

# Guidance for Bahá'í Groups

by National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States Office of Community  
Administration and Development  
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## Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
Introduction	1
Importance of Bahá'í Groups	1
Group Formation and Officer Election	3
Group Organization	4
Lapsed Assemblies	5
Consultation	7
Protection	8
Publishing and Distribution of Bahá'í Literature	9
Community Membership	10
Teaching/Consolidation	13
Building Distinctive Bahá'í Communities	16
Bahá'í Holy Days and the Nineteen Day Feast	19
Bahá'í Funds	21
Bahá'í Education	23
External Affairs	23
Properties	25
Application of Bahá'í Law	25
Marriage	26
Divorce	28
Burial Law, Wills	29
Contact Information	31
Appendix A — Basics of How To Be a Treasurer	39
Appendix B — Federal Tax Identification Number	41

## 1.2 Foreword

Guidance for Bahá'í Groups is intended primarily for the use of Bahá'í groups and individuals. Unlike Local Spiritual Assemblies, Bahá'í groups generally have no administrative functions other than maintenance of their membership lists. Despite any similarities in general community activities among both group and Assembly areas, there can be no confusion between the role of a Bahá'í group, which is a community of individuals endeavoring to establish a Local Spiritual Assembly, and a Local Spiritual Assembly, which is a legally recognized institution of the Faith. Detailed guidance for Local Spiritual Assemblies may be found in *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*.

## 1.3 1.4 Introduction

(DDBC notations at the start of each section refer to corresponding sections of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, 1998 Edition, which is available from the

Bahá'í Distribution Service. Both *Guidance for Bahá'í Groups* and DDBC are available on the Internet for word searches and downloading at the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly's administrative web site [<http://www.usbnc.org>]. The American Bahá'í and the administrative web site are additional sources of current news, information and references. The suggested readings listed at the end of each section should be available through the Bahá'í Distribution Service.)

A Bahá'í group exists wherever two or more Bahá'ís reside and where the Bahá'í community has not formed a Local Spiritual Assembly. The main focus of a Bahá'í group should be fellowship, community building, and teaching in order to strengthen the community so that it may eventually form a Local Spiritual Assembly. While it is suggested that Bahá'í groups register with the National Spiritual Assembly, a group is not an administrative institution of the Faith and, therefore, does not have the same duties and responsibilities as a Local Spiritual Assembly. Registered Bahá'í groups have certain privileges that unregistered groups do not, which are referred to in the section titled *Group Formation and Officer Election*. The following guidance is intended to assist individuals and members of Bahá'í groups in understanding their responsibilities and in knowing what matters should be referred to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly or to the National Spiritual Assembly.

Development of Bahá'í groups well-grounded in Bahá'í principles and patterns of community life is essential to the establishment of new Local Spiritual Assemblies that are strong and vital, capable of serving the interests and needs of their communities from the outset. Therefore, the energies of Bahá'í groups should be centered in cultivating a spirit of loving fellowship, teaching unceasingly, and becoming trained and adept in the art of Bahá'í consultation, which is the primary skill for Bahá'í community life. Creation of communities that are loving, unified, and diverse will attract and hold the hearts of seekers, as such communities embody the qualities of the divinely promised refuge for which all humanity is seeking.

## **1.5 Importance of Bahá'í Groups**

(DDBC, Chapter 1)

### **1.6**

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, states that the principal importance of Bahá'í groups is that they will eventually develop into Local Spiritual Assemblies whose destinies are vital to the establishment of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh:

Furthermore, I cannot too strongly emphasize the vital necessity for all the Bahá'í groups, scattered throughout these forty-two countries, to brace themselves, and make a supreme effort, during these intervening two years, to achieve assembly status, ...contributing, through this act, to the broadening and strengthening of the foundations of these projected pivotal institutions, destined to play so prominent and vital a part in ushering in the last phase in the gradual establishment of the structure of an Administrative Order that must needs slowly evolve into the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and which in turn will give birth, in the fullness of time, to a world spiritual civilization, which posterity will hail as the fairest fruit of His Revelation.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá'í World: 1950-1957)*

When the membership of a group includes nine adult believers in good standing, it becomes eligible to form a Local Spiritual Assembly on the date of the following Ridván. According to the Guardian, the formation of a Local Spiritual Assembly should not be delayed for any reason, as each new Spiritual Assembly becomes a link strengthening the world encircling Administrative Order.

