

The Bahá'í Plans and Spatial Unity

The worldwide Bahá'í community's dedication to the principle of racial unity dates back to the founding of the religion. Bahá'ís have held fast to key principles related to the unity of humanity, in general, and to racial unity, specifically, while learning to develop flexible new strategies that recognize contemporary challenges. They have done so within the framework of global plans that guide the growth and development of the Bahá'í community worldwide.

Since its birth in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has given rise to a religious community with significant capacity to unite people across traditional barriers of race, class, nationality, gender, and creed. Its cardinal teaching is the oneness of all humanity. Bahá'í administrative institutions have paid special attention to the issue of racial disunity in North America; much guidance on the subject relates to that continent. This has been true ever since the head of the Faith at that time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, visited North America in 1912. Through both word and deed, He emphatically encouraged interracial fellowship and disavowed traditional norms of racial segregation and discrimination. He urged people to overcome racial barriers through means such as intermarriage and multiracial meetings, and He praised the beauty of such diversity. These were remarkable exhortations for that time, when interracial marriage was illegal in many American states and Jim Crow laws discouraged free association between people of different racial backgrounds.¹ "Jim Crow" was the label given to a set of state and local laws upheld in the southern United States and dating mostly from the late nineteenth century. Designed to separate blacks and whites in most social and economic settings, they covered such institutions and places as public schools, public transportation, food establishments, and public facilities such as parks. The principles He enunciated for North America also pertained to the world with all its various forms of prejudice and social conflict.

Following His visit, in letters sent to the North American Bahá'í community and later published collectively as *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Abdu'l-Bahá presented a visionary spatial strategy for unity of the world's peoples. He asked North American Bahá'ís to travel first to other states and provinces in their own countries and then to a long list of countries, territories, and islands in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe, spreading the unifying teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to peoples of diverse race and ethnicity. He also placed great importance on teaching America's indigenous populations. His vision was to "establish the oneness of the world of humanity."² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), 42.

When leadership of the worldwide Bahá'í community passed to Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in 1921, he continued to emphasize interracial fellowship as a path to racial unity, even when custom discouraged such fellowship. Starting in the 1920s, his letters to North American Bahá'ís addressed these issues, with his most forceful communication being

the book-length 1938 letter *The Advent of Divine Justice*. In that work, he laid out principles for the success of a global plan for the growth and development of the Bahá'í community. This Seven Year Plan covered the years 1937 through 1944 and encouraged North American Bahá'ís to travel to other North, Central, and South American states, provinces, territories, and countries—many of them mentioned in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*—to share with peoples of all races, nationalities, and ethnicities the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís were encouraged to reach out in particular to “the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races. . . . No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered . . .”³ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 45. This letter was completed in December 1938 and published in book form the next year; these were the terms (“Negroes,” “Indians”) used for those populations at that time. Among the three major requirements for success of that plan was freedom from racial prejudice, a necessary precondition in that momentous spiritual endeavor to share the Faith with diverse people. ⁴The other two of three principles were rectitude of conduct, primarily for institutions, and a chaste and holy life for individuals. The assumption in the two subsequent global plans that Shoghi Effendi initiated, the second Seven Year Plan (1946-53) and the Ten-Year Crusade (1953-63), was that freedom from racial prejudice would continue to be important as the geographic scope of the Faith expanded to the entire world. ⁵For confirmation of the current relevance of these principles, see Universal House of Justice, 4 March 2020, letter to an individual, par. 3, reprinted in “Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Race Unity, 1996-2020.” Notably, each global plan aimed to increase the number of nationalities, tribes, ethnicities, and races represented within a faith that could then shelter its members from the pernicious influences of division, prejudice, and materialism. As “pioneers” spread the Bahá'í teachings, thus increasing the Faith's reach and diversity, Shoghi Effendi illustrated detailed global maps showing the increasing number of tribes, ethnicities, and peoples who were joining the Bahá'í Faith worldwide. ⁶Pioneers are Bahá'ís who travel to other places in support of the global plans. Usually moving without financial support from the Bahá'í Faith, they find jobs or other means of income and live among their new population as contributing members of the community. In addition to *The Advent of Divine Justice*, see for more description of the global plans: Melanie Smith and Paul Lample, *The Spiritual Conquest of the Planet: Our Response to Global Plans* (Palabra Press, 1993) and June Thomas, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi* (Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1999).

Since its first election in 1963, the worldwide governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, has continued to champion the central principles of racial unity and diversity. Between 1964 and 1996, it launched five global plans that reached the world's diverse peoples in various ways, such as by sending travelers to various countries.

