

Building Visions of Growth, Devising Strategies.

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Establishing Lines of Action, and Inspiring Dedication to Service.

A working paper prepared by the International Teaching Centre for the Auxiliary Board Conferences to be held during January and February 1992 which have as their theme "Releasing the Power of the Individual and Galvanizing the Local and National Baha'i Communities." (Consultations on this paper are to follow those held earlier on Sacredness, Nurturing the Individual and the Community, and the Local Spiritual Assembly.)

Building visions of growth, devising strategies, establishing lines of action and inspiring dedication to service are all aspects of helping communities develop and implement plans of action. However, before these components of the planning and implementation process are examined, a few words will be said about the nature of community action, especially in the context of the Holy Year.

The power of concrete, well-defined action

In their efforts to help release the potential of the individual and galvanize the local community, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants draw upon the power of the Creative Word and the force of their own love for the friends to help them deepen their knowledge of their Faith, and to foster understanding, create enthusiasm, motivate, strengthen the bonds of unity, and kindle the desire to serve. This, however, is not the extent of their work. They also need to help the friends translate their love and understanding into action.

Early in the Holy Year, the requirement to arrange dignified and befitting commemorations of the Centenary of the Ascension of Baha'u'llah presents Auxiliary Board members with the opportunity to rally the friends in each local community around a concrete common purpose. Every people has the traditions, the capacity, and the means to unite in the commemoration of a holy event, and it should be possible to do this in a vast majority of the cities, towns and villages throughout the world where Baha'is live. By encouraging these believers to draw spiritual energy from a sacred and historic undertaking and to set the stage for a sequence of well-defined actions to emblazon the Name of Baha'u'llah throughout their surroundings.

If the Centenary of the Ascension of Baha'u'llah is to be observed befittingly, especially in places where the believers have not yet received a great deal of deepening, groundwork will need to be laid well in advance. The friends need to be helped to gain an understanding of Baha'u'llah's Mission and His glorious station. They will have to be aided through a consultative process to reach a decision as to how they will commemorate this holy anniversary in a way that expresses their love for Baha'u'llah and their deepest feelings towards the

sacred. They should be encouraged to organize the commemoration in their own way: to gather their resources, to divide the tasks among themselves, and to call out the strong spirit of cooperation that exists in most cultures. The results of such a process are far different from what is likely to follow a cursory visit to the community during which they are reminded of the importance of the occasion and called to a meeting of commemoration.

Building on the spirit generated by a befitting commemoration of Baha'u'llah's Ascension, a sequence of concrete actions can systematically increase the community's capacity to propagate the healing Message of Baha'u'llah. Of course, the nature of such action will vary from community to community, from visits to neighboring villages to teach the Faith all the way to complex proclamation projects in major metropolitan areas. The following topics are suggested for consultation on the manner in which Auxiliary Board members and their assistants can promote community action. The short statement following each subject heading is intended to stimulate thought and discussion.

- The ability to help the friends reach unity of thought. Consensus and unity of thought are first reached not about details but at higher levels of consciousness. Before detailed decisions are made there is need for general agreement on the aims, the nature and the extent of the action to be undertaken. Collective will has to be created as a result of consensus about the direction to be followed.

- The ability to create a "learning" atmosphere. The posture of learning avoids searching for formulas that are to be followed strictly. Decisions are carried out, after consultation, with the understanding that the developments which follow will be observed and reflected upon. This community reflection is done in light of the wisdom enshrined in the Writings. In a learning environment fear of failure is eliminated, and the friends are helped to focus on achievements and the new capacity for progress that learning creates.

- The ability to increase institutional capacity. Through concrete action it is possible to gradually build the organizational capacity of a community, its capacity to cooperate, to make decisions and implement them effectively. The strengthening of Local Spiritual Assemblies depends both on deepening and on the accumulation of experience in concrete action.

- The ability to bring joy and enthusiasm to community action. Enthusiasm is easily generated at the beginning of an activity, but to maintain it requires radiance and joyfulness. Unfulfilled expectations tend to dampen enthusiasm. It is important, therefore, to help the friends draw joy and satisfaction from the act of service itself, even when performed by a few, and not exactly as originally envisioned.