It is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book, in every locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine, a local "Spiritual Assembly" be forthwith established. To it all local matters pertaining to the Cause must be directly and

immediately referred for full consultation and decision. The importance, nay the absolute necessity of these local Assemblies is manifest when we realize that in the days to come they will evolve into the local Houses of Justice, and at present provide the firm foundation on which the structure of the Master's Will is to be reared in future.

*(Shoghi Effendi: Bahá'í Administration, Page: 37)*

Furthermore, the establishment of a Local Spiritual Assembly draws a share of divine bounty to the entire locality in which it is formed, not merely to the Bahá'í community:

The community must become imbued with a sense of mission and the Local Spiritual Assembly grow in awareness of its role as a channel of God's grace not only for the Bahá'ís but for the entire village, town or city in which it serves.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Dec 26, 1995, letter to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)*

It sometimes happens that a community's membership list contains the names of believers who are not known to the community or who have, in the past, indicated that they are unwilling to serve on an institution. When a group realizes that it will have an opportunity to form a Local Spiritual Assembly on the coming Ridván, it should endeavor, well in advance, to clarify any uncertainties concerning the willingness of individual members to participate in the election or joint declaration. When it is confirmed that there will be enough members to form a Local Spiritual Assembly, election notices should be mailed to every member at least fifteen days in advance of the election with instructions for absentee voting. The necessary election forms and instructions can be obtained from the Office of Membership and Records at the Bahá'í National Center. Following the election, if the Local Spiritual Assembly formation is accepted by the National Spiritual Assembly, the Local Spiritual Assembly will be mailed a packet of information to assist it to begin functioning.

### **1.6.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi

The Local Spiritual Assembly, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

## **1.7 Group Formation and Officer Election**

(DDBC, Chapters 2 & 3)

A Bahá'í locality is an area in which a Bahá'í community is situated. Generally, the boundaries of Bahá'í localities follow those of the smallest unit of civil jurisdiction, such as the boundaries of an incorporated city, or, outside of a city, the boundaries of a township or county. Whenever the boundaries for a locality are uncertain, boundary clarification and/or guidelines for establishing boundaries should be requested from the National Spiritual Assembly. Bahá'ís residing in localities that do not yet have enough members to form Local Spiritual Assemblies are encouraged to register as Bahá'í groups.

Bahá'í groups are established through the believers meeting together and deciding to register as a group in order to receive mailings, develop community life, promote teaching and prepare for the eventuality of Local Spiritual Assembly formation. Larger groups are encouraged to elect officers such as a correspondent, chairman and treasurer in preparation for the time when they will become Local Spiritual Assemblies. Small groups need not hold an election, but may simply designate someone to serve as the contact person to receive the group's mail.

Every group should submit a "Bahá'í Group Registration Form/Officers Election Report" to the Office of Membership and Records at the Bahá'í National Center on an annual basis. This form can be obtained by contacting the Office of Membership and Records. The group will then be registered and will receive correspondence from the Bahá'í National Center. Registering a group will ensure that it receives periodic mailings, Feast letters and newsreels, and allows it to establish a local Bahá'í Fund.

Although a group may form and elect its officers at any time during the year, it is recommended that,

after the first formation, it reform each year on the First Day of Ridván at an annual meeting. Preferably, all believers should be notified of the meeting at least 15 days in advance.

