

FORMATION/ELECTION OF THE LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

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FORMATION – GENERAL PRINCIPLES

When must a Local Spiritual Assembly be formed?

Local Spiritual Assemblies are formed on the first day of Riḍván, which is on 13 Jalál according to the Bahá'í calendar (from sunset on 19 April to sunset on 20 April when Naw-Rúz is on 20 March and from sunset on 20 April to sunset on 21 April when Naw-Rúz is on 21 March). Although exceptions have existed in the past, the Universal House of Justice wrote to all National Spiritual Assemblies on 26 December 1995:

...beginning at Riḍván 1997, the practice of electing all Local Spiritual Assemblies on the First Day of Riḍván will be reinstated.

Is there an obligation to form a Local Spiritual Assembly when there are nine or more adult believers in a civil area?

Yes. Shoghi Effendi wrote through his Secretary:

...in any locality where the number of adult believers reaches nine, a local Assembly should be established. He feels this to be an obligation rather than a purely voluntary act. Only in exceptional cases has the National Spiritual Assembly the right to postpone the formation of an Assembly...

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 46

Can a Local Spiritual Assembly be formed in an area where all nine believers are not actually physically resident in the area, but where believers are intending to move?

If the friends have made a firm commitment to move in, such as obtaining a lease or putting a down payment on a house, then they may be counted as resident in the community for the purposes of the Riḍván election.

The establishment of residence in a locality to the satisfaction of the National Spiritual Assembly may be accepted as a transfer of membership even though the particular individual may not physically reside at his new address immediately. Thus, the decision as to whether or not the Local Spiritual Assembly at ... should be recognised is within the discretion of your Assembly.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 June 1975

It is within the province of a National Spiritual Assembly to decide whether or not to accept such a transfer. The National Assembly may decide if the intention to transfer physical residence is sincere and genuine, and thus arrives at its decision concerning recognition of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

What if a believer has places of residence in multiple council areas?

A believer having places of residence in multiple council areas should make a choice as to which Assembly is to count him or her as a member. The chosen residence will normally be in the area where the believer votes in national and local elections, or where the believer resides for the greater part of a year. Where there is doubt, the National Assembly has the right of final determination.

Can Local Spiritual Assemblies be formed in prisons?

The National Spiritual Assembly has adopted the policy that Local Spiritual Assemblies will not be formed in prisons.

What is the area of jurisdiction of a Local Spiritual Assembly?

The area of jurisdiction of a Local Spiritual Assembly is determined by the National Spiritual Assembly, and is reviewed typically every five years (to reflect changes in the local government wards by which Assembly localities are currently defined). Any queries about an area of jurisdiction should be referred to the Office of the Secretary in the first instance.

What happens if the National Assembly finds that a Local Assembly has been improperly elected?

If the National Spiritual Assembly finds that a Local Spiritual Assembly has been improperly elected, it may disallow the election and appoint an Administrative Committee to administer the affairs of its community until the following Riḍván:

In such circumstances, you should not call for the re-election of the Local Spiritual Assembly before next Riḍván. You are advised to consider appointment of an Administrative Committee composed of reliable believers from the region, perhaps three or five in number, to carry out such vital functions as arranging for Bahá'í meetings, children's classes and participation in the training institute programmes until the Local Spiritual Assembly is restored.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia,
3 June 2003*

MEMBERSHIP

What are the spiritual attitudes, qualities and duties of a Local Spiritual Assembly member?

The following quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice outline the duties of a Local Spiritual Assembly member:

Obedience unto them (the Assemblies) is essential and obligatory. 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.

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

It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá'í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service – whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies – recognize the great

privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá'í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. 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.' Bahá'í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us that 'when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire's distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it.' As He averred, 'ye must in this matter – that is, the serving of humankind – lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice.'

And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian's words that 'their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent.' 'Never' would they be 'led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.' 'With extreme humility,' they approach their tasks and 'endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.' Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious.

Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: 'When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.'

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

If he be a member of any Spiritual Assembly, let him encourage his Assembly to consecrate a certain part of its time, at each of its sessions, to the earnest and prayerful consideration of such ways and means as may foster the campaign of teaching, or may furnish whatever resources are available for its progress, extension, and consolidation.

Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 44

Only as individual members of Local Spiritual Assemblies deepen themselves in the fundamental verities of the Faith and in the proper application of the principles governing the operation of the Assembly will this institution grow and develop toward its full potential.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 11 August 1970

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 Counsellors, 28 December 2010

It is important for Assembly members to understand that their home and Assembly duties must be balanced. Development of the spiritual and family life of each believer goes hand in hand with the development of the administrative institutions of the Faith and teaching efforts. Neither set of duties may be neglected:

Therefore it is not so much a matter of which is more important, the teaching work or family and personal responsibilities, but how we can seek a balance in our lives to accomplish both of these sacred tasks. But in addition to the progress and development of the spiritual life of each believer, individually and as a member of a family unit, the foundations of the administrative institutions of the Faith must likewise be continually strengthened...these two goals go hand in hand...

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 19 April 1979

Who can serve on the Local Spiritual Assembly?

With certain exceptions which are set out in the question immediately below, any Bahá’í whose membership is in good standing, who is at least 21 years of age and resides within the Assembly’s area of jurisdiction, is eligible to serve on the Local Spiritual Assembly. If one or more adult members of the community are such recently declared Bahá’ís that they are not yet recorded as believers by the National Spiritual Assembly, they may take part in the formation of the Assembly, subject to later confirmation of their Bahá’í status by the National Assembly.

Are there any names that should not appear on the voting list?

The following names may not appear on the list of people eligible to be voted for:

- **Counsellors:** These believers are exempt from administrative duties on elected institutions. However, if they are a ninth adult member in a community which has an existing Assembly, they may serve as a member of an Assembly for as long as necessary.

As with the Counsellors, should the membership of a community drop to nine, an Auxiliary Board member may serve temporarily on the Local Spiritual Assembly, and as an officer if elected, until a replacement is available. An Auxiliary Board member need not ask for permission to serve on a Local Assembly under these circumstances, but should notify the Board of Counsellors accordingly.

The Institution of the Counsellors, document prepared by the Universal House of Justice

- Believers who have had their right to be voted for or to vote removed. Some individuals may have one or other of these rights or both rights removed, and account should be taken of the relevant circumstance in each case in drawing up the list of persons eligible to be voted for and persons eligible to vote.
- Prisoners. Believers in prison may not vote for or be voted onto an Assembly until released. Once released, the National Assembly should be advised and it will then consider whether the person's right to vote and be voted for can be restored.
- Some citizens of the People's Republic of China.

Citizens of the PRC should be left free to choose the extent of their involvement in the Bahá'í Community. If they so wish, they can be granted full administrative rights as any other believers of good standing, including service on a Bahá'í committee of a Spiritual Assembly, if elected.

