

Compilation of Guidance on Teaching and Enrollments

Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of
the Universal House of Justice

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Your concern for the progress of teaching efforts is warmly acknowledged, as are your reflections on making evident the criteria for Bahá'í membership. The beloved Guardian, in the early years of his ministry, set out criteria for Spiritual Assemblies and Bahá'í teachers regarding the enrollment of new believers. In a letter dated 24 October 1925 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

I would only venture to state very briefly and as adequately as present circumstances permit the principal factors that must be taken into consideration before deciding whether a person may be regarded a true believer or not. Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the True Exemplar of the Bahá'í Cause, as set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present day Bahá'í administration throughout the world—these I conceive to be the fundamental and primary considerations that must be fairly, discreetly and thoughtfully ascertained before reaching such a vital decision.

Later in his ministry, however, after the administrative capacity to embrace larger numbers grew, the Guardian alerted the friends to the danger of being too rigid in the requirements for becoming a Bahá'í. For example, a letter dated 9 July 1957, written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, stated:

As he has written the Central and East Africa Assembly, he feels that the friends should be very careful not to place hindrances in the way of those who wish to accept the Faith. If we make the requirements too rigorous, we will cool off the initial enthusiasm, rebuff the hearts and cease to expand rapidly. The essential thing is that the candidate for enrolment should believe in his heart in the truth of Bahá'u'lláh. Whether he is literate or illiterate, informed of all the Teachings or not, is beside the point entirely. When the spark of faith exists the essential Message is there, and gradually everything else can be added unto it.

Today, we can generally be open and flexible in accepting individuals into the Bahá'í community. As the believers invite growing numbers of individuals to participate in a united effort to apply Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, it becomes clear that the process of becoming a Bahá'í is best viewed as a continuum—based on independent investigation, engagement in service, and increasing understanding—rather than as dichotomous states of membership and non-membership.

The Bahá'í teacher is encouraged to adopt an approach suitable for the individual seeker, taking into account the seeker's growth in relation to Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings. The Guardian stated in *The Advent of Divine Justice* in connection with the role of the Bahá'í teacher towards the seeker:

Let him refrain, at the outset, from insisting on such laws and observances as might impose too severe a strain on the seeker's newly awakened faith, and endeavor to nurse him, patiently, tactfully, and yet determinedly, into full maturity, and aid him to proclaim his unqualified acceptance of whatever has been ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. Let him, as soon as that stage has been attained, introduce him to the body of his fellow-believers, and seek, through constant fellowship and active participation in the local activities of his community, to enable him to contribute his share to the enrichment of its life, the furtherance of its tasks, the consolidations of its interests, and the coordination of its activities with those of its sister communities.

Though declaration of faith and enrollment into the Bahá'í community may occur at the same moment, they do not necessarily have to do so, in light of the above passage. Where, for example, a tutor is accompanying seekers through the institute process and a seeker declares, it would not be unreasonable for formal enrollment to be deferred while the new believer is being nurtured to the point where he or she is ready to assume the responsibilities associated with membership in the community. In different parts of the world, as well as with different individuals, circumstances may vary, and it is left to the wisdom of the teacher and the discretion of the institutions to determine how to attract receptive souls, when to invite them to embrace the Faith, and how to nurture them to full maturity.

It is hoped that this letter provides you with the clarification you seek. If related questions about the teaching process arise, you are encouraged to consult with an Auxiliary Board member for your area or with your Regional Bahá'í Council. May your efforts to spread the Message of Bahá'u'lláh be blessed and confirmed.

(From a letter dated September 28, 2014, to an individual)

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A delegate can certainly raise at the National Convention the topic of enrollments. However, it is important for you to be prepared to ensure any ensuing consultation is carried out in a constructive manner and in light of the experience unfolding within the framework of the Five Year Plan. When discussed in the abstract, this subject could lead to erroneous assertions about the past as well as fruitless, dichotomous debates that create the appearance of conflict between individual or collective teaching, activities for expansion or those for consolidation, direct or indirect teaching approaches, or one particular method of teaching or another. Consultation at Convention on the topic of enrollments will only be fruitful if it draws

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upon the practical experience of the friends working in their clusters to determine what has proven to be most effective to date and where the practical challenges lie.