### **1.7.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Bahá'í Elections, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice  
Electing Bahá'í Assemblies, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1997

## **1.8 Group Organization**

(DDBC, Chapter 3)

In principle, registered Bahá'í groups regularly meet and consult together regarding such matters as the observance of Feasts, the development of children's classes, if needed, and the planning of teaching events. Decisions in Bahá'í communities are achieved through consensus in consultation, but if consensus cannot be achieved, then they are carried by majority vote. While Bahá'í groups may consult on issues of community development and teaching, they cannot perform the legislative duties of a Local Spiritual Assembly, such as, performing Bahá'í marriages or handling cases involving the violation of Bahá'í law. Nor should Bahá'í groups be concerned, other than maintaining their membership lists, with such administrative duties as taking minutes, distributing an annual report (although one may be needed to preserve incorporation for a lapsed Local Spiritual Assembly, see Lapsed Assemblies), and so forth. Groups should particularly bear in mind Shoghi Effendi's warning against over-administration and place their primary focus on fellowship, community building, and teaching. Should an issue requiring the attention of a Local Spiritual Assembly arise, the group should turn to a nearby Spiritual Assembly or contact the National Spiritual Assembly for assistance.

Should a group disperse and no believers remain in the community who are able to responsibly store whatever archival records may exist for the community, they should be sent to the National Bahá'í Archives. Only actual community records, such as important correspondence, local bulletins, financial records, local publicity material, and other historical information, such as community photographs and scrapbooks should be sent. Do not send any of the community's library, including back issues of *The American Bahá'í* and *Bahá'í News*. Books and other such printed matter may be given to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly or registered Bahá'í group to use as they wish. Certain types of records having no permanent value, such as routine mailings from the Bahá'í National Center, routine advertisements, etc., from non-Bahá'ís, and so forth, should be disposed of locally. If a dispersing group has a local Bahá'í fund, it may send the remaining balance to any other Bahá'í fund before the group dissolves. An individual believer may not hold funds on behalf of a registered Bahá'í group in the hope that it will reform. If Bahá'í funds remain following the dispersion of a registered Bahá'í group, advice should be sought from the National Treasurer's Office.

### **1.8.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Lights of Guidance, A Bahá'í Reference File, compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, India

## **1.9 Lapsed Assemblies**

(DDBC, Chapter 3)

In an area served by a Local Spiritual Assembly, if the number of registered believers in possession of their administrative rights falls below nine, it may lose its Local Spiritual Assembly status. While this is unfortunate, it is sometimes unavoidable due to the size of a community and the circumstances of its members. Job transfers or layoffs, marriages, divorces, illness, death, and other factors naturally produce fluctuations in the size of communities. When the communities are small, minor variations in the

number of believers often make the difference between maintaining or losing Local Spiritual Assembly status. Records indicate that there is a real correlation between general population density and the size of the Bahá'í community. Therefore, in many areas, particularly those less populated, the challenge of establishing and maintaining a Local Spiritual Assembly requires a long-term commitment on the part of the believers. In these areas, opportunities abound for true homefront pioneering.

Believers in an area that has lost its Local Spiritual Assembly status should not become discouraged and allow the loss to consume their spiritual energies. They should not feel that they or others have, in some way, failed in their obligations as Bahá'ís, but should realize that, in the natural ebb and flow of events, it is inevitable to experience setbacks. In due course, the community will again achieve Local Spiritual Assembly status and become stronger and more firmly established than it was previously.

When a Local Spiritual Assembly community reverts to group status, it should report immediately to the National Spiritual Assembly. The National Assembly may, at its discretion, appoint a temporary administrative committee for the purpose of maintaining the life and vigor of the community. In addition, there are a number of issues pertaining to the change in status that may need to be considered:

**Bahá'í Funds:** The names of bank accounts should be changed, if necessary, to reflect the change in status. Automatic contributions may be continued, if the group wishes, and the amount adjusted, if necessary. However, the group should file a name change with the Internal Revenue Service to reflect its change in status for its Federal Tax Identification Number.

