

Spiritual Institutions: The Foundation for Oneness

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"He Who is your Lord,
the All-Merciful, cherisheth
in His heart the desire of
beholding the entire human race
as one soul and one body."

— Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of
Bahá'u'lláh, p. 214

"The history of humanity as one people is now beginning." We are moving from
"the exper-ience of tribes, cultures, classes and nations" to the "physical
unification of the planet." Throughout the world, immense intellectual and
spiritual energies are seeking expression." Everywhere "the signs multiply that
the earth's peoples yearn for an end to conflict" and long for "the age-old

dream of global peace." We hunger for "a vision of human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term."— The Prosperity of Humankind, a statement written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Bahá'u'lláh provided a solution. He has brought us a system for organizing and uniting the world in His Administrative Order. This Order is radically different from the administrative institutions seen in our modern day governments. Only this system of institutions and the unique process for electing them can ever hope to organize all the diverse inhabitants of the planet into one organic whole.

The Administrative Order is established on the fundamental truths of the Bahá'í Revelation. Its institutions have emerged gradually and organically. As the Bahá'í community has grown, the characteristics and functions of each of the institutions have evolved, and are still evolving. This process of gradual change will continue until the World Order destined in the Bahá'í Revelation emerges in its full splendor.

"The source from which it derives its inspiration is no one less than Bahá'u'lláh Himself. Its shield and defender are the embattled hosts of the Abhá Kingdom. Its seed is the blood of no less than twenty thousand martyrs who have offered up their lives that it may be born and flourish."— Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 156

Bahá'u'lláh has provided for the organization of His Faith around the world through a net-work of elected institutions. Each community is cared for by a Local Spiritual Assembly. Regional Bahá'í Councils serve in designated regions. Countries are unified under National Spiritual Assemblies. And all the Bahá'ís in the world are connected through the loving guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

"Bahá'u'lláh has drawn the circle of unity. He has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity." — `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 54

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant

"A day will come wherein the lights of unity will enlighten all the world."— `Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 28

"Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps . . ."— `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 80

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant is unique in that its institutions and laws give us a complete blueprint for a divinely ordained world order destined to bring the world to unity. " Nowhere in the sacred scriptures of any of the world's religions do we find any provisions establishing a covenant or

providing for an administrative order that can compare in scope and authority."

"This Administrative Order is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to apply His legislative ordinances."

— Bahá'u'lláh, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 145

"The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous system — the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed." — Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 85

Divine Institutions

The institutions of the Faith all spring directly from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, His successor and Interpreter, and Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian. This divinely re-vealed World Order has two types of institutions that encircle the world like twin arms. On the left side of the globe are the elected institutions. On the right side are the appointed institutions, which guide and encourage elected institutions and draw us all to the guidance of God's Word.

Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi each appointed Hands of the Cause of God. The Hands have traveled all over the world to encourage Bahá'ís in their teaching efforts and help them establish communities. The Universal House of Justice appoints the Continental Boards of Counselors every five years to serve specific regions of the world. The Counselors appoint the Auxiliary Board members, who encourage teaching and help to keep the Faith unified and safe from attack. Each Board member appoints assistants, who serve local communities.

Local communities are composed of individual believers who are like a solid, unified foundation upon which are built the elected institutions of the Faith. Individual believers elect Local Spiritual Assemblies, which later elect Regional Councils. The individuals in each area also come together to elect delegates, who in turn elect the National Spiritual Assembly. National Spiritual Assemblies elect the Universal House of Justice, the supreme administrative body for the world.

The elected institutions function as consultative bodies of nine individuals. No one person has special authority over another. The elected institutions have the power and authority to administer the affairs of the Faith as a group working together in unity.

Bahá'u'lláh

Local
Spiritual Assemblies
`Abdu'l-Bahá
Individual
Believers
Elected
Institutions
The
Guardianship
Appointed
Institutions
The
Hands of the Cause of God
The
Universal House of Justice
The
Continental Boards of Counselors
National
Spiritual Assemblies
The
Auxiliary Boards and their assistants
Regional
Bahá'í Councils

"From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions."— `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 80

Local Spiritual Assemblies

Bahá'u'lláh, in His Most Holy Book, has stated, "The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counselors to the number of Bahá." Each Assembly is composed of nine individuals elected each year by the local adult believers in every community. At this time these institutions are called Assemblies. In the future, as Assemblies mature, they will be called Houses of Justice.

