

ATTRIBUTES THAT A LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY SHOULD DEVELOP IN SERVING THE NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES AT THIS STAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CAUSE

What “state of mind” should an Assembly member have in serving on an Assembly?

Why is “great and continuous” expansion of the Bahá’í community essential?

As for the institutions, entry by troops will act upon them as much as they will act upon it. The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá’í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá’u’lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization. Progress towards that glorious realization requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá’í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions. This is a matter of immediate importance to Bahá’u’lláh’s avowed supporters in all lands.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, Ridván 1996

How can a Spiritual Assembly describe its responsibilities and how can it best realise these prospects?

How can a Spiritual Assembly measure its level of maturity?

For such an expansion to be stimulated and accommodated, the Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believers’ capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá’í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, Ridván 1996

What is the “steady development” of a Local Spiritual Assembly tied to and how can this best be understood?

As you are aware, often in a rural cluster made up of villages and perhaps one or two towns, while the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth is being established, the efforts of the friends are confined to a few localities. Once in

place, however, the pattern can be extended quickly to village after village, as explained in our Riḍván message this year. 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.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 20

What should a local Spiritual Assembly give attention to in its consultations and on its agenda?

How does the Assembly build its relationship with its Area Teaching Committee and the training institute?

How can it begin to lay the foundation to “building that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship” with the individual believer?

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.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 21

What must a local Assembly confine its discussions to?

Who should the core activities of the local community encompass?

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.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 22

What responsibility might a local Assembly have in terms of utilizing the human, financial and other resources at its disposal, in nurturing “an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action” and in caring for “the spiritual well-being of the community”?

How might an Assembly address inevitable problems that arise and, in so doing, promote unity and justice?

Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly's growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly's mind. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 23

What are some of the key challenges that a local Assembly should be mindful of, as its community become “drawn further into the life of society”?

As the community grows in size and in capacity to maintain vitality, the friends will, we have indicated in the past, be drawn further into the life of society and be challenged to take advantage of the approaches they have developed to respond to a widening range of issues that face their village. The question of coherence, so essential to the growth achieved thus far, and so fundamental to the Plan's evolving framework for action, now assumes new dimensions. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised.

Our Riqdán message described a few of the characteristics of social action at the grassroots, and the conditions it must meet. Efforts in a village will generally begin on a small scale, perhaps with the emergence of groups of friends, each concerned with a specific social or economic need it has identified and each pursuing a simple set of appropriate actions. Consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find constructive expression. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential

pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them – the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá'í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance. Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends to take advantage of methods and programmes of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá'í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraphs 24 & 25

What will be the outcome of an Assembly developing the attributes outlined by the Universal House of Justice in the above paragraphs?

What is outlined in the foregoing paragraphs represents only a few of the attributes which Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many villages of the world will gradually develop in serving the needs of communities that embrace larger and larger numbers. As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as “the trusted ones of the Merciful among men”. Thus will these Assemblies become “shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.”

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 26

Is there a difference between a Spiritual Assembly functioning in a major metropolitan area and one in a village?

Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly's development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population. The first necessitates the division of the Assembly's area of jurisdiction into neighbourhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each. The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area – social, political, and cultural – with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 27

We are repeatedly warned by Shoghi Effendi to never “lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which” “the administrative machinery of the Cause” “has been created”.

So how can we describe the purpose, the “twofold purpose” of the administrative machinery of the Cause?

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.”

The Universal House of Justice, Message to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors,
28 December 2010, paragraph 27