

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

“The Book of God is wide open, and His Word is summoning mankind unto Him.” In such exhilarating terms does the Supreme Pen describe the advent of the day of union and ingathering. Bahá'u'lláh continues: “Incline your ears, O friends of God, to the voice of Him Whom the world hath wronged, and hold fast unto whatsoever will exalt His Cause.” He further exhorts His followers: “With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your lives to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all.”

Beloved co-workers: This stirring pronouncement comes to mind unbidden when we see your consecrated efforts around the world in answer to the call of Bahá'u'lláh. The splendid response to His summons can be witnessed on every side. To those who pause to reflect on the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, it becomes impossible to ignore how the power possessed by the Word of God is ascendant in the hearts of women and men, children and youth, in country after country, in cluster after cluster.

A worldwide community is refining its ability to read its immediate reality, analyse its possibilities, and apply judiciously the methods and instruments of the Five Year Plan. As anticipated, experience is most rapidly accumulating in clusters where the frontiers of learning are being consciously advanced. In such places, the means for enabling an ever-rising number of individuals to strengthen their capacity for service are well understood. A vibrant training institute functions as the mainstay of the community's efforts to advance the Plan and, as early as possible, skills and abilities developed through participation in institute courses are deployed in the field. Some, through their everyday social interactions, encounter souls who are open to the exploration of spiritual matters carried out in a variety of settings; some are in a position to respond to receptivity in a village or neighbourhood, perhaps by having relocated to the area. Growing numbers arise to shoulder responsibility, swelling the ranks of those who serve as tutors, animators, and teachers of children; who administer and coordinate; or who otherwise labour in support of the work. The friends' commitment to learning finds expression through constancy in their own endeavours and a willingness to accompany others in theirs. Further, they are able to keep two complementary perspectives on the pattern of action developing in the cluster firmly in view: one, the three-month cycles of activity—the rhythmic pulse of the programme of growth—and the other, the distinct stages of a process of education for children, for junior youth, and for youth and adults. While understanding clearly the relationship that connects these three stages, the friends are aware that each has its own dynamics, its own requirements, and its own inherent merit. Above all, they are conscious of the operation of powerful spiritual forces, whose workings can be discerned as much in the quantitative data that reflect the community's progress as in the array of accounts that narrate its accomplishments. What is especially promising is that so many of these distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development.

As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavours. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to

coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives. Equally, they have come to recognize that when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time, but that this in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavours. For they understand that if learning is to be their mode of operation, they must be alert to the potential offered by any instrument of the Plan that proves to be especially suited to a particular point in time and, where called for, invest greater energy in its development; it does not follow, however, that every person must be occupied with the same aspect of the Plan. The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a programme of growth to be directed towards the same end. Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals or collectively; in another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.

Furthermore, the friends are conscious that the work of the Cause proceeds at different speeds in different places and for good reason—it is, after all, an organic phenomenon—and they take joy and encouragement from every instance of progress they see. Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all. Gatherings for reflection are increasingly seen as occasions where the community's efforts, in their entirety, are the subject of earnest and uplifting deliberation. Participants learn what has been accomplished overall, understand their own labours in that light, and enhance their knowledge about the process of growth by absorbing the counsels of the institutions and drawing on the experience of their fellow believers. Such experience is also shared in numerous other spaces that are emerging for consultation amongst friends intensely engaged in specific endeavours, whether they are pursuing a common line of action or serving in a particular part of the cluster. All these insights are located in a wider appreciation that progress is most easily achieved in an environment imbued with love—one in which shortcomings are overlooked with forbearance, obstacles are overcome with patience, and tested approaches are embraced with enthusiasm. And so it is that, through the wise direction of institutions and agencies of the Faith functioning at every level, the friends' exertions, however modest individually, coalesce into a collective effort to ensure that receptivity to the call of the Blessed Beauty is identified quickly and nurtured effectively. A cluster in this condition is clearly one where the relationships among the individual, the institutions, and the community—the Plan's three protagonists—are evolving soundly.

From this landscape of thriving activity, one prospect deserves particular mention. In the message addressed to you three years ago, we expressed the hope that, in clusters with an intensive programme of growth in operation, the friends would endeavour to learn more about the ways of community building by developing centres of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages. Our hopes have been exceeded, for even in clusters where the programme of growth has not yet achieved intensity, efforts by a few to initiate core activities among the residents of small areas have demonstrated their efficacy time and again. In essence, this approach centres on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those

who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.

