assembly meetings.*
2. *The National Assembly must take measures to safeguard the confidential nature of many matters referred to in the minutes.*

It is within the discretion of your National Spiritual Assembly to decide what should be done to give effect to these two principles.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
25 March 1971

Minutes of the Local Spiritual Assembly should not be read at the Nineteen Day Feast. However, the Assembly should decide what actions of general concern to the community should be shared with the community and how this should be accomplished.

Should the Local Spiritual Assembly send a copy of its minutes to its respective Regional Bahá'í Council?

There is no requirement for Local Assemblies to share their minutes with the Regional Bahá'í Council, but they may do so if they so wish. Confidential information should be redacted beforehand, as deemed appropriate by the Local Assembly. Irrespective of whether minutes are sent to the Council, Local Assemblies have the responsibility to retain and preserve their own minutes within their archives.

Should the Local Spiritual Assembly send a copy of its minutes to the

National Spiritual Assembly?

No. Local Assembly minutes should not be sent to the National Assembly. If there is any matter that a Local Assembly wishes to bring to the attention of the National Assembly, it should write directly to the National Assembly about it. Naturally, in doing so, copies or extracts from the relevant minutes may be provided if desired. Occasionally the National Assembly may request copies of specific Local Assembly minutes.

Should the Local Spiritual Assembly send a copy of its minutes to the Auxiliary Board members?

The Continental Board of Counsellors for Europe has advised that Auxiliary Board members should not ask a Local Spiritual Assembly for a copy of its minutes. The Local Spiritual Assembly is free, of course, to use its own discretion in the matter and to send copies of, or extracts from, its minutes to the Auxiliary Board member if it chooses to do so.

Can minutes or other files of the Local Spiritual Assembly be shared with individuals, including researchers?

No. The minutes and files of the Local Assembly should be treated as confidential. Such files, even if they are historic, should not be shared with individuals, including researchers.

May a Local Spiritual Assembly record confidential items separately from the minutes?

Yes. A Local Spiritual Assembly may record confidential items separately but should note in its minutes that this has been done. Although the details of these items should be shared in certain circumstances with the National Spiritual Assembly upon request, the Local Assembly may request permission to withhold confidential items if it feels this action would be in the best interests of the Faith:

It is appropriate for a Local Spiritual Assembly to record, in a document other than its regular minutes, matters it considers to be highly confidential. However, the minutes you receive should show that certain items were recorded confidentially, and give some indication of the subject matter or the individuals concerned. Should you require, at any time, details of a particular case, the information could then be requested from the respective Local Assembly. While encouraged to take its National Assembly fully into its confidence, a Local Assembly which deems it in the best interests of the Faith not to divulge the details of a particular case could express this view to you when your request is received, and seek your permission to withhold the information from you.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 November 1991

MEMBERSHIP LIST

How should the Local Spiritual Assembly maintain its membership list?

The Local Spiritual Assembly should keep an up-to-date list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of all adults, youth and children currently in its community. It is essential for a Local Assembly to notify the National Office of any changes on its membership list.

Should the Local Spiritual Assembly keep separate birth, death and marriage registers?

Yes. It is important to maintain accurate registers of current membership and historical registers of declarations, births, marriages, divorces and deaths, as they occur. The Universal House of Justice emphasises the responsibility of Local Spiritual Assemblies to maintain documentation of these events:

Local Spiritual Assemblies, which are embryonic Local Houses of Justice, should develop as rallying centres of the community. They must concern themselves not only with teaching the Faith, with the development of the Bahá'í way of life and with the proper organization of the Bahá'í activities of their communities, but also with those crucial events which profoundly affect the life of all human beings: birth, marriage, and death.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies,
17 April 1981

It is for the Local Spiritual Assembly to decide how it will set up these registers. The register of deaths should include the date of the believer's death, the place the believer is buried and the plot number. The registers of births, marriages and deaths should be kept distinct from the membership list.

Are membership and voting lists confidential?

Yes.

Requests for access to contact details of one or more individual Bahá'ís needs to be treated with care. Prior to disclosing such information to another Bahá'í institution the providing institution would need to assure itself that the information is needed for a legitimate purpose of Bahá'í administration. Where contact details are provided to an institution, the receiving institution should be reminded of the confidential nature of the information.