**Postal address:** If the Local Spiritual Assembly had a post office box and the group wishes to maintain it, the name associated with it should reflect the status of the community.

**Disposition of Local Spiritual Assembly records:** The outgoing Local Spiritual Assembly should determine whether a reliable member is willing to hold the Spiritual Assembly records. If someone is willing, the National Spiritual Assembly should be informed of the location of these records and the name of the person holding them. If not, or if the Local Spiritual Assembly is not re-formed after two years, the Spiritual Assembly records should be forwarded to the National Archives at the Bahá'í National Center. Only the actual Spiritual Assembly records, such as minutes, important correspondence, local bulletins, financial records, publicity material, and other historical information, such as community photographs and scrapbooks, should be sent. Do not send any of the Spiritual Assembly's library, including back issues of *The American Bahá'í* and *Bahá'í News*. Books and other such printed matter should, if possible, be given to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly, registered Bahá'í group, or responsible individual willing and able to hold it in trust until the Local Spiritual Assembly can be reformed. Certain types of records having no permanent value, such as routine mailings from the Bahá'í National Center, routine advertisements, etc., from non-Bahá'ís, and so forth, should be disposed of locally.

**Insurance:** Activities and events organized by Bahá'í groups are not covered under the National Spiritual Assembly's general liability insurance policy. However, they may be covered if a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly can be found to sponsor them.

**Incorporation:** The incorporated status of a Local Spiritual Assembly is not necessarily lost if it is unable to re-form. The corporation created has a legal existence apart from the actual Local Spiritual Assembly that it represents. It can continue to exist even if the Local Spiritual Assembly itself is lost, as long as the legal requirements for maintaining corporate status continue to be met, including filing the annual report with the Secretary of State in the state of incorporation. The Local Spiritual Assembly's incorporation can and should be maintained as long as there are one or more believers in the area who are willing to do so.

**Bahá'í Properties:** If the Local Spiritual Assembly holds real estate, appropriate measures should be taken to ensure the proper management of the property. With the approval of the National Assembly, a local or regional committee may be established under the auspices of another Local Spiritual Assembly to manage the property, or the property may be transferred to the National Spiritual Assembly to hold in trust or to dispose of as indicated.

## 1.10 Consultation

(DDBC, Chapter 4)

Bahá'u'lláh says, “No welfare and no well being can be attained except through consultation.”<sup>1</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá called consultation “one of the explicit ordinances of the Lord of Mankind.”<sup>2</sup> The Universal House of Justice states that the skill of consultation will lead to “new paths of human corporate action.”<sup>3</sup> It may be said, therefore, that the most important skill for believers to acquire in their development as members of a Bahá'í group is that of effective Bahá'í consultation. Individuals and Bahá'í groups are encouraged to attend workshops offering training in Bahá'í consultation skills, including those offered through the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of Assembly Development, in addition to those offered through Bahá'í schools and training institutes.

Groups will wish to consult on developing plans for the growth of their Bahá'í community in anticipation of the time when they will function as a Local Spiritual Assembly. A primary concern of the group will be to foster the development of the Faith in its locality by deepening its believers and by attracting new souls, so that when a Local Spiritual Assembly is eventually formed, it will be firmly grounded in the teachings, principles and spirit of the Faith. Since a group is not an administrative institution, consultation within it does not cover the wide range of issues that may be considered by a Local Spiritual Assembly, such as marriage, divorce, personal problems, status of believers, and so forth. Should such concerns arise regarding any of these issues, they should be referred to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly or to the National Spiritual Assembly. Nonetheless, as the principles of consultation are universal, group members will obtain valuable experience in preparation for becoming Local Spiritual Assembly members by endeavoring wholeheartedly to understand and apply the principles and practices of Bahá'í consultation.