From guidelines from the Universal House of Justice, 19 April 1989 and a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 October 1989

- Iranian Muslims and Israelis who have declared their Faith and who have not yet been notified of their acceptance by the National Spiritual Assembly. Such persons may not vote or be voted for in a Bahá'í election until notified of their acceptance by the National Spiritual Assembly.
- Iranian believers whose Bahá'í status has not yet been verified by the friends in Iran through the National Spiritual Assembly.
- Iranian believers who for reason of safety have not formally registered.
- Believers who have transferred into the community from overseas whose transfer of membership has not yet been received at the National Office. These believers may neither vote nor be voted for, but may attend Bahá'í-only functions if they have valid international credentials. They may, however, participate in the formation of a Local Spiritual Assembly by joint declaration. The formation will be accepted by the National Spiritual Assembly, subject to this believer's transfer of membership being completed at a later date.

- Believers who have previously resigned from the Faith and who have applied to re-enrol but whose re-enrolment has not yet been accepted by the National Spiritual Assembly.

The following should be left on the voting list as they would be able to vote even though they would not be able to serve on an incorporated local Assembly:

- Any believer who has been declared bankrupt. This is a prohibition existing under the civil laws for incorporation in England and Wales and would prevent such a person from serving as a director of a company (as required for members of an incorporated Local Assembly). It only applies when the person is undergoing bankruptcy and once the bankruptcy is spent the believer can serve on an Assembly again. It does not prevent such persons serving on committees, nor does it apply to unincorporated Assemblies.
- Any believer who has at any time been convicted of any offence involving dishonesty or deception unless the conviction is spent (e.g. the length of time which must pass as imposed by the Court is over), or a waiver has been granted by the Charity Commission for England and Wales. See Section 72(1) of the Charities Act 1993.

In either case should the believer serve on an incorporated local Assembly they will be committing a criminal offence. There is no need for the person to disclose that they are ineligible to serve before an election but if they are elected onto an incorporated Assembly they must immediately step down and a by-election called. This does not affect their other Bahá'í administrative rights. The National Spiritual Assembly must be informed as soon as possible.

Should names of inactive believers appear on the voting list?

Yes: Your Assembly should not remove the names of Bahá'ís from the voting list just because they do not attend meetings or just because their addresses are unknown. It is hard to make Bahá'ís; and you must try and help them and reactivate them, and find those whose addresses are unknown if you can.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 September 1957

A Local Spiritual Assembly may, however, ask the National Spiritual Assembly to remove believers from the voting list where the nature of their inactivity constitutes a de facto resignation:

A distinction is to be made between those who are interested in the Faith but remain inactive and those whose inactivity indicates complete lack of interest in the Faith to the extent that they have in fact ceased to be Bahá'ís. In this latter instance removal from the list is simply recognition of this fact.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 December 1974

The request to the National Spiritual Assembly should set out the circumstances and reasons for such a removal from the voting list.

Should names of Auxiliary Board members or their assistants appear on the voting list?

Yes. Auxiliary Board members, if elected, must decide whether to continue to serve on the Auxiliary Board or to accept membership on an Assembly. Assistants to the Auxiliary Board, if elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly, can serve simultaneously on both institutions.

Members of the Auxiliary Board are eligible to be elected to any administrative post, but they cannot serve both in an administrative capacity (for example, as a member of a National Assembly) and as a member of the Auxiliary Board. Should they be elected to serve on an administrative body, they must then choose whether they will continue as a member of the Auxiliary Board or whether they feel they can best serve the Cause in the administrative post to which they have been elected.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda and Central Africa, 10 April 1966

The Auxiliary Board member in this situation must be given a sufficient amount of time to decide of whether or not to serve on the Assembly:

Whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or a Regional Council, or as a delegate to the National Convention, a Board member should be allowed a reasonable length of time to make a choice and should feel no compulsion to decide immediately after the results of the election are announced. Membership on an Auxiliary Board would be regarded as a valid reason for resignation from an elected body.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 June 1978

If the Auxiliary Board member decides to remain on the Board during the election meeting, a vacancy may be declared, and those at the election meeting may elect a replacement in the same manner as a by-election. Should the Board member make their decision after the election meeting has ended, the replacement may be elected by postal ballot. Again, this should follow the standard procedure for a by-election, and all voting members of the community should be given the opportunity to vote.

May members of the Continental Board of Counsellors or members of the Auxiliary Board serve on an Assembly if they make the ninth member of a community?

Yes. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

The provisions of the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice state the principles governing the service of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members on administrative bodies; they do not abrogate the present exception to the rule which permits a Hand of the Cause, a Counsellor or an Auxiliary Board member to serve temporarily as a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the locality where he or she resides, in order to help preserve its existence. If the membership of the community is exactly nine, including the Hand of the Cause, Counsellor or Auxiliary Board member, or if, subsequent to Ridván, it falls to or below nine, the above exception will come into force so long as the National Spiritual Assembly recognises the continued existence of the Spiritual Assembly. Membership of a

Hand of the Cause, a Counsellor, or an Auxiliary Board member is of a temporary nature, and should cease when a replacement is available.

Letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 18 November 1973

Should the names of believers who have asked to resign from the Faith, but whose resignation has not yet been accepted, appear on the voting list?

Yes. Such people remain Bahá'ís until their resignation is accepted.

Should the name of a believer who is mentally ill or senile be removed from the voting list?

The voting rights of such believers may be wholly or partially removed if they are incapable of exercising them. Shoghi Effendi advised Local Spiritual Assemblies to consult with experts before arriving at a decision:

Regarding persons whose condition (i.e. mental condition) has not been defined by the civil authorities after medical diagnosis, the Assembly on the spot must investigate every case that arises and, after consultation with experts, deliver its verdict. Such a verdict however, should in important cases, be preceded by consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly. No doubt, the power of prayer is very great, yet consultation with experts is enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh. Should these experts believe that an abnormal case exists, the with-holding of voting rights is justified.

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 30 May 1936

A Local Spiritual Assembly may make a recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly for full or partial removal of voting rights in these circumstances. If the National Spiritual Assembly accepts that the person's right to be elected to a Bahá'í institution should be removed, the Local Spiritual Assembly may then remove that person's name from the voting list.

Should the name of a believer who is physically incapacitated be removed from the voting list?

Shoghi Effendi has said that a person may be excused from service on a Local Spiritual Assembly on the grounds of physical incapacity:

Concerning the question of refusal by certain believers to accept election to an administrative post ... Only cases of physical or mental incapacity, which, by their very nature, are extremely rare, constitute valid reasons for such an act.

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 86

Shoghi Effendi also said:

With reference to your question whether it would be permissible for a believer to resign from the Local Assembly; under special circumstances, such as illness, one may do so, but only after, and never before he has been elected to the membership of the Assembly.

Shoghi Effendi, Local Spiritual Assemblies, compilation, p. 13

Based on this guidance, the names of physically incapacitated believers should not be removed from the voting list. If a believer is elected to an Assembly and is unable to serve, he or she should accept the election and then discuss the matter with the Assembly at the earliest opportunity. If the Assembly accepts that the believer is physically incapable to serve (for a prolonged period, not just temporarily), it may, at its discretion, declare a vacancy and call a by-election.

Is it permissible for the friends to make statements at the Ridván election concerning their ability to serve?

No. Such decisions are left to the Local Spiritual Assembly to decide following the election. Believers who may wish to exempt themselves from such service should bear in mind the following words written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

The believers, for the sake of the Cause, now in the period of its infancy, should accept their duties in a spirit of self-sacrifice, and should be animated by the desire to uphold the verdict of the electorate, and to lend their share of assistance, however difficult the circumstances, to the effective administration of the affairs of the Faith.