7“Preface,” *The Four Year Plan: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications, 1996), iii. As time passed, however, it became increasingly obvious that the ability of the Bahá’í community to effectively contribute to constructive social change and new models of social organization was limited. One reason was that, despite its wide geographic spread, the Bahá’í community was still relatively small in number. The other was the lagging moral and spiritual state of the world’s people in the face of rapid social, scientific, and technological developments and of a rampant materialism.

Place and the Institute Process

In a new series of global plans initiated in 1996 with the call for a “network of training institutes,” the worldwide Bahá’í community began to approach expansion in a different way.⁸The Universal House of Justice initiated in 1996 a series of five plans that would lead the worldwide community until 2021, the anniversary of the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “Preface,” *The Five Year Plan, 2011-2016: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications, 2013), iii. One innovation was the creation of training institutes. These “centers of learning” aim to build human resources and improve communities through a spiritually-based training program designed for different age groups, ranging from children to adults.⁹Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 letter, par. 28 and 29. Listed are only a few of the skills that the training institute facilitates. They embody a form of distance education that can reach even remote areas of the globe. By 1999, these centers of learning had made “significant strides in developing formal programmes and in putting into place effective systems for the delivery of courses.”¹⁰Universal House of Justice, 26 November 1999 letter, par. 2. The program involves direct education as well as participatory study circles open to youth and adults, with all activities open to people of all faiths, races, and creeds. The Universal House of Justice calls the efforts for capacity building for advancing community building and propelling social change the “institute process.” After a few years of reflective learning, the worldwide Bahá’í community adopted, from among several options, the curriculum that first arose from the Ruhi Institute in Colombia.

As the Universal House of Justice learned more about the institute process and as Bahá’ís gained more experience with Ruhi educational materials, they began to focus their efforts on neighborhoods and villages.¹¹Bahá’ís organized groups of metropolitan areas, cities, villages, or rural areas into “clusters,” defined by Bahá’ís but based on existing secular conditions, specifically “culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants.” Universal House of Justice, 9 January 2001 letter, par. 10. The Universal House of Justice sent messages between 2010 and 2016 that described salutary experiences in several such receptive locations. It advised the world’s Bahá’ís to look for “smaller pockets of the population” that would benefit from the institute process. It defined such pockets: “in an urban

cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose.”¹²Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010 letter, par. 5.

In such places, the role of the institute would be both to nurture the population spiritually and to enable the building of capacity and community. The means for doing so were deeply participatory: to “enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives.”¹³Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010 letter, par. 5, 14. By 2013, the Universal House of Justice could report clear evidence for the power of “community building by developing centers of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages.” In 2016, the Universal House of Justice reported that, because of such strategies, the Teachings of the Faith were influencing people in many different spaces: “crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths.”¹⁴Universal House of Justice, 26 March 2016 letter, par. 5.

All of this was an effort to support salutary transformation in the lives and fortunes of the world’s people. In 2015, the Universal House of Justice described the following: “A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. ... Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change. ... Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities.”¹⁵Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015 letter, par. 24.

Addressing Racial Unity through Institutes

In 2010, the Universal House of Justice bemoaned that “prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity.” It noted, however, that its current global plans could “build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.” It expressed the hope that the process set in place by these plans would steadily unfold to “disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another.”¹⁶Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 letter, par. 34.

Indeed, institute-related activities began to bring into collaboration members of diverse faiths, creeds, and ethnicities, as whole villages, cities, and neighborhoods around the world studied unifying spiritual principles and turned away from separations by race, ethnicity, caste, or class. In 2018, the Universal House of Justice reported on results “from country to country.”

“As the work in thousands of villages and neighbourhoods gathers momentum,” it wrote, “a vibrant community life is taking root in each.” The House of Justice then explained that, as this happens, a “new vitality emerges within a people taking charge of their own development. Social reality begins to transform.”¹⁷ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2018 letter, par. 3

The Universal House of Justice sent special assurances to North American believers about the effectiveness of the institute process. Steady promotion of the institute process “will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi ... when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.”¹⁸ Universal House of Justice, 26 March 2016 letter, par. 3. In this letter and in many others, the Universal House of Justice affirmed the potential benefits of the institute process as a tool for racial unity.

The North American community needed such assurance. The United States, especially, continues to experience problems of racial disunity, characterized by lingering racial segregation, social and economic lags for minority-race people, and political/cultural confrontation. Racial prejudice continues to be a problem ingrained in society and in its geographic places. Metropolitan areas in the United States demonstrate spatial inequality, implanted by historic federal and state policies or by ongoing discrimination and exclusionary zoning. Efforts to resolve problems falter: “Any significant progress toward racial equality has invariably been met by countervailing processes, overt or covert, that served to undermine the advances achieved and to reconstitute the forces of oppression by other means.”¹⁹ Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020 letter, par. 2.