The principle of consultation, which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration, should be applied to all Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith, for it is through cooperation and continued exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests. Individual initiative, personal ability and resourcefulness, though indispensable, are, unless supported and enriched by the collective experiences and wisdom of the group, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Consultation: A Compilation, p. 15)*

Individuals may also wish to know that the Universal House of Justice has noted that:

Any Bahá'í, whether an isolated believer or a member of a local community or group, may convey his suggestions and recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly at any time and thus take part in the consultative aspect of Bahá'í community life.

*(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated July 23, 1985)*

### 1.10.1.1 Suggested Reading:

Consultation: A Compilation, Extracts from the Writings and Utterances of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and The Universal House of Justice, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Consultation, John Kolstoe

Channels of Divine Guidance: Consultation, Part I & II, National Spiritual Assembly, Office of Assembly Development

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1 Consultation: A Compilation, p. 3, #2

2 Consultation: A Compilation, p. 7, #14

3 Wellspring of Guidance, p. 96

## **1.11 Protection**

(DDBC, Chapter 5)

Protection of the Faith primarily involves maintaining the unity of the friends, upholding the principles and standards of the Faith, and encouraging obedience to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. If problems of disunity arise within a group, and sincere attempts at consultation do not resolve them, the matter should be reported directly to the National Spiritual Assembly or to the Auxiliary Board member or assistant for protection for that area. Contact information for Auxiliary Board members can be obtained through a Local Spiritual Assembly or the National Spiritual Assembly.

Problems of opposition, which originate with people outside the Faith, or of Covenant-breaking, which afflicts only Bahá'ís, should be reported immediately to both the National Spiritual Assembly and to the Auxiliary Board member for protection. As Covenant-breaking is something that occurs only rarely, it is important to understand what it is not. Those who break Bahá'í law, who withdraw from the Faith, or who reject Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be a Manifestation of God are not Covenant-breakers.

The following passage from the Universal House of Justice explains what Covenant-breaking is:

Every Bahá'í is at liberty, nay is urged, to freely express his opinion and his understanding of the Teachings, but all this is in a totally different category from that of a Bahá'í who opposes the clear Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh or who asserts his own opinion as an authoritative and correct interpretation of the teachings, and attacks or opposes the very institutions which Bahá'u'lláh has created to protect His Covenant. When a person declares his acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God he becomes a party to the covenant and accepts the totality of His Revelation. If he then turns round and attacks Bahá'u'lláh or the Central Institution of the Faith he violates the Covenant. If this happens every effort is made to help that person to see the illogicality and error of his actions, but if he persists he must, in accordance with the instructions of Bahá'u'lláh himself, be shunned as a Covenant-breaker.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated March 23, 1975, to an individual believer)*

A Bahá'í who violates the Covenant is declared a Covenant-breaker only after every effort has been made to help that person see the illogicality and error of his actions. Only the Universal House of Justice can declare someone a Covenant-breaker. Since Bahá'u'lláh has stated that Covenant-breaking is a highly contagious spiritual disease, for the protection of the community Covenant-breakers are cut off from all association with the Bahá'í community both in their personal and public lives.

### **1.11.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Overcoming Barriers to Unity, Steven E. Ellis, The Alaska Bahá'í Bookshop

Issues Concerning Community Functioning, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

The Covenant, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Opposition, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

## **1.12 Publishing and Distribution of Bahá'í Literature**

(DDBC, Chapter 5)

The National Spiritual Assembly, through the following agencies, publishes and distributes the sacred and authoritative texts, teaching literature, introductory and historical works, literature for children and youth, audio/visual materials, and periodicals:

The Bahá'í Publishing Trust publishes sacred and authoritative texts and other works to support the teaching and consolidation efforts of the National Spiritual Assembly.

The Bahá'í Distribution Service distributes Bahá'í publications and special materials through mail order and Bahá'í bookstores.

Bahá'í Media Services provides media production services to both the national and international Bahá'í community, produces videos and audiotapes, provides photographic services, and maintains an extensive media library. It also produces *The American Bahá'í*, a newspaper covering domestic and international news of the progress of the Cause. *The American Bahá'í* is provided free of charge to all U.S. Bahá'ís in good standing.