For the friends who are sacrificially promoting the imperatives of the Plan, any decline in the number of enrollments is neither an indication of an increase in apathy or inactivity nor want of receptivity in the general population to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather, declarations alone do not provide a sufficient measure of the progress of the Faith in your country or the level of teaching activity within the community. In the current Five Year Plan, the efforts for expansion and consolidation in your community are unfolding in more than 600 clusters. Some of these clusters have advanced significantly to the third milestone, where a hundred or

more active friends are engaging hundreds of participants, while other clusters have a program of growth that is still at an early stage of development. Overall, more than 40,000 individuals are participating in core activities, roughly two-thirds of whom are Bahá'ís. Within each cluster, an expanding nucleus of individuals reflect on their experience and learn over time to extend the scope and increase the effectiveness of their activities. From the foundation of this experience, the friends are well positioned to accelerate the movement of more and more clusters, multiply core activities, increase participation through outreach to the wider society, and strengthen the process of expansion and consolidation—including learning to increase the number of new believers.

Ultimately, then, any concern about the rate of enrollments, like any other practical challenge that arises in the process of community building, is in the first instance best addressed by the friends in light of their experience in their clusters, where circumstances, resources, approaches, challenges, activities, and results can be considered. Teaching is the sacred obligation of every believer. Whether in the course of their daily interactions with friends and colleagues or as part of a teaching team visiting neighbors or in efforts to help a receptive population take charge of its spiritual and material development, the friends are sharing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in a multitude of meaningful conversations about human nature and the advancement of society. Just as an individual finds that certain capabilities contribute to effective teaching, so too the friends in a single cluster can collectively ensure—through training and practical experience—that all the capacities necessary for effective action in the range of activities essential to progress are increasingly developed. Depending on experience and needs, learning and action in any given cycle may focus on pursuing specific objectives or resolving different challenges, such as how to engage receptive individuals or populations in elevated discussions that attract their interest, how to multiply core activities and increase participation, and, when timely, how to present the Faith effectively and invite a ready soul to embrace the Faith in a variety of settings, such as devotional gatherings, firesides, or home visits. It is in this context that the 29 December 2015 message of the House of Justice, in setting out the requirements of the current Plan, offered encouragement for the friends to “become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause.” In cluster reflection gatherings and other settings, the friends have the opportunity to hear about the exploits of their co-workers in the Cause and learn from one another’s experiences, always abstaining from the quixotic quest for formulaic solutions that results in the

community lurching frenetically from one activity to another or from the kind of destructive criticism that prevents the search for solutions to challenges and only cools the desire to serve.

In the context of the activities in a cluster, the friends should appreciate certain distinct features of the approach to teaching in neighborhoods where the work is intensifying. Experience has demonstrated that, in many instances, when introducing community-building activities into a neighborhood or village, an approach that does not emphasize enrollment initially can allow for a wider circle of participation. Where the implementation of core activities is accompanied with ongoing and rich conversations about associated Bahá'í teachings and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, the influence of the Faith begins to permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population. Thus, in a natural and unobtrusive way, a wide array of individuals and families grow in their familiarity with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the nature of His Mission. In their own lives and in the life of the community, they begin to witness and experience the transformation that comes from exposure to and interaction with the Word of God, including its practical application. In such settings, the ways in which individuals will advance in their relationship with the Faith will vary. There are some who, while appreciating the effect of the core activities on their personal lives and on the life of the community, approach them only as valuable efforts to better social conditions. For others, however, a close association with the Bahá'í community and an ever-deeper appreciation of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh evoke a profound love for and commitment to the Faith. Some may spontaneously request enrollment or readily respond to an invitation. Others, viewing themselves as completely at one with the Bahá'í community, might express the desire to join the Faith through eagerness to participate in the full range of Bahá'í activities, including those dimensions of community life that are only open to Bahá'ís, such as Nineteen Day Feasts, the Fund, or the electoral process.

(From a letter dated March 22, 2019, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States)

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The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of ..., together with its enclosure, addressed to the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre and raising the issue of how the Bahá'í community should view itself in relation to others as well as asking a number of thoughtful questions related to recognition of Bahá'u'lláh and enrollment in the community. We have been asked to share the following with you.... The questions you have raised are complex and nuanced and

are best explored with an Auxiliary Board member or other knowledgeable believers. To assist you in your ongoing study of and reflection on these important issues, the following thoughts are offered for your consideration.