As explained by the Universal House of Justice, "The divinely ordained institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly operates at the first levels of human society and is the basic administrative unit of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. It is concerned with individuals and families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances, and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation." Spiritual Assemblies are "channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes."

Regional Bahá'í Councils

In 1997 the Universal House of Justice stated, "the time has arrived for us to formalize a new element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, to be designated as `Regional Bahá'í Councils.'

Regional Bahá'í Councils partake of some, but not all, characteristics of Spiritual Assemblies, and thus provide a means of carrying forward the teaching work and administering related affairs of a rapidly growing Bahá'í community in a number of situations." The main task of Regional Bahá'í Councils is to devise and carry out expansion and consolidation plans in close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies. Regional Bahá'í Councils are composed of nine members. They are elected every year by members of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the four regions defined by `Abdu'l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan: the Northeastern States, the Southern States, the Central States and the Western States. These elections are completed on November 26, the Day of the Covenant.

National Spiritual Assemblies

When the number of believers in a country grows and reaches a considerable size, a National Spiritual Assembly, representative of the friends throughout the country, should be established.

"Its immediate purpose is to stimulate, unify and coordinate . . . the manifold activities of the friends as well as the Local Spiritual Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.— Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 39

The National Spiritual Assembly is elected every year by 171 delegates at a National Convention. Each electoral unit around the country has a unit convention in the fall for the purpose of electing delegates to the National Convention the following spring. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States has its National Center and administrative offices in Illinois, near the House of Worship in Wilmette.

The Universal House of Justice

In His Tablet of Carmel, Bahá'u'lláh announces, "Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Bahá who have been mentioned in the Book of Names." With these words He has called into being the Universal House of Justice, the Supreme Institution of the Bahá'í Faith, with its Seat on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

The Universal House of Justice, which the Guardian said would be regarded by posterity as "the last refuge of a tottering civilization," is the only

infallibly guided institution in the world. It is described by `Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament as "the source of all good and freed from all error."

"The Guardian has in his writings specified for the House of Justice such fundamental functions as the formulation of future worldwide teaching plans, the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, and the guidance, organization, and unification of the affairs of the Cause throughout the world."— The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice, p. 89

Elections ...Everywhere

"On the election day the friends must whole-heartedly participate in the elections, in unity and amity, turning their hearts to God."— Shoghi Effendi, Letter to the friends in Persia, February 27, 1923

"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." We are encouraged by the Universal House of Justice to see the role of the individual who elects these institutions as serious and important. These institutions will operate in a World Order design-ed to channel the forces of a new civilization. "The electors must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership" explains Shoghi Effendi. "I cannot but pray that they may be guided in their choice, and discharge honourably their functions."

"Election to an Assembly, from a Bahá'í point of view, is not a right that people are entitled to, or an honor to which they should aspire; it is a duty and responsibility to which they may be called. The purpose is that those who are elected to an Assembly should be the most worthy for this service; this does not and cannot mean that all those who are worthy will be elected. It is expected that, through training and experience in the process of Bahá'í elections, the members of the electorate will have raised their consciousness of their responsibility to vote for only those who satisfy the requirements that the Guardian has outlined. They will, therefore, see it as their continuing duty to familiarize themselves with the character and abilities of those who are active in the community, so that, when the time for an election comes, they will already have some idea of the people from among whom they must make their choice."— The Universal House of Justice, November 16, 1988, — to the International Teaching Center

The election of Bahá'í institutions is a sacred responsibility. Every adult believer is encouraged to participate.

Local Elections In April Local Spiritual Assemblies are elected each year on

the First Day of Ridván.

Regional Councils

In November Assemblies meet and their members cast ballots to elect Regional Councils.

Unit Convention

In October individuals gather in each electoral unit to elect delegates to the National Convention the following spring.

National Convention

Each spring the delegates from electoral units around the country gather at National Convention to elect the National Spiritual Assembly.

International Convention

Every five years the National Spiritual Assemblies from every country travel to Haifa, Israel, to elect the Universal House of Justice.

"Spiritual Assemblies are . . . heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions." — `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 80

A Rarified Atmosphere

"Every Assembly elected in that rarified atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is, in truth, appointed of God."— Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 65

Who Best Demonstrates these Qualities?

- Unquestioned loyalty
- Selfless devotion
- A well-trained mind
- Recognized ability
- Mature experience

A Bahá'í election should be a prayerful, joyful, and spiritual experience. It is completely different from the methods and practices of elections in political systems. Ballots are cast privately and confidentially, and no electioneering or nominations are permitted. In a local election individual believers have the responsibility to get to know one another and find through personal experience who may be best qualified to serve.

"Consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice 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," is our guidance from Shoghi Effendi. "Bahá'í electoral

procedures and methods have, indeed, for one of their essential purposes the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of maintaining his full freedom in the elections, they make it incumbent upon him to become an active and well-informed member of the Bahá'í community in which he lives."

Ballots are counted privately, and the names of the nine individuals with the most votes are read to those who are gathered. If there is a tie, a member of a racial minority is given priority. Elections at every level are handled in a similar manner.

Divinely Guided Spiritual Assemblies

"Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the spirit of God. Their defender is `Abdu'l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His Wings. What bounty is there greater than this?"— `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 6

When the Assembly is in session, it is more than just a group of individuals having a meeting. When the hearts of the members turn toward God, they become united and the Assembly receives God's guidance. Shoghi Effendi reminds us of Bahá'u'lláh's promise that "in every Assembly where unity and harmony prevail, there His glorious spirit will animate, sustain and guide all the friends in their deliberations."

"The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold," explains `Abdu'l-Bahá.

"`Abdu'l-Bahá is constantly engaged in ideal communication with any Spiritual Assembly which is instituted through the divine bounty, and the members of which, in the utmost devotion, turn to the Kingdom and are firm in the Covenant. To them He is heartily attached and with them He is united by everlasting ties." — `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 6

On April 21, 1863, Bahá'u'lláh declared openly that He was the Promised One. This day is celebrated as the First Day of Ridván. Bahá'u'lláh declared that He was sent by God to show us how to build God's Kingdom on Earth. He taught that the foundation of God's Kingdom on earth is the Local Spiritual Assembly.

On this same day each year, in every corner of the earth, Bahá'ís gather in their local communities to form a Spiritual Assembly. People of all colors, of all backgrounds, of all income levels come together to vote in cities and villages in obedience to God's instructions. Bahá'u'lláh has given each of us the opportunity and the responsibility to play his or her part in building God's promised Kingdom.

There is no one else to do this job. Bahá'u'lláh has given us the instructions. It is up to each of us to carry them out.

This blessed day begins at sunset on April 20 and ends at sunset on April 21. Each Bahá'í community decides for itself the exact time that the Bahá'ís will gather to form the Assembly. By the end of the day, new "heavenly gardens" will have been planted throughout the earth.

Holding Assembly Elections

At least two weeks before April 21, all the Bahá'ís in the community over the age of 21 should be invited to the gathering where the Spiritual Assembly will be elected. Unlike political elections, no one is nominated and discussion of names before the election is forbidden. God forbid, no one should seek to be elected. We are trying to do God's will; not our own.

When it is time to vote, our hearts are drawn to God through prayer. In that special atmosphere, we write down the names of the nine adults in the community whom we feel are the most dedicated and the most qualified. These names are written down in secret and given to the persons chosen to count the ballots. The ballots are counted privately and the names of the nine with the most votes are read to those gathered. These nine form the new Local Spiritual Assembly for that community. They have been called by God to serve with great humility.

Whom should you vote for? During prayer and while filling out the ballot, who comes to your heart? You might ask yourself: Who do you respect? Who is wise? Who serves the community eagerly? Who is teaching the Bahá'í Faith? Who goes out of the way to serve others?

What Do Spiritual Assemblies Do?

The individual members of the Spiritual Assembly have no power in the Bahá'í community. They are simply servants of God like everyone else. But when the Assembly as a whole makes a decision, the believers follow in unity. So how do these Assemblies make decisions and guide the community?

After the Assembly is elected, the nine members, or as many as possible gather to organize the Assembly. The Assembly elects its officers: a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and treasurer. The Assembly then begins consulting on the needs of the community.

Bahá'í consultation demands that every member of the Assembly have the freedom to express his or her views. However, once an opinion is offered, it belongs to the Assembly, not to the individual. This way, opinions can clash without feelings being hurt. For it is only this clash of different opinions that can produce the "spark of truth." It is through this process of consultation that the Assembly receives a shared vision.

This shared vision is the "lamp of guidance" for the community. How can the

Assembly assist the believers to grow in their love for Bahá'u'lláh? How can the community create an atmosphere of love and unity? How can the Assembly encourage each individual to play his or her own part? These and many other questions will come before the Assembly as it grows to fulfill its role in building God's Kingdom on earth.