Not just in the United States, but in other countries, place-based action in small geographic areas could encounter such built-in racial disunity. Many metropolitan areas and cities around the world contain sectors or neighborhoods set aside for specific racial, ethnic, or national groups and habitually marginalize the poor. Spatial segregation by race, ethnicity, or income level persists, often oppressing the disadvantaged. How, then, could the current plan’s institute process, an educational initiative based in discrete neighborhoods or localities—some of them defined by racial exclusion—promote racial unity?

Consider two hypothetical families as examples. The first family lives in a modern metropolitan area. That family lives a life of relative prosperity, is not a “minority,” and holds no antagonism toward people of minority races—although its everyday life is isolated by race and income level. Only families of its own, comfortable income bracket live in its section of the city, because of historic circumstances or municipal laws limiting access. Because of longstanding exclusionary practices, the city where this family lives is home to few minority-race people. Schools are similarly homogeneous, and the family’s children have no friendships with diverse people. How might this family help promote racial unity?

The second family lives in the same metropolitan area. That family is of a minority race and has low income. It lives in an isolated neighborhood, housing families with very similar characteristics to its own. Like the first family, this family also has no antagonism toward other racial groups. Its most challenging issue is not overcoming its own individual prejudices, but surviving in a hostile environment. Its children go to inferior schools; its adults suffer from underemployment or unemployment; and the public services it receives are grossly inferior to the norms for its nation. How might this family make sense of the concept of racial unity, while hemmed in by the geographic proof of disunity?

The Universal House of Justice has explained that different circumstances call for different approaches. Both families and the neighborhoods they live in contain people who can benefit from the institute process, but the utility of the process may manifest itself differently in the two neighborhoods. The specific approach to racial unity would vary as well. Here are four of several possible approaches:

Become free from racial prejudice

The first principle is individual freedom from racial prejudice. The Bahá'í Writings offer much guidance on exactly what this means, but they refer to both attitudes and actions. What binds this guidance is a fundamental recognition of our common humanity and an unwillingness to prejudge people because of race, color, or other exterior characteristics. The Bahá'í teachings also counsel action. In 1927 Shoghi Effendi gave specific spatial advice; he told Bahá'ís to show interracial fellowship “in their homes, in their hours of relaxation and leisure, in the daily contact of business transactions, in the association of their children, whether in their study-classes, their playgrounds, and club-rooms, in short under all possible circumstances, however insignificant they appear.”²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922-1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), 130. Bahá'í institutions have continually confirmed the importance of mirroring forth freedom from racial prejudice in both attitude and action.

Both the family of comfortable means and the family of circumscribed means should treat others without racial prejudice, but their charges differ. Although Shoghi Effendi noted that both blacks and whites should make a “tremendous effort,” he called on whites to “make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem.” Blacks, in turn, were to show “the warmth of their response” when whites did reach out.²¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 33. In conditions of geographic isolation, a majority-race family may need to make special efforts to help promote racial unity. This might require seeking diverse friendships, associations, and social activities, as a matter of general principle and as a service to its own children. It is important to replace racism with “just relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions or society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as ‘other.’” The change required is not merely social and economic, but above

all moral and spiritual.”²²Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020 letter, par. 4.

Reach out to minority peoples

This, too, is a principle enshrined within Bahá'í history and widely assumed in the present activities of the global community.²³Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015 letter, par. 25. This principle applies to both families in our hypothetical examples. Assume they are all Bahá'í. The more privileged family might consider how to help greater numbers of minority people gain access to the capacity-building potential inherent in the institute process. This would require some form of access and communication; fortunately, a range of possibilities exists. In a letter, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States recommended that Bahá'ís consider homefront pioneering into communities predominantly populated by African-Americans, Native Americans, or immigrants.²⁴National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 31 January 2018 letter, par. 4. Alternatively, such a family might steer toward mixed-race neighborhoods when it makes its next move from one domicile to another. Another strategy would be to befriend and engage minorities in their own locality, or to reach across municipal boundaries and associate with people who live in areas segregated from their own. This may require a concerted, conscious effort to overcome the geographic boundaries that exist and to offer genuine friendship. The second family, living in a high-minority, low-income area, could find it easier because of location to offer neighbors local opportunities for collaboration as part of the institute process, although that family, too, may face challenges of agency and receptivity.