While expansion and consolidation have steadily progressed over the past year, other important areas of activity have also moved forward, often in close parallel. As a prime example, the advances at the level of culture being witnessed in some villages and neighbourhoods are due in no small part to what is being learned from Bahá'í involvement in social action. Our Office of Social and Economic Development recently prepared a document which distils thirty years of experience that has accumulated in this field since that Office was established at the Bahá'í World Centre. Among the observations it makes is that efforts to engage in social action are lent vital impetus by the training institute. This is not simply through the rise in human resources it fosters. The spiritual insights, qualities, and abilities that are cultivated by the institute process have proven to be as crucial for participation in social action as they are for contributing to the process of growth. Further, it is explained how the Bahá'í community's distinct spheres of endeavour are governed by a common, evolving, conceptual framework composed of mutually reinforcing elements, albeit these assume varied expressions in different domains of action. The document we have described was lately shared with National Spiritual Assemblies, and we invite them, in consultation with the Counsellors, to consider how the concepts it explores can help to enhance existing efforts of social action pursued under their auspices and raise consciousness of this significant dimension of Bahá'í endeavour. This should not be interpreted as a general call for widespread activity in this area—the emergence of social action happens naturally, as a growing community gathers strength—but it is timely that the friends reflect more deeply on the implications of their exertions for the transformation of society. The surge in learning that is occurring in this field places increased demands upon the Office of Social and Economic Development, and steps are being taken to ensure that its functioning evolves commensurately.

An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations. These expressions of appreciation and support have also come from some previously unexpected quarters. For example, even in the Cradle of the Faith, despite formidable obstacles placed by the oppressor in their path, the Bahá'ís are increasingly recognized for the profound implications their message holds for the state of their nation and respected for their unbending determination to contribute to the progress of their homeland.

The suffering borne by the faithful in Iran, particularly in the decades since the most recent wave of persecutions began, has spurred their brothers and sisters in other countries to come to their defence. From among the invaluable endowments which, as a consequence of that endurance, the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired, we mention one in this connection: an impressive network of specialized agencies at the national level that has proven capable of systematically developing relations with governments and organizations of civil society. Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. At the grassroots, involvement in this kind of endeavour builds naturally, through the same

organic approach that characterizes the steady increase of the friends' engagement in social action, and no special attempt to stimulate it is necessary. At the national level, however, it is more often becoming the focus of attention for these same dedicated agencies already functioning in dozens of national communities, and it is proceeding according to the familiar and fruitful pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.

Encouraging progress is occurring in other areas as well. In Santiago, Chile, where the Mother Temple of South America is being erected, the building work continues apace. The concrete construction of the foundations, basement, and service tunnel is complete, as are the columns that will bear the superstructure. The anticipation associated with this project is growing, and a similar sense of expectation is stirring in the seven countries where national or local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs* are to be raised up. In each one, preparations have commenced, and the contributions the believers are making to the Temples Fund have begun to be used; however, practical considerations, such as location, design, and resources, represent only one aspect of the work being undertaken by the friends. Fundamentally, theirs is a spiritual endeavour, one in which the whole community participates. The Master refers to the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* as "the lodestone of divine confirmations", "the mighty foundation of the Lord", and "the firm pillar of the Faith of God". Wherever it is established, it will naturally be an integral component of the process of community building that surrounds it. Already, in those places where a House of Worship is to appear, awareness of this reality is deepening among the rank and file of the believers, who recognize that their collective life must more and more reflect that union of worship and service which the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* embodies.

On each front, then, we see the Bahá'í community moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks when resources make it possible, agile in its response to fresh imperatives, conscious of the need to ensure coherence among the various areas of activity in which it is engaged, wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission. Its enthusiasm and devotion are apparent in the tremendous fervour generated by the announcement some two months ago of the convocation of 95 youth conferences throughout the world. We are gratified not only by the reaction of the youth themselves but also by the expressions of support voiced by their fellow believers, who appreciate how the younger followers of Bahá'u'lláh act as a vital stimulus to the entire body of the Cause.

We are filled with hope by the successive evidences we see of the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's message, the reach of its influence, and the growing awareness of the ideals it enshrines. In this season of anniversaries, we call to remembrance that "Day of supreme felicity", separated from this *Riḍván* by a century and a half, when the Abhá Beauty first proclaimed His Mission to His companions in the *Najíbíyyih* Garden. From that sanctified spot, the Word of God has gone forth to every city and every shore, summoning humanity to an encounter with its Lord. And from that initial retinue of God-intoxicated lovers, a diverse community of purpose has blossomed, variegated flowers in the garden He has reared. With each passing day, rising numbers of newly awakened souls turn in supplication towards His Shrine, the place where we, in honour of that blessed Day and in gratitude for every bounty bestowed upon the community of the Greatest Name, bow our heads in prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]