

# Local Spiritual Assemblies

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(Based on extracts of communications from the Universal House of Justice)

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### I. The Importance of the Local Spiritual Assembly

- 1 As the Bahá'í Administrative Order rapidly expands throughout the world it behooves everyone associated with it to familiarize himself with its principles, to understand its import and to put its precepts into practice. Only as individual members of Local Spiritual Assemblies deepen themselves in the fundamental verities of the Faith and in the proper application of the principles governing the operation of the Assembly will this institution grow and develop toward its full potential.

(From a letter dated 11 August 1970 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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- 2 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. It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock.

Strengthening and development of Local Spiritual Assemblies is a vital objective... Success in this one goal will greatly enrich the quality of Bahá'í life, will heighten the capacity of the Faith to deal with entry by troops which is even now taking place and, above all, will demonstrate the solidarity and ever-growing distinctiveness of the Bahá'í community, thereby attracting more and more thoughtful souls to the Faith and offering a refuge to the leaderless and hapless millions of the spiritually bankrupt, moribund present order.

The friends are called upon to give their whole-hearted 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 honour. This great prize, this gift of God within each community must be cherished, nurtured, loved, assisted, obeyed and prayed for.

Such a firmly founded, busy and happy community life as is envisioned when Local Spiritual Assemblies are truly effective, will provide a firm home foundation from which the friends may derive courage and strength and loving support in bearing the Divine Message to their fellow-men and conforming their lives to its benevolent rule.

(From a letter dated Naw-Ruz 1974 to the Bahá'ís of the World)

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- 3 The institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly is of primary importance in the firm establishment of the Faith, and we hope that you will give particular attention to ensuring that as many as possible, and in increasing numbers, are, in the words of the beloved Guardian, "broadly based, securely grounded" and "efficiently functioning".

(From a letter dated Naw-Ruz 1974 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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- 4 ...the one vital activity which will enrich the quality of Bahá'í life is the strengthening of Local Assemblies, for in this institution, operating at the first level of human society, rests the greatest opportunity to foster the sound and healthy growth of the Bahá'í community. In other words, however efficient the National Assembly and its staff may be, and however diligently the national committees may function, it is only when the Local Spiritual Assemblies begin to operate vigorously that a firm home base can be provided from which to carry the Divine Message further afield.

(From a letter dated 3 April 1974 to the National Spiritual Assembly of South and West Africa)

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- 5 It is becoming increasingly understood by the friends why ... such great emphasis upon the firmness of the foundation and the efficiency of the operation of the Local Spiritual Assemblies. This is very heartening, for upon the degree to which the members of these Assemblies grasp the true significance of the divine institution on which they serve, arise selflessly to fulfil their prescribed and sacred duties, and persevere in their endeavours, depends to a large extent the healthy growth of the world-wide community of the Most Great Name, the force of its outward thrust, and the strength of its supporting roots.

(From a letter dated 25 May 1975 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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## II. The Development of the Local Spiritual Assemblies

- 6 Local Spiritual Assemblies are at the present newly born institutions, struggling for the most part to establish themselves both in the Bahá'í community and in the world. They are as yet only embryos of the majestic institutions ordained by Bahá'u'lláh in His Writings....

What we find expounded in the writings of our Faith is the lofty station Local Spiritual Assemblies must attain in their gradual and at times painful development....

Among the more salient objectives to be attained by the Local Spiritual Assembly in its process of development to full maturity are to act as a loving shepherd to the Bahá'í flock, promote unity and concord among the friends, direct the teaching work, protect the Cause of God, arrange for Feasts, Anniversaries and regular meetings of the community, familiarize the Bahá'ís with its plans, invite the community to offer its recommendations, promote the welfare of youth and children, and participate, as

circumstances permit, in humanitarian activities. In its relationship to the individual believer, the Assembly should continuously invite and encourage him to study the Faith, to deliver its glorious message, to live in accordance with its teachings, to contribute freely and regularly to the Fund, to participate in community activities, and to seek refuge in the Assembly for advice and help, when needed.

In its own meetings it must endeavour to develop skill in the difficult but highly rewarding art of Bahá'í consultation, a process which will require great self-discipline on the part of all members and complete reliance on the power of Bahá'u'lláh. It should hold regular meetings and ensure that all its members are currently informed of the activities of the Assembly, that its Secretary carries out his duties, and its Treasurer holds and disburses the funds of the Faith to its satisfaction, keeping proper accounts and issuing receipts for all contributions. Many Assemblies find that some of their activities such as teaching, observance of Feasts and Anniversaries, solution of personal problems, and other duties are best dealt with by committees appointed by the Assembly and responsible to it.