Utilize the institute process as a matrix for racial unity

The institute process can help build community as a part of a process of social transformation. Both hypothetical neighborhoods could benefit; usefulness of the institute process is not dependent on the socio-economic status or racial characteristics of any geographic area. The institute process can support racial unity in part because it allows people to converse on related topics in a warm and loving atmosphere, and because it allows them to walk together along several paths of service to humanity.²⁵See for example Universal House of Justice, 10 April 2011 letter. Other relevant letters compiled in “Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Race Unity, 1996-2020.” This process would work best as a tool for racial unity, of course, with diverse participants. For the two families that we have described, both in homogeneous areas, it could be difficult to arrange activities for racially diverse participants, dampening the ability of the institute process to support racial unity. Even so, the spiritual principles enshrined within the institute curriculum are a useful foundation for raising consciousness in people about the importance of racial unity, since those principles include such virtues as respecting the nobility of human beings, valuing kindness and generosity, seeking justice, and nurturing the life of the soul as opposed to

materialistic pursuits. If more people of privilege understood and acted on such principles, this would help counteract self-righteousness, prejudice, and lack of empathy, shortcomings that pose major barriers for racial unity. Likewise, understanding such principles could be of tangible, even life-saving importance for a minority-race family living in a low-income area experiencing social disintegration. Indeed, a main protection against pernicious influences in such a situation may be spiritual education for themselves and for their surrounding neighbors, giving rise to a process of social transformation.

Aim toward social and economic development

We have already mentioned several benefits that could come from engagement in the institute process, including elevation of spiritual dialogue, the education of children, the nurturing of junior youth, and the promotion of moral conduct. All of this could lead to various forms of social action. Built into the institute process is the idea that groups of people can raise up protagonists for social action from within their own communities. This happens by nurturing individuals' capacity and then enhancing collective capacity as the community consults on possibilities for action that address complex needs. These needs could range from health and welfare to water safety, the provision of food, or neighborhood beautification. Although this level of collective action is still, in some nations, only in embryonic form, in other nations the institute process has led to a flowering of social and economic development initiatives that are borne out of a deep understanding of the needs of local inhabitants of all faiths, races, and ethnicities, joined together in unified action.

Such action could take place in a wide variety of neighborhoods of various economic means. This characteristic would be of particular importance, however, to the hypothetical low-income family. From their perspective, a necessary aspect of "racial unity" could indeed be support for their movement toward sustenance and survival. The training institute could offer short-term support from visiting helpers, teachers, or study circle tutors. The aim, however, would be for residents to arise to become tutors within their own neighborhoods, becoming indigenous teachers and accompanying growing numbers of their fellow residents to contribute to the betterment of their community. The institute process is "not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of the congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity."²⁶ Universal House of Justice, 10 April 2011 letter, par. 4. People living in a particular place could begin to reshape their destinies as they engaged growing numbers of friends and neighbors in collective action.

Furthering the Racial Unity Agenda

The struggle for the unity of humanity is a long-term one that requires much concerted action along the way. Members of the Bahá'í Faith have continued to advance international, national, and local plans and efforts designed to further such unity. On the specific matter of racial unity, both

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi provided unifying spiritual guidance within the framework of visionary, international plans designed to bring the world’s people into one human family. They also addressed such matters as how to change both attitudes and actions in order to overcome racial prejudice and help bring about unity. The Universal House of Justice has supported and advanced these strategies.

This worldwide governing body has now offered humanity a potent tool in the form of the institute process, an educational strategy that can help prepare people to build up their communities and contribute their share to the betterment of humanity. The Universal House of Justice has also turned the attention of Bahá’ís to the challenge of helping to bring about such social transformation within small portions of nations, such as villages or neighborhoods that are part of cities or metropolitan areas. This article concerns one of the dilemmas connected with efforts to advance unity, particularly racial unity, in such places: society has segmented people and communities by divisive lines that have cemented disunity. This poses a spatial problem that needs thoughtful action in response.

We used two hypothetical (but realistic) examples to serve as thought experiments, efforts to think through the implications of geographic space for race unity action within the framework of the institute process. The examples were just that; the point is that people in many places face difficulties of various kinds in promoting a race unity agenda in contemporary times. The challenge is to assess our own situations and to take appropriate action. We do know, based on experience from around the globe, that the institute process offers a powerful tool for social transformation and for bringing about several forms of social unity, including racial. It is also capable of raising up individual protagonists who can begin to reshape themselves and their communities in myriad positive ways, a matter of great importance particularly to neighborhoods suffering the consequences of historic racial inequality.

Study circles, a fundamental element of the institute process, have an essential function in what the Universal House of Justice sees as a process of community building starting with spiritual empowerment and moral education, extending to social action at a small scale, and ultimately expanding to include progressively complex community-building projects. The experience that is being gained opens the possibility for the greater influence of spiritual principles in important matters of public discourse, such as racial unity, the environment, health, and other areas of concern. In such ways, the process of implementing Bahá’u’lláh’s vision, furthered by the institutions of His Faith, is advancing.

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