More broadly, name and contact details should not be provided to members of the Bahá'í community simply interested in contacting an individual or individuals, without the consent of that individual or individuals to the provision of those details.

Any Local Spiritual Assembly in doubt as to whether it should share names from its membership list in any given instance should contact the National Assembly's office for advice.

Voting lists

Voting lists showing only the names of eligible adult believers for the election of the Local Assembly may be distributed together with the election call to all eligible believers, if the Local Assembly so wishes. However such voting lists should not include contact details, and friends receiving the list should be reminded of the need to appropriately dispose of it.

In regard to distribution of voting lists, the National Assembly wishes to clarify that as part of Bahá'í community life, all Bahá'ís would anticipate that their names will from time to time appear on Bahá'í voting lists. Accordingly Bahá'í institutions should not feel that they cannot distribute voting lists because of privacy concerns.

Lists that are no longer current should be destroyed.

Should names of believers whose address is unknown appear on the membership list?

Yes. If a believer's address is unknown the Local Spiritual Assembly should make every reasonable effort to discover it, including: attempting to establish contact at the person's last known address, asking neighbours, asking to see the electoral roll at the local council, and so on. If the Local Spiritual Assembly discovers the person's new address it should place the address on its own membership list and notify the National Spiritual Assembly of it. The Local Assembly should take special care to maintain contact with this believer in future. If the Local Spiritual Assembly does not discover the believer's new address, it should nevertheless retain that person's name on the membership list, as he or she is still registered as a Bahá'í. The Local Assembly should also advise the National Spiritual Assembly so that it will stop sending material to that believer.

Should the names of believers who have lost their voting rights be retained on the membership list?

Yes. A Local Spiritual Assembly must retain the names of all believers who have lost their voting rights on the membership list as they are still Bahá'ís. It must note their status next to their names, i.e. whether the person has lost his or her full voting rights or only part of them and if so, which rights have been removed

Is there any advice to offer a believer who is changing his or her address?

Local Spiritual Assemblies should advise believers who are changing their address to apply at the Post Office to have their mail re-directed for a reasonable period of time. The Post Office will do this for a small fee. In this way, mail from the Bahá'í institutions will still reach them and the institutions will not lose touch with the believers. The Local Spiritual Assemblies should also advise believers to notify the National Office of their change in address so that the National records can be updated accordingly.

What is the difference between the membership list and the voting list?

The membership list is a list of all adults, youth and children resident in the community, regardless of whether they are inactive, address unknown, or have lost their voting rights. Generally speaking it will also include the names of declarants who have been accepted by the Local Spiritual Assembly, but whose declarations have not yet been accepted by the National Spiritual Assembly; however, there are notable exceptions to this rule (see the chapter on 'Membership in the Bahá'í Community'). Other exceptions include believers who have transferred in from overseas whose transfer of membership has not yet been verified at the National Office.

The voting list, on the other hand, consists of only the adult believers eligible to serve on an Assembly. As such it does not include, for example, members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, citizens of the People's Republic of China, Iranian believers who for reasons of safety have not formally registered, prisoners, or people who have lost their administrative and voting rights or those whose addresses are unknown.

ANNUAL REPORT

When should the Local Spiritual Assembly prepare its Annual Report?

The Annual Report covers the period Riḍván to Riḍván (April 21 – April 20) and must be prepared in time to be presented to the community at its Riḍván Meeting. This means the Assembly must receive its committees' reports sufficiently ahead of time to be able to incorporate them into its Annual Report.

What information should the Annual Report contain?

According to the Articles of Association, the Assembly must provide its community with

...a report of the activities of the Assembly since the last Ridván meeting, a financial statement showing all income and expenditure of its Fund, reports of its committees and any other matters pertaining to the affairs of the Local community.

As an account of the progress of the Local Bahá'í community during the year, in addition to stating the name of the Local Assembly, the date of the report and the period covered, it can include an account of principle achievements and related activities during the year which recount progress in the development of the community and Local Assembly and in particular those that contribute towards the goals of the current Plan.

The report must include an account of the Assembly's finances during the year and their current state.

Who prepares the Annual Report?

Preparation of the Annual Report is usually the responsibility of the Secretary; however, the Assembly as a whole is responsible for ensuring its accuracy.