Community Activities

The Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility to guide the community to be both a model and a magnet. The community, through the efforts of its members, should become a model of love, righteousness, chastity and interracial fellowship.

Through its unity, the Bahá'í community will become a magnet drawing the masses to the Cause of God. The Spiritual Assembly's great, God-given task is to guide this process.

In stepping forth to meet this challenge, the Assembly should have confidence and rely on the promises of `Abdu'l-Bahá that His spirit is present at the Assembly meeting. The Assembly should also turn for assistance to their Auxiliary Board Members. These are individuals appointed to love and nurture Spiritual Assemblies in their region. The Auxiliary Board Members appoint Assistants to help them care for the Assemblies.

To create a "shared vision" the Assembly consults with the believers in the community. How does each one want to serve the Cause of God? What kinds of events do the believers want to see? How can the youth and children be at the heart of the community? How can the community achieve true racial harmony? How can the Bahá'í community serve the county, town or city? How can our Feasts and Holy Days be more joyous?

Answering these and many other questions in unity will create the magnetic model that will attract many others to the Bahá'í Faith. As new believers enter in troops, the Assembly will find itself growing to meet ever-increasing challenges.

My Faith

Do I believe? Do I have faith that God has sent Bahá'u'lláh to build the Kingdom of God in these turbulent times? Do I believe that God can and will work through the lowliest and most humble of His servants to achieve His purpose? If the answer is "yes", then it is time for action - for it is action that is based in faith that attracts the power and blessings of God.

Only the actions of the individual believers can bring into being the Local Spiritual Assembly. Only the individual can form friendships and attract others to this great Cause. Only the individual can pray and study the Holy Writings. Only the individual can joyfully and eagerly carry out the decisions of the Spiritual Assembly.

On April 21, under God's watchful eye, may you have the great privilege and bounty of helping to build His Kingdom by gathering with your fellow

Bahá'ís to elect His Spiritual Assemblies. May these actions of faith bring the blessings of God to a darkened world. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

Bahá'í Consultation: A Shining Light

"O Divine providence! This assemblage is composed of Thy friends who are attracted to Thy beauty and are set abaze by the fire of Thy love cause them to become the promulgators of the oneness of mankind and the cause of love and concord in the world of humanity." — `Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 115

Bahá'u'lláh has given us a process, called consultation, through which we investigate truth, seek justice, and make decisions based upon spiritual laws and principles. "Consultation is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation."

The Universal House of Justice guides our understanding: "There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem." Spiritual Assemblies go through several steps during the process of consultation. Facts are gathered, and the problem is clearly stated. Relevant spiritual principles are identified, and the Assembly considers how these apply to the particular situation. A discussion follows in which every member of the Assembly freely expresses his or her views, and ultimately the spark of truth becomes apparent. A decision is made after all have been heard and a consensus has emerged. All members then obey this decision in unity.

Individuals and Institutions

"The steps of her holy resting-place represent Local Spiritual Assemblies . . . the columns are like the National Spiritual Assemblies, while the dome symbolizes the Universal House of Justice."— Shoghi Effendi, in Bahiyyih Khanum, p. 92

There is an intimate connection between each individual Bahá'í and the elected institutions of the Faith. The believer is connected through his or her prayerful and thoughtful participation in voting for the Local Spiritual Assembly and for the delegate to the National Convention. The individual is also involved through obedient and loving support of the institutions and by devoted service on an institution should she or he be elected.

"The friends are called upon to give their wholehearted support and cooperation to the Local Spiritual Assembly, first by voting for the membership and then by energetically pursuing its plans and programmes, by turning to it in time of trouble or difficulty, by praying for its success and taking delight in its rise to influence and honor. This great prize, this gift of God within each community must be cherished, nurtured, loved, assisted, obeyed and prayed for."— The Universal House of Justice, Naw-Rúz 1974, in

Messages From the Universal House of Justice, p.
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As the Universal House of Justice explains, "The authority to direct the affairs of the Faith locally, nationally and internationally, is divinely conferred on elected representatives. However the power to accomplish the tasks of the community rests primarily in the mass of the believers."— The Universal House of Justice, letter of May 19, 1994

"The power of action in the believers is unlocked at the level of individual initiative and surges at the level of collective volition."— The Universal House of Justice, letter of May 19, 1994

As we individually fulfill our responsibilities to the institutions of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order, we are part of a divine building process, providing a firm foundation for the unification and spiritual regeneration of the human family.

"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."— The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1996

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