Bahá'í News #152, April 1942, p. 2

What should a Local Spiritual Assembly do if it discovers an error in the voting list after the Assembly has been elected?

The voting list is determined at Ridván and all questions of eligibility are settled then by the appropriate body (the National Spiritual Assembly for a new Assembly, otherwise the Local Spiritual Assembly itself). The fact that a clerical error in the list is subsequently discovered does not invalidate the election.

Does a believer elected to serve on a Local Spiritual Assembly have an obligation to serve?

The Guardian wishes you to make clear to all the believers that membership in a Bahá'í Assembly or Committee is a sacred obligation which should be gladly and confidently accepted by every loyal and conscientious member of the Community, no matter how humble and inexperienced...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 2 July 1939 quoted in Dawn of a New Day, 1970 ed., p. 79

In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explained unacceptable reasons for refusal to serve:

...the Guardian strongly feels that criticism, opposition, or confusion do not provide sufficient grounds for either refusal or resignation.

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 86

Is the unwillingness of an individual to serve a valid reason not to proceed with Assembly formation?

No. Believers cannot be excused from serving on an Assembly merely because they are unwilling to do so:

The statement that it is a condition to the formation of a Local Spiritual Assembly that there be at least nine adult believers who are ready, willing and able to serve on the Local Assembly should not be taken as giving any Bahá'í the right to refuse to take part in the formation of the Assembly. It is merely a statement of a factual condition.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 June 1977

Further clarifying the matter in a letter to a National Assembly, dated 30 June 1968, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

Within the framework of this principle it is for each National Assembly to determine in each individual case whether a Local Spiritual Assembly should be recognised.

What action should an Assembly take in response to a member who refuses to participate in the formation of the Assembly?

At this stage in the development of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice advises that such friends should be lovingly educated as to the importance of their responsibilities:

It can therefore be seen that it is the duty of every Bahá'í in such a situation to take part in the joint declaration. If a Bahá'í, however, refuses to do so he should be helped to realise that he has committed a grave dereliction of his Bahá'í duty. In this stage of the development of the Cause a National Spiritual Assembly should not, generally, deprive a believer of his voting rights for such an offence, but should lovingly and patiently educate the friends in the importance of their responsibilities.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 December 1980

May a believer resign from the Local Spiritual Assembly?

A believer may resign from the Assembly if he or she has a valid reason for doing so, such as illness or travel. The believer must accept the outcome of the election and then discuss the matter with the Assembly at the earliest opportunity:

With reference to your question whether it would be permissible for a believer to resign from the Local Assembly; under special circumstances, such as illness, one may do so, but only after, and never before he has been elected to the membership of the Assembly.

Shoghi Effendi, Local Spiritual Assemblies, compilation p. 13

What reasons are not acceptable for proffering one's resignation?

1. Personal differences and disagreements among Assembly members:

Personal differences and disagreements among Assembly members surely afford no sufficient ground for such resignation, and certainly cannot justify absence from Assembly meetings. Through the clash of personal opinions, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and divine guidance revealed.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 3, p. 10

2. A poor attendance record:

Although it is highly desirable that all members of the National Assembly attend every meeting of the Assembly, the fact that a member is prevented by business or other circumstances from having a good attendance record is not a ground upon which a resignation can be accepted. It is not justified to accept a resignation or otherwise declare a vacancy on the National Assembly without a valid reason such as in the case of prolonged absence ...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 November 1968

3. To give someone else the opportunity to serve:

The Universal House of Justice has received your ... message ... advising that your National Assembly has accepted the resignation from the Assembly of ... for a number of reasons including the thought that his resignation was justified by ‘giving a chance to others to prove themselves worthy of occupying responsible posts in the administrative field’. We are asked to say that ... Although the other reasons referred to in your message may have offered sufficient grounds for accepting ... resignation, the point stated above does not.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 31 March 1986

A Local Spiritual Assembly may not accept a resignation from one of its members for a reason that is not valid:

... the action taken by the National Spiritual Assembly in recommending to the Assembly in question the necessity of refusing to accept the resignation of any of the members, except in special circumstances such as illness, is in strict conformity with Bahá’í procedure...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 28 February 1940

The Universal House of Justice has advised that acceptance of a resignation is a serious matter and should only be taken when there are compelling reasons:

As you are aware, acceptance of the resignation of an elected member of a Bahá’í administrative body is a serious matter which requires careful consideration. In response to questions in the past the House of Justice has stated that such an action should be taken only when there are compelling reasons for the resignation.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Australia, 31 October 2003

What should believers do if pressing commitments leave them short of time to fulfil their duties on the Local Spiritual Assembly?

A believer in this position should strive to remain on the Assembly. He or she may ask not to be appointed as an officer or to a committee:

As you know the beloved Guardian highly reprobated resignation from any office to which a believer has been elected and it is certainly best, at this present state of the Cause, for the friends to accept elective service whenever they are called upon to do so. However, there is no objection for an overburdened believer asking the Spiritual Assembly to which he may be elected not to appoint him as an officer or to a committee.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
9 December 1970*

Although it is a condition of service on an Assembly that a member be regularly able to attend meetings, if a member is unable to attend for a period, the following guidance will be helpful:

Also if certain members temporarily absent themselves from meetings there is no need to dissolve the Assembly; on the contrary the reluctant ones should be educated and encouraged to reassume their spiritual obligations as believers. A Spiritual Assembly is not based on nine people being available for every single meeting but on nine resident Bahá'ís doing their best to discharge their duty to the Spiritual Assembly when they are not prevented by illness or absence or some legitimate reason from doing so.

*Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly,
31 March 1945*

On the other hand, if the absence is 'prolonged' or 'excessive', the Assembly will have to consider solutions to the matter. Shoghi Effendi said that no time limit should be fixed beyond which a person is automatically dropped from the Assembly; each case should be considered on its merits. Depending on the circumstances, it may be necessary to declare a vacancy and call a by-election:

It is establishing a dangerous precedent to allow Assemblies to put a time limit on non-attendance of their members at meetings of the Spiritual Assembly, beyond which that person is automatically dropped from the Assembly and a vacancy declared....There should be no time limit fixed by Assemblies beyond which a person is dropped. Every case of prolonged absence from the sessions of the Assembly should be considered separately by that Assembly, and if the person is seen to not want to attend meetings, or to be held away from them indefinitely because of illness or travel, then a vacancy could legitimately be declared and a new member be elected.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Bahá'í News #208, June 1948, p. 7

The present practise of Bahá'í Administration is...to ascertain the duration of the absence of any member who has to be away. Should this period of time be excessive it is within the discretion of the Assembly to recognise a vacancy and call for a by-election. However this should not be lightly decided and the members declared elected at the Convention should remain in office unless there are insuperable difficulties which prevent it.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
10 December 1970*

If the Assembly ascertains that a believer is willing to serve but for a variety of reasons is not able to, it may declare a vacancy. The Assembly should consult with the person concerned and make a decision based on the best interests of the Faith:

It is only too obvious that unless a member can attend regularly the meetings of his Local Assembly, it would be impossible for him to discharge the duties

incumbent upon him, and to fulfil his responsibilities, as a representative of the community.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 February 1935

In any case of the perceived inability of a believer to serve, the Assembly should do its utmost to discover the difficulty and lovingly assist the believer to overcome it. Steps to take could include delegating members of the Assembly to visit the believer concerned, or asking the assistant to the Auxiliary Board to consult with the individual. The inability of an Assembly member to be extensively involved in the activities of the Bahá'í community often occurs in the case of a non-Bahá'í family or spouse who may not be sympathetic to amount of time being dedicated to Bahá'í service. Respect and empathetic loving-kindness are important when faced with such a situation.