(From a letter dated 30 July 1972 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Bolivia)

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- 7 The time has come, we believe, when increasing numbers of Local Spiritual Assemblies should assume responsibility for helping the teaching work of groups, isolated believers, and other Spiritual Assemblies in their neighborhood. Such extension teaching goals should be assigned by the National Spiritual Assembly or one of its teaching committees, or can be spontaneously adopted by Local Spiritual Assemblies, and should be carried out within the framework of the overall teaching plans of the country. It should also be made clear that by being given such goals a Spiritual Assembly is not being given any jurisdiction over believers outside its area, still less over other Local Spiritual Assemblies, but is being called upon to collaborate with them in their work.

(From a letter dated Naw-Ruz 1974 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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- 8 We long to see every Local Spiritual Assembly either spontaneously adopt its own goals or warmly welcome those it has been or will be given by its National Spiritual Assembly, swell the number of the adherents who compose its local community and, guided by the general policy outlined by its National Spiritual Assembly, proclaim the Faith more effectively, energetically pursue its extension teaching and consolidation goals, arrange the observances of the Holy Days, regularly hold its Nineteen Day Feasts and its sessions for deepening, initiate and maintain community

projects, and encourage the participation of every member of its community in giving to the Fund and undertaking teaching activities and administrative services, so as to make each locality a stronghold of the Faith and a torch-bearer of the Covenant.

(From a letter dated 25 May 1975 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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- 9 The adoption of a local plan by the Local Assembly can exert a far-reaching influence on its work and on the life of the community.

(From a letter dated 24 December 1975 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Reunion)

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### III. The Supporting Role of the Auxiliary Board Members and their Assistants

- 10 The National Spiritual Assemblies in consultation with the Counsellors should avail themselves of the services of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, who, together "...with the travelling teachers selected by the Assembly or its Teaching Committees, should be continuously encouraged to conduct deepening courses ... and to make regular visits to Local Spiritual Assemblies..."

The visitors, whether Auxiliary Board members, their assistants or travelling teachers "...should meet on such occasions not only with the Local Assembly but, of course, with the local community members, collectively at general meetings and even, if necessary, individually in their homes."

The subjects to be discussed at such meetings with the Local Assembly and the friends should include among others the following points:

1. the extent of the spread and stature of the Faith today;
2. the importance of the daily obligatory prayers (at least the short prayer);
3. the need to educate Bahá'í children in the Teachings of the Faith and encourage them to memorize some of the prayers;
4. the stimulation of youth to participate in community life by giving talks, etc. and having their own activities, if possible;
5. the necessity to abide by the laws of marriage, namely, the need to have a Bahá'í ceremony, to obtain the consent of parents, to observe monogamy; faithfulness after marriage; likewise the importance of abstinence from all intoxicating drinks and drugs;
6. the local Fund and the need for the friends to understand that the voluntary

act of contributing to the Fund is both a privilege and a spiritual obligation. There should also be discussion of various methods that could be followed by the friends to facilitate their contributions and the ways open to the Local Assembly to utilize its local Fund to serve the interests of its community and the Cause;

7. the importance of the Nineteen Day Feast and the fact that it should be a joyful occasion and rallying point of the entire community;
8. the manner of election with as many workshops as required, including teaching of simple methods of balloting for illiterates, such as having one central home as the place for balloting and arranging for one literate person, if only a child, to be present at that home during the whole day, if necessary;
9. last but not least, the all-important teaching work, both in the locality and its neighbouring centres, as well as the need to continuously deepen the friends in the essentials of the Faith. The friends should be made to realize that in teaching the Faith to others they should not only aim at assisting the seeking soul to join the Faith, but also at making him a teacher of the Faith and its active supporter.

All the above points should, of course, be stressed within the framework of the importance of the Local Spiritual Assembly, which should be encouraged to vigorously direct its attention to these vital functions and become the very heart of the community life of its own locality, even if its meetings should become burdened with the problems of the community. The local friends should understand the importance of the law of consultation and realize that it is to the Local Spiritual Assembly that they should turn, abide by its decisions, support its projects, co-operate whole-heartedly with it in its task to promote the interests of the Cause, and seek its advice and guidance in the solution of personal problems and the adjudication of disputes, should any arise amongst the members of the community.

(From a letter dated 2 February 1966 to all National Spiritual Assemblies Engaged in Mass Teaching Work)

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- 11 It is at this local level of Bahá'í community life, the very foundation of the administrative structure of the Faith, that we so often find lack of adequate strength and efficiency. It is at this same level that our beloved Guardian urged Auxiliary Board Members to establish contact with Local Spiritual Assemblies, groups, isolated centres and the individual believers, and through periodic and systematic visits to localities as well as by correspondence help in promoting the interests of the Plan,

assist in the efficient and prompt execution of the goals, watch over the security of the Faith, stimulate and strengthen the teaching and pioneer work, impress upon the friends the importance of individual effort, initiative and sacrifice, and encourage them to participate in Bahá'í activities and be unified under all circumstances.