Who receives copies of the Annual Report?

The report is made available to the community either prior to or at the Annual Ridván election meeting.

Local Spiritual Assemblies are only required to send a copy of its Financial Annual Report to the National Treasury Office. They are not required to send a copy of their Annual Report to the National Spiritual Assembly.

Do incorporated Assemblies have special requirements to meet?

Incorporated Local Spiritual Assemblies do not have any special requirements regarding the Annual Report save producing their Annual Financial report for the Treasury Office of the National Assembly.

COMMUNICATIONS

Who receives and sends communications on behalf of the Local Spiritual Assembly?

Generally the Secretary receives and sends communications on behalf of the Local Spiritual Assembly, although the duty may be delegated to another Assembly member. Correspondence requiring the attention of the Assembly is taken by the Secretary to the Assembly's next meeting. The Assembly retains overall responsibility for all communications made on its behalf.

How should communications from the Assembly be prepared?

It is important that the Assembly's communications be accurate and clear. The tone must be appropriate for the purpose of the communication. In all circumstances, the letter

should be loving and respectful of the individual and dignified in tone. It is particularly important that the communication convey the spirit of the Faith; it should be warm and loving, not cold and impersonal:

We are deeply concerned that some of the letters written on behalf of your National Assembly contain brusque language, are critical in tone, lack warmth, and reflect impatience with friends whose actions have brought problems to your council chamber. We fully understand how the burdensome weight of these vexatious problems, many of which could and should have been avoided, can tax the patience of the most serene. The temptation to react sharply and defensively is very great, yet we know that, as Trustees of the Merciful, we should not do so. Not only is it contrary to the spirit of the instructions of the Master and the Guardian, with which you are thoroughly familiar, but giving vent to such reaction tends to evoke resentment rather than bringing about the desired result ... We mention these examples only to call to your notice a reaction which may not have been apparent to those writing letters on your behalf, in the hope that ways and means can be found to insure that the manner in which you convey your views or decisions to the friends will promote the utmost unity, concord and understanding.

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

What is the correct protocol for addressing institutions of the Faith?

The full name or title of an institution should be used when that institution is being addressed:

It has been noted that your letter of 13 June, 1972 was addressed to 'The U.H.J.'. It would be more fitting in addressing the institutions of the Faith that the full name or title be spelled out.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 July 1972

What is the correct title of a Local Spiritual Assembly?

In its Constitution, the Universal House of Justice refers to a Local Spiritual Assembly as follows: 'a local administrative body of nine members to be known as the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of that locality'.

Therefore, a Local Spiritual Assembly should be styled as, '**Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of place name**'. The words 'Local' and 'District' should not therefore appear on its letterhead.

What guidelines apply to local newsletters?

The publishing and distribution of local newsletters or bulletins can be a useful means of communication with the friends. Such newsletters should be primarily devoted to local news and activities and should always remain subordinate in importance to national newsletters or bulletins:

Concerning local Bahá'í newsletters the Guardian strongly feels that they should be primarily devoted to the spread of local news and activities ... They may occasionally refer to items of a national scope, but this should be done only with

the view of assisting and not hindering the national body of the Cause to carry out effectively its programme and decisions. There is thus a definite line of demarcation between correspondence initiated by local and national Assemblies. Local activities should always be subordinated to those of a national character and importance. This is intended not to minimise the role of the local Assembly in the administrative order, but to establish and ensure a sane relationship between that body and the national organism of the Cause.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 10 May 1934

In certain countries, we are glad to see, there are in addition to the national newsletter, news bulletins issued on regional or district levels. The importance of these secondary organs of Bahá'í communication acquires added weight in areas where differences of language make the issue of bulletins in a local language of each area highly desirable, if not essential.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies,
25 May 1975

The distribution of such Bahá'í newsletters which contain news and information for Bahá'ís will be only to Bahá'ís:

In answer to your query concerning the policy of keeping 'Bahá'í News' for Bahá'ís only, the House of Justice instructs us to explain that the circulation of Bahá'í newsletters is restricted to Bahá'ís because they are vehicles of news that is primarily of internal interest to the friends and the Assembly should be able to write freely to the believers without having to so word the information that it would be easily understandable to a non-Bahá'í reader. In other words, a Bahá'í newsletter is not secret but is an internal journal intended for an informed readership.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Mexico, 19 December 1982

Must a Local Spiritual Assembly go through its Regional Bahá'í Council to access the National Spiritual Assembly?