At the heart of embracing the Faith are the twin duties “prescribed by God for His servants”, as set forth by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: recognition of the Manifestation and

observance of His ordinances. “These twin duties are inseparable”, Bahá'u'lláh states. “Neither is acceptable without the other.” However, the fulfillment of these twin duties does not begin or end with enrollment; as discussed in the enclosed letter dated 28 September 2014 written on behalf of the House of Justice to an individual believer, the process of becoming a Bahá'í is best viewed as a continuum. The recognition of the Manifestation of God for this Day is a responsibility that rests on all humanity—yet how this recognition takes place will vary based on each individual's personal experiences and different circumstances. Of course, the institutions of the Faith have the responsibility to determine whether one who wishes to become a Bahá'í meets the qualifications for membership in the community, which have been outlined by Shoghi Effendi and are referred to in the 28 September letter. Though ultimately, it is God that judges the response of each soul.

Bahá'ís are called to both teach the Faith to receptive souls and “consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.” The concept of “us” and “them”, prevalent in almost every conception of human identity and social organization, finds no place in the Bahá'í teachings. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly explains:

The teachings specialized in Bahá'u'lláh are addressed to humanity. He says, “Ye are all the leaves of one tree.” He does not say, “Ye are the leaves of two trees: one divine, the other satanic.” He has declared that each individual member of the human family is a leaf or branch upon the Adamic tree; that all are sheltered beneath the protecting mercy and providence of God; that all are the children of God, fruit upon the one tree of His love. God is equally compassionate and kind to all the leaves, branches and fruit of this tree. Therefore, there is no satanic tree whatever—Satan being a product of human minds and of instinctive human tendencies toward error. God alone is Creator, and all are creatures of His might. Therefore, we must love mankind as His creatures, realizing

that all are growing upon the tree of His mercy, servants of His omnipotent will and manifestations of His good pleasure.

(The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912 (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2012), p. 230)

It is with such a perspective that Bahá'ís approach their responsibility to teach the Cause. Regarding the attitude toward teaching others, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

The children of men are all brothers, and the prerequisites of brotherhood are manifold. Among them is that one should wish for one's brother that which one wisheth for oneself. Therefore, it behoveth him who is the recipient of an inward or outward gift or who partaketh of the bread of heaven to inform and invite his friends with the utmost love and kindness. If they respond favourably, his object is attained; otherwise he should leave them to themselves without contending with them or uttering a word that would cause the least sadness. This is the undoubted truth, and aught else is unworthy and unbecoming.

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In brief, what is right and true in this day and acceptable before His Throne is that which was mentioned at the outset. All men have been called into being for the betterment of the world. It behoveth every soul to arise and serve his brethren for the sake of God. Should a brother of his embrace the truth, he should rejoice that the latter hath attained unto everlasting favour. Otherwise he should implore God to guide him without manifesting the least trace of animosity or ill-feeling towards him. The reins of command are in the grasp of God. He doeth what He willeth and ordaineth as He pleaseth. He, verily, is the Almighty, the All-Praised.

(The Tabernacle of Unity: Bahá'u'lláh's Responses to Mánikchí Sáhíb and Other Writings, paragraphs 2.39 and 2.42)

In countries where, across many clusters, the community-building process is increasing in intensity and embracing ever-larger contingents, the nature of the teaching work and the manner in which people enter the Faith are evolving in considerable ways. Where the implementation of core activities is accompanied with ongoing and rich conversation about associated Bahá'í teachings and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, the influence of the Faith permeates an ever-broader cross section of the

population. Thus, in a natural and unobtrusive way, a wide array of individuals and families grow in their familiarity with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the nature of His Mission. In their own lives and in the life of the community, they begin to witness and to experience the transformation that comes from exposure to and interaction with the Word of God, including its practical application.

It is to be expected that, even in those locations where the phenomenon described above is most dynamic, the ways in which individuals will advance in their relationship with the Faith will vary. There are some who, while appreciating the effect of the core activities on their personal lives and on the life of the community, approach them only as valuable efforts to better social conditions. For others, however, a close association with the Bahá'í community and an ever-deeper appreciation of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh evoke a profound love for and commitment to the Faith. Some may spontaneously request enrollment. Others, viewing themselves as completely at one with the Bahá'í community, might express the desire to join through eagerness to participate in the full range of Bahá'í activities, including those dimensions of community life that are only open to Bahá'ís, such as Nineteen Day Feasts, the Fund, or the electoral process.

(From a letter dated January 14, 2020, to an individual)

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