May Assembly members resign or absent themselves from meetings to preserve Assembly unity?

Absence from Assembly meetings is not justifiable on the grounds of maintaining harmony:

The Guardian strongly feels that criticism, opposition, or confusion do not provide sufficient grounds for...resignation. ...The difficulties and tests involved in the acceptance of administrative posts, far from inducing the believers to dissociate themselves from the work of the Cause, should spur them on to greater exertions and to a more active participation in the privileged task of resolving the problems that confront the Bahá'í community ... The believers, for the sake of the Cause, now in the period of its infancy, should accept their duties in a spirit of self-sacrifice, and should be animated by the desire to uphold the verdict of the electorate, and to lend their share of assistance, however difficult the circumstances, to the effective administration of the affairs of the Faith.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in Bahá'í News #152, April 1942, p. 2

Personal differences and disagreements among Assembly members surely afford no sufficient ground for such resignation, and certainly cannot justify absence from Assembly meetings. Through the clash of personal opinions, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and divine guidance revealed.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 3, p. 10

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.

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

What should be done if an Assembly member is unwilling to serve on the Assembly?

The only circumstance in which the National Spiritual Assembly would need to be involved in a case of chronic absenteeism would be in that rare instance in which a believer, for no good reason, absolutely refused to accept his or her Bahá'í responsibilities. In such a situation the question of deprivation of voting rights could arise only after the believer had been repeatedly counselled and warned. In general, the

Universal House of Justice has advised that, at the present time, encouragement and education is likely to be far more beneficial than the application of sanctions:

While it is true that refusal to serve can ultimately incur the forfeiture of administrative rights, the House of Justice feels that your Assembly should bear in mind the caution voiced on behalf of the Guardian in the letter published on pages 86 and 87 of Principles of Bahá'í Administration: 'Only in cases where individual believers, without any valid reason, deliberately refuse the repeated exhortations, pleas, and warnings addressed to them by their Assemblies, should action be taken in removing them from the voting list.' At the present stage ... far more beneficial results are likely to be achieved by encouragement of the believers and by their education in the principles and significance of Bahá'í administration than by the threat or imposition of sanctions. Indeed the latter, if applied unwisely, could achieve the very opposite of what your Assembly is hoping to accomplish. ... [However,] it is to such extreme cases that you would be justified in applying sanctions if, after 'repeated exhortations, pleas and warnings' they persist in their attitude.

*Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
8 July 1980*

Generally, the membership of small local communities includes some believers who are new in the Faith and need to be lovingly nurtured in the responsibilities of being a Bahá'í, and others who are overburdened by a multitude of cares. How often one finds in small Assemblies members who, although devoted believers, have non-Bahá'í spouses and families to care for and are very limited in the time they can spend in Bahá'í administrative activities. Such believers should be encouraged, and loving appreciation should be shown for whatever services they can render, and nothing should be done, however unintentionally, to make them feel that they are living under the threat of administrative expulsion if they do not attend every Assembly meeting or decline a request to serve on a Committee".

*Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
8 July 1980*

In the case of an incorporated Assembly, what should be done if an Assembly member is unwilling to serve as a director of the company?

If a member of a Local Spiritual Assembly does not wish to serve on an incorporated body because of what that member perceives to be the onerous obligations of being a director, the National Spiritual Assembly should be informed and it will initiate one or all of the following processes:

1. A loving letter will be prepared for delivery from the National Assembly to the member encouraging them to continue in their service as a member of the Assembly, explaining the importance and significance of the Spiritual Assembly and of also of its incorporation. For example, in relation to incorporation, the letter might highlight that incorporation gives an Assembly legal status and it can thus act in law as a legal entity. It may also mention the importance that Shoghi Effendi gave to the status of an incorporated Assembly and how the victories of obtaining incorporated status are hard won goals of previous plans of the Faith that every effort should be made to preserve. The letter may also include a short paragraph on what the responsibility entails in reality and to dispel any doubts or myths the individual may have.

2. A member of the Auxiliary Board, the National Assembly or a Regional Council could be asked to visit the person at home to explain the importance of the Assembly and of its incorporated status.
3. After every effort has been made to urge the person to continue to serve and if the person insists that they wish to resign, the Local Spiritual Assembly may consider the matter and decide to accept the resignation.
4. If at the coming Riḍván, the only 9 members of the community include the person who has resigned then the Assembly will unfortunately lapse.

Is it permissible to elect a temporary Assembly member in place of one who must be absent for a while?

No:

As regards electing a temporary member to replace one who is absent the present practice of Bahá'í Administration is not in favour of this but prefers to ascertain the duration of the absence of any member who has to be away. Should this period of time be excessive it is within the discretion of the Assembly to recognize a vacancy and call for a by-election.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
10 December 1970*

May a Local Spiritual Assembly accept the resignation from membership of a member who is a member of a Regional Bahá'í Council or the National Spiritual Assembly?

The Universal House of Justice has advised:

The House of Justice has not approved the automatic resignation of a member of a National Spiritual Assembly from a Local Spiritual Assembly, but rather asks that the circumstances of each case be considered separately. Normally those elected to a Local Assembly and the National Assembly should make every effort to serve on both bodies, whatever the personal sacrifices may be. The House of Justice has stated that:

If it is too much of a burden and impractical for an individual member to assume the responsibilities of serving on both the National and the Local Assembly, he should present his case to both bodies, and seek consultation. Each case should be considered separately, depending on the circumstances of each member. It may be found that if a National Assembly member is an officer of the Local Spiritual Assembly, his resignation as officer of the Assembly, instead of the membership of that Assembly, may solve the problem for that individual.

In the event that a solution cannot be found, however, membership on the National Assembly would then take precedence over membership on the Local Assembly. The same principles would apply in the case of a believer who is elected to both a Regional Council and a Local Assembly. In such an instance, the Local Assembly would accept the resignation at its own discretion. Only if unusual circumstances arise would the case need to be referred to the National Assembly.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia,
4 March 2002*

Are there any situations that would justify a Local Spiritual Assembly removing a believer from Assembly membership?

A Local Spiritual Assembly may require a member to resign only on the grounds of physical incapacity or disloyalty to the Faith. The National Spiritual Assembly must be consulted first before any action is taken:

... under no circumstances has any local Assembly or the National Spiritual Assembly the right to require a duly elected member to resign, unless he is physically incapacitated or has proved to be disloyal to the Faith.

*Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly,
9 March 1940*

Any question of the possible disloyalty of an Assembly member must be referred immediately to the National Spiritual Assembly and action may not be taken pending its advice. If an Assembly member's mental capacity is in doubt the Assembly would need to make a recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly for full or partial removal of voting rights. It may be the case that the National Spiritual Assembly will remove the person's right to serve on an Assembly, without removing any other rights.