(From a letter dated 17 November 1971 to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

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- 12 The aims of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, stated previously in relation to the services of the assistants, "...should be to activate and encourage Local Spiritual Assemblies, to call the attention of Local Spiritual Assembly members to the importance of holding regular meetings, to encourage local communities to meet for the Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days, to help deepen their fellow-believers' understanding of the Teachings,...

(From a letter dated 7 October 1973 to the Bahá'is of the World)

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- 13 We are confident that the institution of the Boards of Counsellors will lend its vital support and, through the Counsellors' own contacts with the friends, through their Auxiliary Boards and their assistants, will nourish the roots of each local community, enrich and cultivate the soil of knowledge of the teachings and irrigate it with the living waters of love for Bahá'u'lláh. Thus will the saplings grow into mighty trees, and the trees bear their golden fruit.

(From a letter dated 25 May 1975 to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

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#### IV. Suggested Goals for Local Spiritual Assemblies

- 14 Any plan must have a term and specific goals, expressed preferably and if possible in numbers. For a Local Spiritual Assembly it would be better, at least in the early stages of its development, to have a term of nine months to a year. Of course it is also quite possible to have a series of plans of very short terms of say two to three months each, throughout the year.

The examples of local goals listed below are in the form of questions which each Assembly could put to itself, or may be directed to it by the National Spiritual Assembly. The questions are meant to lead to the adoption of a specific goal. An explanatory note follows items which may need clarification or comment.

##### A) Teaching

1. How many new believers? (The Plan calls for a “great increase in the number of believers” and confirming individuals “from every stratum of society”. The ideal is for each local community to double itself every year, since every believer should, in accordance with the wish of the Master, guide one soul to the Cause of God every year. In some areas this may be an ambitious project at the beginning, and at the outset a more modest goal could be adopted.)
2. How many firesides? (Shoghi Effendi urged the friends to hold one fireside every nineteen days in their homes. The friends willing to respond to this wish, could give their names to the Local Assembly.)
3. Can a pledge be made to have extension teaching activities outside the local area of jurisdiction? (Obviously only strong Local Assemblies can sustain such a goal.)

B) Proclamation

4. Are mass media facilities such as radio, television, and the press available to the Local Assembly? Can a goal be adopted for such activities?
5. Can public meetings be anticipated? If so, how many?
6. What methods can be adopted for the dissemination of Bahá’í literature, such as distribution of books to local libraries, etc....? Can this goal be expressed in a challenging form?
7. Can the local community participate in the social and humanitarian activities of the society of which it forms a part? Could a modest step be taken along this line?

C) Consolidation

8. Can the attendance of the friends at Nineteen Day Feasts be improved upon? What about the Anniversaries? Can the increase in attendance be expressed numerically, such as in terms of the percentage of those attending?
9. Can regular meetings for the benefit of the local friends be held? If so, how often and when? (In the recent compilation on “Meetings” released to all National Spiritual Assemblies, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorts the friends to hold such meetings as a “constant” activity, and praises weekly meetings. He repeatedly counsels the believers to read and recite the Holy Word in such meetings and deliver speeches on the teachings, the proofs and the history of the Faith.)



10. Can daily early morning prayer sessions be held? If so, where and when? (If this is not feasible every day, an effort could be made to hold such sessions less frequently. At such devotional meetings not only prayers, but suitable selections from the Sacred Writings could be read. Bahá'u'lláh has pointed out that upon the Word of God “must depend the gathering together and spiritual resurrection of all men”, that “every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame”, and that were man to “taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments”. It is because of such considerations that the Five Year Plan calls for the friends to memorize selections from the Writings. If a believer finds it difficult to memorize, he may be encouraged to make for his own use a selection of extracts, however brief, which he could reread and enjoy at his own leisure, to satisfy his inner soul.)
11. Can youth activities be encouraged? If so, in what way?
12. Can activities and classes for children be established? If so, could a specific goal be adopted?
13. Can youth activities be maintained? Could this be expressed in the form of a goal?
14. Is the community strong enough to establish a local Haziratu'l-Quds?
15. Can a local endowment be acquired and maintained, and possibly used as an investment for the community?
16. How can local contributions to the local Fund be encouraged? Can a target be adopted?
17. Can the local community serve as host to a district conference of neighbouring communities and localities?
18. Can the Local Assembly issue a regular Newsletter?

When the goals are finally decided upon, it is important that they should be announced to the friends. It should be borne in mind that Shoghi Effendi longed to see every believer involved in Bahá'í service, so that universal participation may be achieved. It would be most effective if the Local Assembly, prior to such an announcement, would appoint local committees, to each of which a branch of activity or one or more of the local goals could be assigned. Such committees need not consist

of many members. When the committee appointments are made, the Local Assembly will be fully prepared to announce its goals and its committee appointments to the community at a Nineteen Day Feast or a specially called meeting of the community.

(Prepared for inclusion with a letter dated 24 December 1975 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Reunion)

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