No. The Local Spiritual Assembly retains the right to access the National Spiritual Assembly directly:

The working relationship between the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the National Spiritual Assembly in an area where there is a Regional Bahá'í Council will depend upon the range of functions and responsibilities conferred by the National Assembly upon the Council. The right of direct access to the National Assembly by the Local Spiritual Assembly is preserved.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies,
30 May 1997

May a Local Spiritual Assembly communicate with Regional Bahá'í Councils outside its region?

Yes. Local Spiritual Assemblies may communicate directly with the Bahá'í Councils for other regions, but in doing so it would be courteous to provide a copy of all relevant correspondence to their own Council.

May a Local Spiritual Assembly communicate directly with the Universal House of Justice?

A Local Spiritual Assembly may write directly to the Universal House of Justice.

If a Local Spiritual Assembly wishes to appeal to the Universal House of Justice against a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly, the appeal must be channelled through the National Spiritual Assembly.

May an individual communicate directly with the Universal House of Justice?

Yes, with the exception of appeals:

It is true, as you state in your letter of 26 May 1975, that every Bahá'í may write direct to the Universal House of Justice but this does not apply in the case of appeals which should be submitted through the National Spiritual Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 17 June 1975

May a Local Spiritual Assembly communicate directly with an overseas National Spiritual Assembly, one of its committees, or a Local Spiritual Assembly within the jurisdiction of another National Spiritual Assembly?

No. In each of these instances the Local Spiritual Assembly must channel its communication through the National Spiritual Assembly. Permission can be given, however, by the National Spiritual Assembly for regular communication between a UK Local Spiritual Assembly and an overseas Local Spiritual Assembly

May Local Spiritual Assemblies communicate directly with a Continental Board of Counsellors or individual Counsellors?

Yes.

May individuals communicate directly with a Continental Board of Counsellors or individual Counsellors?

Yes. Individuals may write privately to Counsellors.

APPEALS AGAINST ASSEMBLY DECISIONS

When a Spiritual Assembly reaches a decision, after prayer and consultation, the believers should happily accept and support it, no matter what their views on the matter were before, and whether they were members of the Assembly or not.

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, conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of

the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged and always to be wholeheartedly enforced.

Shoghi Effendi, *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 45

As Bahá'ís we understand that unity is more important than dissension. Only the Universal House of Justice is infallible, and Assemblies may make mistaken decisions. If the decision arrived at by the Assembly was in error the wrong will become apparent and can be righted.

One way in which such a wrong may be righted is by appeal to a higher body. This is not a step to be taken lightly, as too free a recourse to it can undermine the basis of the Assembly and bring its work to a halt.

If an individual feels in his heart that a wrong decision has been made, resulting in for example injustice being done or the interests of the Cause being harmed, he may make an appeal. However, while that appeal is being heard, the individual is still bound to uphold loyally the authority and decision of the Assembly.

The first place to appeal to is the body that made the original decision, to lay before it respectfully and lovingly the concerns felt about the decision. If the matter is not resolved, then it may be referred on to the National Spiritual Assembly, and ultimately, to the Universal House of Justice. An appeal to the Universal House of Justice must be made through the National Spiritual Assembly.

INCORPORATION

What is the value of incorporation for Local Spiritual Assemblies?

Incorporation of Local Spiritual Assemblies (meaning Local Spiritual Assemblies establishing themselves as companies) gives legal status and continuity of existence to a Bahá'í institution and affords it certain legal rights and protection. Without incorporation, an Assembly is regarded under civil law as merely a group of individuals. Incorporation of the Assembly, its recognition at law as a legally constituted 'Company', enables it to hold property, enter into contracts, claim certain taxation exemptions, receive bequests, etc. Incorporation is also a form of protection to the individual members of the Assembly for any acts of the Assembly, in that it limits their personal liability at law. Members of incorporated Assemblies are the Directors of a company limited by guarantee. Individuals may be disqualified from service as Directors under certain circumstances (e.g. bankruptcy).