PROCEDURES FOR ELECTION

At what age can Bahá'ís participate in elections?

When Bahá'ís reach the age of 18, they are eligible to vote in Bahá'í elections; when Bahá'ís reach the age of 21, they are eligible to be elected. The Universal House of Justice has shared the following on this matter:

As stated in the Riḍván 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice, immediately following this Riḍván the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections is to be lowered to eighteen. The House of Justice has directed us to write to you with some further information relating to this change.

As you are already aware, the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly is to remain twenty-one; this shall also remain the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Regional Bahá'í Council. While a Bahá'í who has turned eighteen becomes eligible to vote at a unit convention, the age at which a believer becomes eligible for election as a delegate to National Convention shall remain twenty-one as well.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
21 April 2021*

Further to this, the Universal House of Justice has shared the following in relation to delegate allocation:

The numerical strength of each electoral unit should be determined by counting the number of believers who are eligible to vote, i.e. aged 18 and over.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
30 May 2021*

What is the procedure when there are exactly nine believers eligible to serve on a Local Spiritual Assembly?

Wherever there are nine Bahá'ís in good standing who are 21 years of age or older, resident in the same Bahá'í community, these Bahá'ís shall form, by joint declaration, a Local Spiritual Assembly. This would be the case even where there are further members of the community who are eligible to vote but not serve e.g. between the ages of 18 and 21. A Local Assembly may only be formed on the First Day of Ridván, which is on 13 Jalál according to the Bahá'í calendar (from sunset on 19 April to sunset on 20 April when Naw-Rúz is on 20 March and from sunset on 20 April to sunset on 21 April when Naw-Rúz is on 21 March).

Shoghi Effendi feels that in any locality where the number of adult believers reaches nine, a local Assembly should be established. He feels this to be an obligation rather than a purely voluntary act...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

If an Assembly is to be formed by joint declaration for the first time, the necessary formation forms should be filled and signed by all nine members eligible to serve. These forms will have been sent by the National Office prior to the Ridván elections. An effort should be made to meet and for all nine members to sign the form on the First Day of Ridván. If all nine members are unable to come together to sign the form, a sincere attempt must be made on the first day of Ridván to obtain all nine signatures. Failing this, the signatures must be collected and the formation form returned to the National Office as soon as possible after formation. If it is not possible to collect all nine signatures within a reasonable time of, say, a week or so, the form must still be returned with an explanation on the form as to why some signatures have not been collected. Upon receipt of the formation form, the National Spiritual Assembly will determine whether to recognise the new Assembly.

For the reformation by joint declaration of any previously formed Assembly – either continuing from the previous year or after a lapse – there should preferably be a meeting during the First Day of Ridván. However, whether or not there is a meeting, at least one member should submit a signed form with the names of the nine members of the Assembly.

What is the procedure when there are more than nine believers eligible to serve on a Local Spiritual Assembly?

A Local Spiritual Assembly may be elected only on the first day of Ridván, which is on 13 Jalál according to the Bahá'í calendar (from sunset on 19 April to sunset on 20 April when Naw-Rúz is on 20 March and from sunset on 20 April to sunset on 21 April when Naw-Rúz is on 21 March). On this day, a group of more than nine adult believers must hold a Ridván Meeting during which the election of the Local Spiritual Assembly takes place.

If the Assembly being elected is to be formed for the first time, the necessary formation forms should be filled out. These can be obtained by contacting the National office.

What occurs at the Riḍván Meeting?

On the first day of Riḍván, the Assembly or group of believers ready to form an Assembly celebrate the Holy Day [see the Guidance Notes on Bahá'í Holy Days] and also hold a Riḍván Meeting.

The Riḍván Meeting is the occasion for:

1. An account of the year's activities to be presented to the community by the outgoing Assembly (assuming that an Assembly was in operation the previous year). This can take the form of the Annual Report.
2. Consultation by the community on any matters pertaining to the Faith in the Assembly's area of jurisdiction.
3. Election of the new Assembly.

Can non-Bahá'ís be invited to the annual meeting to elect a Local Spiritual Assembly?

With respect to inviting non-Bahá'ís to the annual meeting held to elect a Local Spiritual Assembly, this is not usually permissible, owing to the private and sensitive character of this meeting. There may be particular instances when such invitations might be issued, and they should be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Local Assembly; permission should be granted only at the wise discretion of the Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the UK, 28 November 2011

How should the Riḍván Meeting be arranged?

The Assembly should prepare well in advance for the annual election, making sure that the electoral list is updated and circulated to all believers in the community who are eligible to vote, a place for the election is designated, and how tellers will be appointed. It is the National Assembly's recommendation to Local Assemblies that chief tellers be appointed in advance. Ballots should also have been sent to voters so that they are able to send a postal vote if unable to attend the meeting. Such votes are to be returned – having been sealed successively in both an inner and outer envelope – to the Secretary of the Assembly, and are not to be opened until the election. The ballot paper should not be signed but the word 'Ballot', the name (and preferably the address) of the sender should appear on the outer envelope. The National Assembly *recommends* that voters be asked to keep the inner envelope plain; however, the decision of whether names should be added to the inner envelope is left to the discretion of each Local Spiritual Assembly. This is in accordance with guidance from the Universal House of Justice, as stated in a letter written on its behalf dated 14 June 2017: “the institution responsible for a particular election has the duty of ensuring the validity and confidentiality of ballots cast, and all details in relation to such procedures are within its discretion”.

It is not appropriate for an individual in the community to go around collecting postal ballots from other believers.

As required in the model Articles of Association of an incorporated Local Spiritual Assembly in the UK ('the Model Articles'), all voting members of the community should receive, from the Local Spiritual Assembly, notice of the date, time and place of the election meeting, not less than 14 days prior to the election of the Local Spiritual Assembly. If no Assembly was in operation the previous year, then the election call can be sent by an individual as determined by consultation among the believers in the area. At the same time, each Bahá'í aged 18 and over should be provided with a ballot which can be mailed in, should anyone be unable to attend the meeting. A current list of the names (only) of all believers eligible for election, aged 21 and over, to the Assembly should also be included.

Following is a sample copy of an Election Call letter, which may be adapted as appropriate and sent with a selection of readings from the guidance of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice about Bahá'í elections:

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Riḍván Meeting of [*community name*] Bahá'í Community will be held on [*date*] at [*time*] at [*venue*]. We take this opportunity to call all community members to attend and participate in the election of the Spiritual Assembly of [*community name*] which will guide and coordinate the community's affairs until Riḍván [*year*]. The Riḍván Meeting will also provide opportunity for discussion of the Assembly's summary of the community's activities for the past year.

The Local Assembly urges everyone in the community to attend in order to cast their vote in the election, learn of the achievements of the community, contribute their suggestions and discussion and to socialise with their fellow Bahá'ís in the spirit of this 'Most Great Festival' during which Bahá'u'lláh announced His Mission.

A list of all eligible adult Bahá'ís in [*community name*] is attached. To assist you in your deliberations in this vitally important task of election, we have appended some quotations for your reading and prayerful reflection which we are sure you will find most useful in your preparation for this sacred task.