The strengthening effects of regular activities

What has been presented above regarding action in the context of the Holy Year points to a very basic principle of community development. In most parts of the world, before a community can maintain the regular activities that characterize

Baha'i community life, a sense of community has to be built through a sequence of well-defined actions that are carried out in a specific time period and lead to concrete results with an assurance of success. Once capacity for community action has been built to a certain degree, fulfillment of the following requirements will help ensure that regular activities are expanded and sustained:

- Consistent presence of the Auxiliary Board member and assistants in the community
- Consistent communication between the Auxiliary Board member, the assistants, the friends, and the Local Spiritual Assembly
- Consistent effort to raise the vision of the friends about the mission of the Baha'i community
- Consistent attention to the development of human resources and the education of the friends, not only about concepts and principles, but also about how to carry out their activities effectively
- Consistent attention to the study of the Writings, both as individuals and in groups, and to the development of attitudes and skills that are useful in facilitating group study

Plans of action

Auxiliary Board members serve local communities of varying strengths. While some communities may be at the early stages of development, others may have Local Spiritual Assemblies that are capable of administering fairly complex plans and projects. Auxiliary Board members, themselves, cannot fulfill their own multiple duties by following a pattern of isolated activities; they need to organize their work according to well-conceived, flexible plans of action. The development of the Faith at the level of regions and national communities also calls for systematic plans of action that simultaneously address various areas of activity. Unfortunately, planning often is limited to the establishment of goals for a major plan and their assignment to specific regions, local communities, national committees and other agencies. To implement these plans the friends are then called to arise and win the goals by participating in activities, events, projects, and campaigns that are conceived separately and in isolation from each other, with little sense of continuity. This, of course, does bring results, for success is assured whenever we arise and serve the Faith with love and devotion. We observe, however, that far greater results are achieved when planning and implementation receive more attention and are approached more systematically.

By emphasizing plans of action, the International Teaching Centre does not wish to promote cumbersome approaches to planning which often appear promising but in fact divert energy from action. Indeed, to carry out detailed planning as an exercise separate from action often prove to be rewarding. Without advocating any specific planning methods, we wish to explore some of the spiritual and practical elements that can help the friends systematically expand the Faith

and consolidate their victories. The following four topics are suggested for consultation: "Building Visions of Growth", "Devising Strategies", "Establishing Lines of Action", and "Inspiring Dedication to Service". These elements of the planning and implementation process are not meant to be followed in sequential order. The activities which correspond to them need to be carried out parallel with each other and repeated, refined, and modified as the community learns and its institutional capacity increases.

- Building visions of growth. An essential requirement of systematic action is that the friends and their institutions should arrive at a unified vision of growth for their communities and regions, a vision to be shared by all, that will guide the design and implementation of their projects. Such a vision cannot merely be a description of hopes and wishes for a distant future. Although not concerned with details, this vision must bring to light potentials for immediate growth in the region, areas of action that may be fruitfully explored, the type of goals that can be pursued, the nature of the projects that may be undertaken, and the way these projects can contribute to the objectives of the global plans of the Faith. It is also clear that such a vision cannot be constructed once and for all; it must evolve, become sharper, and integrate an increasing number of elements as planning and implementation steadily progress.

When unity of thought and vision are achieved, many problems disappear, consultation about specific activities becomes much easier and, above all, channels are opened through which the spirit of the Faith begins to flow and move the masses. If this vision is not the imposition of a few people, but the result of a continuous process of consultation; if a process is set in motion by which everyone constantly learns how to improve teaching methods and administrative procedures, and through which teachers and administrators gain deeper insight into how the Baha'i community can grow and influence society; and if this collective learning is carried out in the spirit of unity and humility, we will undoubtedly see our efforts yield rich and abundant fruits.

In trying to assist the friends to develop visions of growth for their local and national communities or regions, we must remember that such visions can only emerge from a far greater vision of such realities as the greatness of this Day, the power of Divine Assistance, the potential inherent in every human being, and the powers that become available to us when we truly unite and work in a spirit of oneness. Evolving a vision of growth, then, is fundamentally a spiritual process, one that implies ever-increasing consciousness of the spiritual forces released by Baha'u'llah.