Should Local Spiritual Assemblies in the UK incorporate at the present time?

Local Spiritual Assemblies may be incorporated if an Assembly believes that it is necessary at this time. The Local Assemblies should contact the National office for guidance and documentation about incorporation.

It is important to maintain the incorporated status of a Local Spiritual Assembly which were often achieved as hard won victories of previous Plans of the Faith. The Guardian also attached much significance to the incorporation of Local Assemblies. Indeed, such

is their importance that one can see the framed documents of incorporation of early Local and National Assemblies on the walls in the Mansion of Bahji in the Holy Land.

May a Local Spiritual Assembly wind up its incorporation without the permission of the National Spiritual Assembly?

No. Given the advantages of incorporation, Assemblies should not wind up their incorporated status.

If an Assembly, for some reason, feels a need to wind up its incorporated status it must contact the National Spiritual Assembly before taking any steps and whilst it is still incorporated, it must continue to comply with its reporting requirements (as summarized above) so as not to jeopardize its corporate status.

What responsibilities does an incorporated Local Spiritual Assembly have?

In the UK an incorporated Local Spiritual Assembly is required to file an Annual Return to Companies House, to file notice of changes of directors (i.e. Assembly members) and Secretary and details as to their name and address changes; it is also required to file annual financial accounts with Companies House. The Finance Office of the National Assembly can advise the Local Spiritual Assembly if they have any queries about this. All paperwork, together with a related guidance note (*headed 'Important Notes for All Assemblies'*), is sent to the Assembly by the National Spiritual Assembly's office well in advance of the meeting. Any queries on this aspect of the work should be referred to that office.

There are time-frames for compliance with all these obligations. There are penalties for failure to comply with the law, mostly involving fines, and thus the obligations need to be taken seriously.

Most of the incorporated Local Spiritual Assemblies are also established as charities. There are similar obligations as to filing Annual Returns to the Charity Commission and to filing changes of 'Trustees' (i.e. Assembly members) and details of name and address changes. The National Office may be contacted for further details.

What happens if an incorporated Assembly lapses?

If the number of adult Bahá'ís in an incorporated Assembly falls below 9, the National Spiritual Assembly must be notified. It is possible to continue the incorporation even if there are less than nine adult Bahá'ís eligible to serve on the Assembly in the community, provided there are 1 or 2 former Assembly members prepared to continue as directors and ensure that Annual Returns and Accounts continue to be filed; so far as Companies House is concerned the company can continue to exist even though there are less than 9 directors. The process of forming and dissolving /discontinuing a company is expensive and time-consuming; furthermore, if a Local Assembly gives up its corporate status, then the Local Assembly's status as a registered charity must also terminate and the process of forming, then discontinuing a charity is likewise expensive and time-consuming. For these reasons every effort should be made to continue an existing incorporation.

FILES OF THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

Do all Local Spiritual Assembly members have equal access to the files?

Yes. The Assembly may, however, list certain items as ‘confidential’ and require that access to them is dependent on a specific decision of the Assembly:

In reply to your letter of May 13th, 1976, the Universal House of Justice instructs us to say that all members of the Spiritual Assembly are equal and should have access to the files and minutes of the Assembly of which they are members. It is, however, within the discretion of any Spiritual Assembly to so organise its files and records that certain items could be listed as ‘confidential’ and access to those so classified could only be had by a specific decision of the Assembly itself.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 8 June 1976

Should the Assembly retrieve copies of minutes, correspondence, files and other papers, from anyone leaving the Assembly?

Yes. This includes all hard copies of minutes, documents, etc. They should be asked to shred all soft copies from their computer. Minutes and other files should not be kept, passed over to individuals who are not on the Assembly, or given to libraries or any collection of Bahá’í materials.

How should a Local Spiritual Assembly organise its files?

In a letter to the UK National Spiritual Assembly, dated 24 April 1986, the Universal House of Justice stated:

As one of the oldest communities in Europe, you have an extremely valuable historical heritage, which will be much prized by historians and other students of the Bahá’í Faith in years to come. The task of ensuring the preservation of the papers of local Spiritual Assemblies and individual believers, both those already in your archives, and others which may be in private or local Assembly hands, is an urgent one.