Should you not be able to attend the election in person, you may send in a postal vote, as follows:

- Complete a ballot with exactly nine names, no more, no less. Do not list any name more than once.
- Place this ballot in an envelope. Do not write on this envelope.*
- Place this envelope inside another envelope for posting. Mark this OUTER envelope with your name and indicate 'Ballot'. If the postal votes do not have a name on the outer envelope, they will be ruled out. The individual ballot for each family member should be in its own separate inner and outer envelopes.
- Please post your ballot to the Local Spiritual Assembly's postal address. It must arrive by no later than [*date*].

We pray that you will be able to join us for this most joyous Holy Day.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

* As indicated above, it is recommended that voters be asked not to write their name on the inner envelope; however, the choice is left to the discretion of each Local Assembly. The template letter can be adapted accordingly.

THE NATURE OF BAHÁ'Í ELECTIONS

Selection of readings from the beloved Guardian and the Universal House of Justice

To be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all of his fellow-believers, to keep in touch with local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and Assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness, and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá'í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 4 February 1935, in Lights of Guidance, p. 10, no. 34

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, 'they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections.'

The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 25 March 2007

...I earnestly appeal to every one of you ... to ... endeavour to approach your task ... with that purity of spirit that can alone obtain our Beloved's most cherished desire. Let us recall His explicit and often repeated assurances that every Assembly elected in that rarefied atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is in truth appointed of God....

In a letter written by Shoghi Effendi, 23 February 1924 to the Bahá'ís in North America

The electors ... must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership. ...

In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 1 July 1943 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran - translated from the Persian

I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences... We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others, of canvassing for any particular individual, but should stress the necessity of getting fully acquainted with the qualifications of membership referred to in our Beloved's Tablets and of learning more about one another through direct, personal experience rather than through the reports and opinions of our friends.

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the Spiritual Assembly of Akron, Ohio, 14 May 1927 in Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 46

Beware, beware lest the foul odour of the parties and peoples ... and their pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda—practices which are abhorrent even in name—should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught. The friends should, through their devotion, love, loyalty and altruism, abolish these evil practices, not imitate them. It is only after the friends completely ignore and sanctify themselves from these evils, that the spirit of God can penetrate and operate in the body of humanity, and in the Bahá'í community.

From a letter of the Guardian to the friends in Persia, January 30, 1923: The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections, p. 1

...the friends must whole-heartedly participate in the elections, in unity and amity, turning their hearts to God, detached from all things but Him, seeking His guidance and supplicating His aid and bounty.

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the friends in Persia, 30 January 1923 in The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections, p. 1

Let them exercise the utmost vigilance so that the elections are carried out freely, universally and by secret ballot. Any form of intrigue, deception, collusion and compulsion must be stopped and is forbidden.

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the friends in Persia, 16 January 1932 in The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections, p. 2

... I do not feel it to be in keeping with the spirit of the Cause to impose any limitations upon the freedom of the believers to choose those of any race, nationality or temperament, who best combine the essential qualification for membership of administrative institutions. They should disregard personalities and concentrate their attention on the qualities and requirements of office, without prejudice, passion or partiality.

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the friends in Persia, 11 August 1933 in The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections, p. 3

The strength and progress of the Bahá'í community depend upon the election of pure, faithful and active souls... Canvassing is deprecated...

Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the friends in Persia, 9 April 1932 in The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections, p. 3

... in the time of election, the friends should be in the mood of prayer, disinterestedness and detachment from worldly motives. Then they will be inspired to elect the proper members to the assemblies.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 7 June 1924

... the elector... is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 27 May 1927 in Bahá'í Administration

If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies . . . we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. Hence it is incumbent upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best

combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.”

Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 88

While there should be no mention of personalities in connection with Bahá'í elections, it is quite appropriate for believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected. Shoghi Effendi offers clear guidance on this point: ‘I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals.’ Among the ‘necessary qualities’ specified by the Guardian are those ‘of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience’. With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.’

The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'is of the World, 25 March 2007

Should electoral lists with believers' names be sent out with the election call?

Electoral lists showing the names (only) of Bahá'ís aged 21 and over, eligible for election may be distributed together with the election call to all Bahá'ís, aged 18 and over, entitled to vote in the election, if the Local Assembly so wishes. As privacy concerns have been raised with the National Assembly with respect to the distribution of these lists, the National Assembly clarifies 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 electoral lists. Accordingly, privacy concerns do not apply and institutions are free to distribute lists of the names of believers eligible for election.

However, lists containing addresses and contact phone numbers should not be distributed, without first seeking the consent of the individuals concerned.

How should the formation meeting be conducted?

A suggested agenda for this meeting follows:

1. Opening prayers.
2. Reading of appropriate Bahá'í passages concerning elections.
3. Advising the names of the appointed tellers – there is no set limit to the number of tellers to be appointed, but there should always be at least two. It is preferable that tellers be of voting age and belong to the area of jurisdiction in which the balloting is taking place. They can either be appointed by the outgoing Local Assembly or, if the Assembly so decides, by those gathered at the election meeting. If it is a new Assembly which is being elected, the tellers should be

appointed through consultation among the believers present. A Chief Teller should be appointed to report the results of the ballot.

4. Distribution of ballot papers.
5. Prayers and readings for the guidance of the voters.
6. Election.
7. Collection of ballots by tellers.
8. Presentation of the annual reports of the Local Spiritual Assembly.
9. Consultation on community affairs.
10. Tellers' report of the election outcome.
11. Approval of tellers' report.
12. Social activities.

Who can act as tellers?

... concerning the use of children as tellers at Unit Conventions and at the election of local Spiritual Assemblies... it is not appropriate for children to serve in this capacity.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom, 11 January 1998

...it would be better to stress the qualities required of a teller, rather than fixing a specific age limit. There are regions of the world where adult Bahá'ís are illiterate, and capable, trustworthy youth... are called upon to serve as tellers. However, in the United Kingdom the majority of adult believers are literate and capable to take on this important task. In general, believers who are chosen to serve as tellers at Bahá'í elections should be reliable, competent and mature, and should be aware of the responsibility with which they are being entrusted by their community.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom, 12 February 1988

VOTING PROCEDURES

How many believers must participate in the election?

There is no minimum number of believers who must participate in an election:

No quorum is required in the holding of an election for a Local Spiritual Assembly. This rule also applies in the case of by-elections. The mere fact that less than nine vote for the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly does not invalidate the election.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 16 April 1969

It should be noted, however, that adequate notice (at least 14 days) must be given before the election to enable as many believers as possible to participate.

Does a believer who is eligible to vote have an obligation to vote?

No. Ideally, everyone eligible to vote in an election should do so, but the right to vote does not make this an obligation. Shoghi Effendi said:

I feel I must reaffirm the vital importance and necessity of the right of voting – a sacred responsibility of which no adult recognised believer should be deprived, unless he is associated with a community that has not as yet been in a position to establish a Local Assembly. This distinguishing right which the believer possesses, however, does not carry with it nor does it imply an obligation to cast his vote, if he feels that the circumstances under which he lives do not justify or allow him to exercise that right intelligently and with understanding. This is a matter which should be left to the individual to decide himself according to his own conscience and discretion.

Letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 28 April 1935

The duty to participate in elections is further elucidated as follows:

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, 'they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections.' Through their wholehearted embrace of the Bahá'í electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh – the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice, 25 March 2007

How is the Local Spiritual Assembly elected?

It is the sacred duty of every Bahá'í elector to cast nine votes, neither more nor less, except under special circumstances, so as to ensure that the results of the elections for the Spiritual Assembly will be effective and on as wide a basis of representation as possible.

Shoghi Effendi, Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 47

If it is a new Assembly which is being elected, the tellers should be appointed through consultation among the believers present.

Voting is conducted by secret ballot. Local Spiritual Assembly members are elected on the basis of plurality, i.e. the nine members receiving the highest number of votes are elected. Each voter must vote for nine people. The whole ballot is invalidated if:

1. the same name appears more than once on the ballot;
2. more than nine names appear;
3. fewer than nine names appear.

If an ineligible or unidentifiable name appears in the ballot, that name is omitted and the other eight votes are counted.

Provided due notification of the formation of an Assembly has been sent out to all eligible members, the number of ballots cast is immaterial.

Can believers vote for themselves?

Yes:

A believer has the right to vote for himself during the election time, if he conscientiously feels the urge to do so. This does not necessarily imply that he is ambitious or selfish. For he might conscientiously believe that his qualifications entitle him to membership in a Bahá'í administrative body, and he might be right. The essential, however, is that he should be sincere in his belief, and should act according to the dictates of his conscience. Moreover, membership in an Assembly or committee is a form of service, and should not be looked upon as a mark of inherent superiority or a means for self-praise.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 March 1938, in Dawn of a New Day, pp. 200-201

What is the procedure if a believer cannot write?

The Universal House of Justice has given the following guidance for such circumstances:

The House of Justice commends your commitment to facilitating the participation in the electoral process of those members of your community who are functionally illiterate. It suggests that you devise a continuing program to educate these believers, as well as those who are literate, in their responsibility to become well-informed and active members of the Bahá'í community in which they live, so that they can choose wisely when they discharge the spiritual obligation to vote for the members of the Spiritual Assembly. They should also be deepened in the sacred nature of Bahá'í elections which are far different from elections held in the larger society.

At the time of balloting, the organizing Assembly should choose one or more trustworthy and reliable believers to act as recorders of a spoken vote for those who may be illiterate. It would be preferable if these recorders were chosen from among those not eligible to be elected, such as capable youth, but this is not an essential requirement. The recorders should be informed that they are obliged to exert the utmost effort to avoid any actions which might, consciously or inadvertently, influence the elector whose vote is being recorded, and they should prepare themselves spiritually to discharge this obligation in an acceptable manner. The recording process should be carried out in a manner which preserves confidentiality, so that others waiting for the recorder's assistance are not influenced.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 26 August 2003

What is the procedure for voting by mail?

When voting by mail the absentee ballot should be placed in two envelopes successively. The National Assembly *recommends* that voters be asked to leave the inner envelope

unmarked, but the choice of whether to ask voters to add their name is left to the discretion of Local Spiritual Assemblies. The outer envelope should have the full name and address of the sender and be clearly marked 'Ballot'. This enables the teller to identify the voter whilst maintaining the anonymity of the ballot. If the absentee voter mails his or her vote, he or she must mail it to the address advised on the election call, well enough in advance so that it is received before the election. Absentee ballots are opened at the election meeting, where they are counted with the votes cast at the meeting.

It is not appropriate for an individual in the community to collect postal ballots from believers within the community.

How is a tie vote resolved?

A tie occurs in the election of an Assembly when the number of believers receiving the same number of votes exceeds the remaining positions. When this occurs, a second ballot confined to the persons tied must be cast by those present at the election meeting. Before this second vote, the names of those tied should be announced. If the tie is not resolved then successive ballots between the persons tied are to be cast. However, if one of the persons tied belongs to a minority that person is accorded priority.

Relevant guidance about the resolution of a tie vote involving a minority is contained in the following letter from the Universal House of Justice:

The Guardian's instruction is clear and definite on the following point, namely that when an election results in a tied vote between persons, one of whom represents a minority, that person should unhesitatingly be accorded priority without having a re-vote to break the tie. There is no doubt on this point. What is not clearly defined, is 'majority' and 'minority'. The Guardian refers to 'various races, faiths or nationalities'. Where this is obvious, e.g. in the United States a white American and a Negro, there is no problem. In all cases of doubt a re-vote should be held.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 30 June 1966

In the case of a tie in any election, when it is obvious that one of the two people receiving the same number of votes is a member of a minority, that person should be given priority, and no re-vote is needed. In the case of any doubt about this, or if there is a likelihood of provoking disputation, there should be a re-vote. This can be decided by the tellers and the Convention officers, or by the outgoing Local Spiritual Assembly in the case of a local election.

Is it necessary to store used ballot papers?

The Universal House of Justice states:

...this is a secondary matter and left entirely to the discretion of the Spiritual Assembly.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, 11 January 1976

How is election information to be reported to the National Spiritual Assembly?

The report of the formation of each local Spiritual Assembly should be sent to the National Spiritual Assembly on the appropriate form as soon after its formation as possible, so that the National Assembly may consider whether or not it has been properly formed.

The instructions given on the form need to be followed exactly and, in order that all Assemblies receive communications from the National Spiritual Assembly, the completion and return of these forms should receive top priority from the elected Secretary, or outgoing Secretary if the election of the new Secretary has not already taken place.

As you know, the National Assembly can always look into the circumstances surrounding a local Spiritual Assembly election and use its discretion in determining whether, considering all circumstances, the existence of the local Spiritual Assembly should be recognised...

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
16 April 1969*

If the secretary has not received the forms by 14 April the National Office should be informed so that replacements can be sent.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Who convenes the first meeting of the Assembly?

The believer receiving the highest number of votes convenes the first meeting of the Assembly and presides until the permanent Chairman is elected. When two or more people receive the same highest number of votes the convenor may be determined by the drawing of lots.

When should the election of officers take place?

Permanent officers of the Spiritual Assembly should be elected immediately following the election or formation by joint declaration. Occasionally a meeting for the election of the officers cannot be held immediately, because of the inability on the part of one or more members to attend:

All members of the Assembly or committee must be given the opportunity to cast their ballots. If, therefore, all nine members of the newly elected Local Spiritual Assembly do not have the opportunity to vote for permanent officers immediately following the elections, the best procedure is to elect or appoint a temporary Chairman and Secretary immediately, who will serve until such time as all members of the Assembly can be properly notified and given the opportunity to vote.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
6 August 1967*

How are the officers elected?

Assembly officers are elected by secret ballot. The Assembly members vote for one officer at a time. The officers are elected by the majority vote of the entire membership of the Assembly (this means at least five votes). If it is impossible for a member of the Assembly to be present at the election, his or her vote may be received by mail or telephone:

...in case of unavoidable absence, it does not contravene the spirit of the By-Laws if the member casts his ballot by mail or by telephone. All other details in the application of these principles are within the discretion of the Assembly.