- Devising strategies. The word "strategy" is used in many ways in different contexts. Here, it is used in a very limited sense. Although vision, by its very nature, operates at the level of generalities, in the creation of a vision of growth some consideration will have been given to actual possibilities, resources, and even methods. In developing strategies one brings structure to a vision and discovers the paths that must be followed in order to achieve it. For example, a community that envisions possibilities for influencing education

may choose the strategy of approaching the educational system primarily through direct contacts with teachers. A community that conceives a vision for the rapid expansion of the Faith among an extraordinarily receptive population may decide on a strategy of well-defined campaigns and permanent teaching teams supplemented by regular institute courses. In trying to achieve the vision of a large number of active Baha'i communities in a rural district, a regional committee may choose as its principal strategy to work with children and youth and, through them, to increase their parents' involvement with the Faith.

In order to be effective, strategies must be developed with knowledge of the conditions of the Baha'i community and the society in which it exists. In choosing their strategies, the communities mentioned in the above examples would have taken into account both the talents they possess and at least some of the characteristics of the surrounding society. Again, to gain such knowledge, we are not advocating formal or complicated studies but a process of consultation that does its best to observe, identify issues, and assess resources within and outside the community. This consultative process needs to be continuous and open, so that premises can be changed in light of the increased understanding that comes from experience.

- Establishing Lines of Action: The International Teaching Centre has become convinced that lack of continuity is greatly limiting the success of Baha'i communities throughout the world. In searching for keys to continuity we have found it useful to think of plans of action which consist of a number of parallel lines of action. A line of action, in turn, consists of a sequence of projects and activities, each building on the previous one and preparing the way for further advances. For example, in several countries the Counsellors are promoting the training of large numbers of children's class teachers as a line of action to be included in national plans of action. This line of action includes the preparation of proper materials, the training of a core group of trainers of children's class teachers, a series of courses for the teachers, evaluation of the materials, and the development of improved methods of teacher training and child education. Many Auxiliary Board members around the world are including within their own plans of action such lines of action as fostering individual teaching, promoting local deepening among the communities of a region, and encouraging activities for junior youth.

To consider another example of a line of action, in many parts of the world the promotion and enrichment of the Nineteen Day Feast is a line of action that needs to be included in the plans of action of Auxiliary Board members and Regional Teaching Committees. An activity within this line of action might be a workshop for the assistants to acquaint them thoroughly with the contents of the letter dated 27 August 1989 written by the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Baha'u'llah throughout the world. Another activity could be a meeting of consultation with selected individuals from the region to discover how to enrich the feast by incorporating compatible elements from local cultural traditions. Another set of activities might be special meetings between an Auxiliary Board member and his or her assistants to learn from each

other's experiences in promoting the Nineteen Day Feast in local communities.

The organization of plans of action into continuous lines of action is not, in itself, a complex matter. But for such plans to be useful, certain basic principles have to be observed. Actions that are to follow each other must be reasonably consistent in their approach and their underlying rationale. In order to continue and increase its scope, a line of action should include activities that help increase the resources available for its implementation, especially human resources. Therefore, in charting a line of action consideration must be given to the available resources and to the means of increasing them, to the administrative support these actions will require, and to the methods that are to be used. Moving along a line of action implies setting specific, short-term goals and reviewing accomplishments, and then designing the next set of activities. But all of this has to be done while focussing mainly on action and the excellence with which each activity is carried out. As short-term goals are won and new ones are set along the line of action, its direction is modified and its methods evolve. Yet, there is continuity, and abrupt changes, which are usually counterproductive, are avoided.

- Inspiring dedication to service: Individuals and communities need to be accompanied as they follow lines of action. As difficulties arise and resolution weakens, the friends need to be inspired time and again to higher levels of dedication. This is where the concept of nurturing becomes pivotal to the work of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Inspiring the hearts, increasing devotion, promoting good character, attracting the Holy Spirit, fostering love and unity among the friends, and imbuing the relationship between the individual believers and the institutions with the spirit of the Faith, these are the challenges which continuously face the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Consultation on the following ideas should help them meet these challenges:

- Relying on the power of prayer and the power of the Creative Word
- Mastering the art of effective encouragement
- Helping the friends to realize the need for consistent effort and perseverance
- Focusing energies and endowing community action with a sense of spiritual discipline

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