RECORDS AND ARCHIVES

General

- There is often some uncertainty as to which letters, copies or replies, and other documents, whether electronic or in hard copy, should be preserved and which may be destroyed.
- Each Assembly should strive to have an efficient filing system from which any required document may be swiftly recalled. This should include a secure system for storing and retrieving electronic files.
- Electronic files should be systematically and regularly backed up to ensure that copies exist either on media (such as DVDs, CD, hard drives or thumb drives/USB sticks) separate from the secretary’s computer or in ‘the Cloud’, using secure online storage, such as DropBox or Google Drive.

- It is important to ensure that ‘live’ files on the secretary’s computer are kept synchronised with versions stored on any backup device or media.
- Appendix A provides some suggestions for the separate files that might be maintained for correspondence.

Preservation of electronic records

Make ‘backup’ copies on an external drive or a memory stick of any information stored on a computer. Store backup copies in another location away from the original records. Record the location and format of any backup information on paper and file away carefully. Review the format of electronic archives whenever there is a significant change or upgrade to office software, to ensure that the archive material is still usable. If necessary, the archive record may need to be converted to a new standard or format.

Pruning Files

At the end of each year, preferably, just after preparation of the annual report, the contents of all files should be examined, and items of only passing interest may be removed and destroyed. Other files of lasting interest or historical value, but which are no longer ‘active’, could be removed and stored.

It is not sufficient to use standard deletion through your computer’s trash or recycling bin for electronic files, since these can easily be recovered. It is essential, when deleting electronic files, to use some form of electronic shredding or secure deletion. There is a range of secure deletion/file shredding utilities available for Windows (including Eraser, CCleaner and File Shredder). Secure deletion is easily invoked in the reasonably up-to-date versions of the Macintosh OS and Windows 7 onwards without any additional apps, although there are secure deletion utilities available for Mac too.

The decision about which files should be pruned should be taken by the Assembly in session or a subcommittee appointed for the purpose and not by an individual.

It is within the discretion and jurisdiction of National or Local Assemblies to decide on which papers in their files are not of long term value and hence can be destroyed, and which papers have possible historical value. The selection of materials for archival retention or for elimination should not, however, be left to the judgement of a single person. Thus, when your Secretary or other person assigned to the task has sifted through the papers, those items marked for destruction should be passed upon by a committee appointed by your Assembly, bearing in mind the historical values of such records of national affairs. The committee’s recommendations can be decided upon by your Assembly. The same principle applies to Local Assembly Archives.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 3 February 1982

ARCHIVES

What is a local Bahá'í archive?

An archive is made up of the retired records created by a Local Spiritual Assembly in the course of conducting its business. Some documentation is kept for information purposes only and other records are kept because they are records of the decisions of the Assembly. Documents that are informative only may be discarded when no longer needed. Records of an Assembly's actions and decisions need to be retained permanently for memory.

Local Assemblies may also want to keep other historical documentation such as oral history interviews, articles, etc., which might normally be found in a library or museum. However, such documentation should be kept in a separate section within the archival material.

What is the reason for setting up local Bahá'í archives?

Local archives provide a valuable source of information for historians of the future.

... Bahá'ís have the opportunity – perhaps even the duty – to preserve for future generations an accurate and detailed record of how a major religion entered the world of man and became established in human society ...

Letter from the Universal House of Justice Department of Library and Archival Services,
11 June 1986

How does an Assembly decide what to archive?

As a general rule Assemblies should keep in mind that what is original and important to the Local Spiritual Assembly now is what will be of most use to future historians.

Appendix 2 at the end of this chapter is a table of the types of records an Assembly should retain as its permanent archives, and those records which may be destroyed.

Other records an Assembly may want to consider keeping are:

- a. The records of individuals in the Assembly's community. Such individuals may have records which are a major contribution to the history of the community or region, or their personal activities are such that the Assembly would like to keep their records. If individuals donate their records to the Assembly, they should also sign a deed of gift or make provision in their wills, which transfer all rights to the records to the Local Spiritual Assembly, to prevent possible difficulties in the future.
- b. Photographs, audio and visual recordings. These may occur as part of another body of records and should be documented as such, but physically they may need to be kept separate.