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
6 August 1967*

It should be noted, however, that receiving ballots by phone or mail will create difficulties if a second vote has to be cast because the first ballot has not produced a clear result. For this reason a member who is unable to attend the election in person should endeavour to make himself or herself available on the phone. It is then the duty of the tellers to receive votes over the phone. In rare cases a member, having been given the opportunity to participate in the election, chooses not to do so, in person, over the phone, or by mail. In such a case the election may proceed without that member; however, the minimum number of votes required for electing an officer remains five. It follows that at least five members must be willing to vote for an election to take place. In the event of nobody receiving at least five votes, there is re-voting until this is attained. There is no such thing as a 'tied vote' when voting for officers. An officer of an Assembly is elected by a majority of its members and until this majority (five or more) is obtained, all members remain eligible for the position and re-voting continues. In a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated 25 January 1967, the Universal House of Justice makes it clear that:

The situation resulting from a tied vote occurs only in an election decided by plurality vote.

If the outcome of a ballot is that no one has received a majority of the votes the full results of the ballot should be reported to all members before re-voting:

The complete results of each vote should be known to all members of the Assembly. Therefore, the names and tally should be given by the tellers, and if no member has received the required majority, the members should proceed to vote again. Voting should not be confined to those receiving the highest number of votes.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 4 August 4 1981.

The following is a suggested procedure for conducting the election. Please note, however, that this is merely a suggestion and can be tailored and varied if the Assembly so decides:

1. The Convenor appoints two or more tellers.
2. Tellers distribute voting slips to all members of the Assembly.
3. Prayers are said for guidance in the election.
4. The Convenor calls upon the members to vote for the one person they wish to elect to the office of Chairman.

5. The tellers collect the voting slips and count the votes.
6. The tellers report the results of the election to the members of the Assembly.
7. If one member of the Assembly has received a majority of five or more votes, that person is elected as Chairman and the Convenor hands over the meeting to the new Chairman.
8. If no member of the Assembly has received at least five votes, one of the tellers reads out the names of all members who received votes and the number of votes each member received.
9. All members of the Assembly remain eligible for election and a re-vote takes place, repeating the above procedure.
10. Steps 2-9 are repeated until a majority of five or more votes are received for one person.
11. The Chairman then follows the same voting procedure for election of Secretary, Treasurer and Vice-Chairman. This order may be varied if the Assembly so decides.

What should be done if, after repeated balloting, no member receives five or more votes?

If, after repeated balloting among those present, it is found that no member receives five or more votes, the Assembly must appoint one or more temporary officers to function until the next meeting. The choice of temporary officers should be made through consultation.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 28 June 1993

When must the National Spiritual Assembly be notified of the results of the election for officers?

If permanent officers are elected within 7 days of the Ridván election, the officer bearer and contact information form should be sent in together with the notification of Assembly Election form. Failing this, the signed Assembly officer/contact details information form may be sent in after officer elections.

How many officers does a Local Spiritual Assembly have?

The Articles of Association generally lists four specific officers of an Assembly: Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. With regard to the possibility of a member holding more than one of these four positions, the following guidance is relevant:

"...we are asked to say it is preferable that a person hold no more than one office, but it is within the discretion of your Assembly to permit a member to hold two offices.

"Regarding the specific instance you have cited, you should consider carefully whether one person can effectively perform as both Chairman and Secretary, given the requirements of each office."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Togo, July 4, 1984)

Other officers, e.g. Recording-Secretary, as may be found necessary for the proper conduct of its affairs, are permitted, and these additional officers may be appointed rather than elected.

What are the functions of Assembly officers?

Useful information about the functions of Assembly officers may be found in the following Guidance Notes:

- Secretary – [Current approaches to the administration of Assembly affairs](#)
- Treasurer – [Bahá'í Funds](#) and [Gift Aid](#)
- Chairman and Vice-Chairman – [Consultation](#)

May a believer decline to service as an office bearer?

If Assembly members believe that there are good reasons why they should not be elected to an office, they are free to put these reasons to the Assembly before the election for office bearers takes place. It can also be useful advisable at times to discuss the duties of each officer, without reference to individuals, before the ballots are cast:

...although it is the obligation of a Bahá'í to serve on an Assembly, either Local or National, when elected, on several occasions the beloved Guardian pointed out that before the election of officers, if any member had a good reason in his own opinion why he should not be elected to one of the offices of the Assembly, he was free to suggest that he should not be so elected. The House of Justice also feels that as the work of the Faith expands and the duties of officers, particularly on National Spiritual Assemblies, acquire more importance, it is permissible and at times advisable to discuss the duties incumbent upon and required of each officer before ballots are cast.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 9 February 1987

Can an office bearer be dismissed mid-term?

An Assembly officer cannot be dismissed mid-term because of perceived inability or a failure to fulfil any duties. The only circumstances in which dismissal is appropriate are those in which his or her loyalty to the Faith is in question. In such circumstances dismissal may follow a majority vote of the members of the Assembly:

As regards the question of what procedure the Bahá'í Assemblies should adopt when dissatisfied with the services of any of their officers. Should such dissatisfaction involve the loyalty of an Assembly officer to the Faith, he should, following a majority vote, be dismissed. But in case the dissatisfaction is due to the incompetence of a member, or simply to a neglect on his part to discharge his duties, this does not constitute sufficient justification to force his resignation or

dismissal from the Assembly. He should be kept in office until new elections are held.

Shoghi Effendi, Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 50

Prior to any such vote being taken, the matter must be referred immediately to the National Spiritual Assembly and no action taken before its advice is received.

VACANCIES

What is done when a vacancy occurs on a Local Spiritual Assembly?

When a vacancy on the Local Spiritual Assembly is declared, a by-election must be held as soon as possible. Written notices must be sent to all members of the community not less than 14 days before the date of the election. In the event that the number of vacancies exceeds four, making a quorum of the Local Spiritual Assembly impossible, the election must be held under the supervision of the National Spiritual Assembly. (See Article 14 of the Model Articles.)

Where an Assembly area has fallen to below nine members eligible to serve, any Bahá'í in good standing who enters the community and who is aged 21 years or over automatically becomes a member of the Assembly. Of course, if more than one person should move into the community, a by-election will need to be held.

What is the procedure for a by-election?

The procedure for a by-election is the same as that for the annual election. Written notice must be given at least 14 days in advance, and the election conducted as soon as possible after the vacancy occurs. It should be noted that the number of names to be written on the voting slip must be the same as the number of vacancies to be filled.

After the by-election has been held, the National Office should be given details of new Assembly membership and any possible changes in contact information.

What is the procedure for electing a new office bearer mid-term?

If it is necessary to elect a new office bearer mid-term, the same procedure is followed as that for the initial election. It is only necessary to fill the vacancy, not to elect all new office bearers. All members of the Assembly, including existing officers, are eligible for election to the vacant office. Details of the new office bearer should be sent to the National Office for their records.

NOTES FOR GROUPS

Groups, as embryonic Local Spiritual Assemblies, are encouraged to prepare themselves for the time when they become Assemblies. To this end they are encouraged to elect officers such as a Secretary, Chairman and Treasurer. It is also permissible for youth to serve as officers of Groups as a group is not an official administrative institution to which the age restriction of 21 applies.

Details of the group formation and their officers should be filled out in the Bahá'í Group form and submitted to the National Office immediately after election.