Once the items to be kept have been decided upon, they should be transferred to the community's archives. Items should not be transferred to the archives before they have been sorted, as this will cause congestion in the collection at a later date.

For how long should financial records be retained?

Financial records generally fall into two categories for the purposes of retention and destruction: those of a legal or statutory nature and day-to-day financial records. The former should be kept permanently. It is especially important for incorporated Assemblies to strictly adhere to these requirements as some of them are legal obligations. Day-to-day financial records such as invoices, receipts, bank statements, used cheque books, etc. may be discarded after six years.

Treasurer's reports, and end of the year financial reports should be archived together with Income/Expenditure analysis records.

Who is in charge of the archives?

The person in charge of the archives may be the Secretary of the Assembly or a person appointed by the Local Spiritual Assembly. This person will be responsible for the storage, maintenance and inventory of the archives and will exercise exclusive control over all aspects of the archives, with the approval of the Local Assembly, except for retention and destruction.

Where should an Assembly's archives be located?

The location of the archives is up to the discretion of the Secretary or appointed archivist and the Assembly. However, the environment and safety of the storage facility should be taken into account when making this decision. To protect the archives, the chosen facility should have the following features:

- a. stable and moderate temperature and humidity (no more than 60% relative humidity);
- b. no insects or rodents;
- c. no threat of flooding or water damage (away from pipes and taps);
- d. easy access to fire extinguisher(s).

Additionally, archives should not be stored on the ground to further safeguard against the above threats.

Also, since archives continue to be records of the Assembly and the community, their whereabouts should be listed on the Assembly's file classification list along with the locations of other Assembly files [see further the section 'Filing'].

If a Local Spiritual Assembly lapses, what should the remaining community members do with the files?

If a Local Spiritual Assembly lapses back to Group status it should continue to maintain the community's archives according to the above instructions. However, should the community's numbers drop to only one or two and there seems little prospect of reforming the Assembly in the near future, the remaining members should contact the

National Assembly's office for instructions about sending the records for storage in the National Archives Collection, until such time as a future Assembly can take possession of them again.

Bequests and donations of archival materials

If an individual, Assembly or community seeks guidance on where to bequeath or donate archival materials – such as papers, books, personal letters and Bahá'í artefacts – the following guidance is offered:

1. Archival materials from individual believers

Individuals are generally free to choose to whom they bequeath or donate archival items. (An important exception is made for documents associated with service on a Local Assembly, which are discussed in these notes under the section “should the Assembly retrieve copies of minutes, correspondence, files and other papers, from anyone leaving the Assembly?”.)

Unless an individual has another preference, it is recommended that they should, in the first instance, bequeath or donate their archival items to the National Archives, which will decide on their preservation, storage – physical and/or electronic – or re-distribution. According to the National Assembly's archival procedures, collections of papers of noted believers should be kept complete.

2. Local Bahá'í Archives and Libraries

The archives and local Bahá'í libraries of Local Assemblies should remain with those Assemblies (as “component parts” of the institution of the Hazíratu'l-Quds) or, if that Assembly has lapsed, the remaining Group. (Further information in this regard can be found in these guidance notes under the relevant sections on files and archives.)

If the Group, or a now isolated believer, is unable to provide the appropriate storage of items, the National Archives will hold them until such time as that locality once again has a Group or Assembly.

3. Books and other library materials from individual believers.

Books belonging to individuals, if left to the National Library, should be sorted. Any items not required by the National Library will be offered to the Afnan Library or, if it has copies already, sold for the Fund or otherwise disposed of.

APPENDIX 1 SUGGESTED GUIDE FOR A LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY FILING SYSTEM

NB: These can be maintained in either soft or hard copy. However, if they are maintained in soft-copy, a system should be introduced to make a regular back-up of the information in the files and folders

Records of Assembly/Community Activities

Local Spiritual Assembly Minutes

Confidential Minutes

Memoranda between Assembly Members

Community growth and development

- Regional Bahá'í Council/Area Teaching Committee
- Training Institute and cluster coordinators
- Plans
- Correspondence and reports re teaching projects and activities

Community Development Activities

- Teaching projects and activities
- Study circles and training events
- Devotional Meetings
- Children's classes
- Junior-Youth activities
- Deepenings
- Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Day arrangements
- Correspondence and Reports from related committee, task force, etc

Social and Economic Development Projects

- Correspondence and reports from related committees, task forces, special officers, etc

External Affairs

- Special publicity campaigns
- Correspondence and Reports from related committees, task forces, special officers, etc

Elections

- Correspondence re organising election at Ridván, re by-elections. Including tellers reports, election result sheets)

Annual Reports

Calendars

Newsletters

- For the Assembly's own community newsletters. Newsletters of other Assemblies or organisations should be kept separately under reference files.

Legal Records

- Formation papers, includes articles of incorporation, and Assembly formation forms which are sent yearly to the National Spiritual Assembly.
- Incorporation reports
- Property files, including deeds, plans, property and contents insurance.
- Insurance file: your Assembly is covered for liability under the National Spiritual Assembly's insurance plan. You should retain a copy of the relevant documents should they be requested by agencies dealt with in the course of conducting some of your activities.
- Contracts.
- BESS forms (ie. statutory declarations, authority to teach Bahá'í Children's classes or for Bahá'í education in state schools)

Treasury Records

- Budgets
- Annual Financial Report
- Cash books etc. See the *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook* chapter 'Bahá'í Funds', the *Treasurer's Manual*

Membership Records

- Declaration records
- Marriage register, certificates or other records (including Notification of Marriage Forms)
- Birth register, certificates or other records
- Records of death (including place of burial of the deceased)
- Copies of community membership lists, as sent by the National Secretariat Membership Records Department, and updated by the Local Assembly.
- Copies of membership transfer forms

Family and Individual Case Files (Confidential)

Routine Advertisements, notification of functions, deepenings, upcoming courses etc

General Reference Material

Incoming material of a general nature kept for reference purposes, filed according to the sending organisation or individual. Correspondence relating to particular Assembly projects, plans or cases is best kept with the relevant records file (as above).

Could be filed as below, i.e. in hierarchies, or types or just alphabetically.

Universal House of Justice

National Spiritual Assembly

Continental Board of Counsellors

Auxiliary Board for Protection & assistant

Auxiliary Board for Propagation & assistant

Regional Bahá'í Council

Area Teaching Committee

Training Institute Board and cluster coordinators

Policy/Guidance Files

These should include policies developed by the Local Assembly itself. They need to be classified by subject and cross-referenced.

APPENDIX 2 ARCHIVES RETENTION AND DESTRUCTION GUIDELINES

Record Type	Retain	Destroy ¹
Annual Reports ²	X	
Minutes	X	
<i>Correspondence:</i>		
Local Feast Letters	X	
Routine Mailings from the Bahá'í National Centre or Regional Bahá'í Council		X ³
Unique Correspondence with the National Spiritual Assembly, or other Bahá'í Institutions	X	
Re community projects, plans, activities, elections etc	X	
Routine advertisements, and so on, from other Bahá'í institutions		X
Correspondence with individuals	X	
Legal Documents re incorporation – required to be kept by law	X	
Legal Documents re ownership of property, e.g. deeds	X	
Legal Documents re compliance with government – keep for statutory period		X
Birth, marriage, and death registers	X	
Local Committee Minutes and Reports	X	
Local bulletins, newsletters, and calendars	X	
Publicity files and scrapbooks	X	
Personal status case files	X	
Membership lists and directories	X	
Change of address forms, etc.		X
Duplicate annual reports, minutes, bulletins, etc.		X
Photographs of the Assembly, Bahá'í community and community activities	X	
<i>Financial Records: Destroy only after 6 years</i>		
Budgets (Annual)		X
Cheque Books		X
Bank Deposit Books		X

¹ Destroy after 1 year, or after statutory period has elapsed (e.g. 6 years for financial records)

² Note: the Annual report should contain reports of election results, annual financial reports, and committee annual reports.

³ Or, if it is policy, keep for Reference Files or Policy Files

Record Type	Retain	Destroy¹
Receipt Books/Invoices		X
Book Keeping Records (Income/Expenditure/Analysis Books)	X	
Bank Statements and Reconciliations		X
Annual Financial Reports ⁴	X	
Audit Reports	X	
Contracts/Mortgages	X	
Insurance Papers		X

⁴ Note, the Annual report should contain reports of election results, annual financial reports, and committee annual reports.