Bahá'í Subscriber Services offers subscriptions to Bahá'í periodicals including *Brilliant Star*, a bimonthly magazine for children and youth; *One Country*, the Bahá'í International Community newsletter; *Art Matters*, a triannual magazine focusing on the importance of teaching and the arts; *Herald of the South*, a full-color quarterly magazine from Australia; and *World Order*, a quarterly journal featuring scholarly articles.

The National Spiritual Assembly is responsible for the reviewing of material intended for nationwide publication. Local Spiritual Assemblies review material intended for publication or distribution within their own communities. Bahá'í groups may not review works for publication. All works produced for public distribution that mention the Faith, its Central Figures, history or teachings must be submitted to the Office of Research and Review. In addition to written materials, videos, music, play scripts, souvenir items, greeting cards, and so forth, that mention the Faith must also be reviewed.

Bahá'í groups may not set up book sales outlets, but may establish community lending libraries and may open accounts with the Bahá'í Distribution Service. Individuals in any locality are free to order Bahá'í books directly from the Bahá'í Distribution Service.

Suggested Reading:

*Writers and Writing*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

### **1.13 Community Membership**

(DDBC, Chapter 6)

Groups are asked to maintain their own membership list and to inform the National Assembly of address changes for those believers moving into or out of the community. Forms for reporting address changes may be obtained from the Bahá'í National Center's Office of Membership and Records.

Communities render an important service to the National Assembly by maintaining current membership information. As there are significant costs associated with undeliverable mail, changes in the community's membership list should be reported as soon as possible. Twice a year, the National Spiritual Assembly, through its Management Information Services department, sends a revised Community Membership List to all Local Spiritual Assemblies and registered Bahá'í groups. Three general categories appear on each list:

1. Believers with known addresses: Mail is deliverable at the listed address.
2. Believers who have had their mail returned: Mail does not reach the addressee and is returned to the post office. The community should try to verify the addresses of these believers. When a community has verified that a person does not live at the last known address, and no forwarding information is available, that finding should be reported to the Membership and Records Office of the Bahá'í National Center so that person's name can be removed from the local mailing list. While names of believers whose addresses have been verified as unknown do not appear on any community membership lists, the person's name is retained on the National Spiritual Assembly's membership rolls with their last known address.
3. Believers deprived of their administrative rights, institutionalized, or imprisoned: Since these people are still members of the Bahá'í Faith, their names are retained on the local list with notations about their personal status. These individuals do not receive *The American Bahá'í*, nor should they receive routine mailings such as newsletters from local communities. (See section on Community Membership.)

Printouts of the community membership mailed to the group's correspondent are confidential, and obsolete lists should be shredded or burned. Bahá'í mailing lists or directories are to be used for the work

of the Faith only and may not be used for promotional or advertising purposes, or for business solicitation. Furthermore, as the names and addresses of individual Bahá'ís are confidential, the lists should not be given to individual Bahá'ís outside the community of their residence without the prior consent of each community member. The National Spiritual Assembly's policy is that such information is private and confidential and thus should not be made available without the person's consent, unless it is requested by a Bahá'í institution for official business purposes only. Correspondence and messages should, of course, be forwarded to the person that the inquirer wishes to contact.

Since Bahá'í groups are not administrative institutions, they do not have the responsibility of enrolling new believers, handling requests for withdrawal from the Faith, or issuing Bahá'í credentials. This does not mean, of course, that a group may not accept a Bahá'í declaration card; only that the countersigning of the card should be done by an institution of the Faith. This will usually be the nearest Local Spiritual Assembly, Auxiliary Board member, or Regional Bahá'í Council. All requests for withdrawal and requests for Bahá'í credentials should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly.

Bahá'í parents may complete a Bahá'í registration card for each child and forward it to the Bahá'í National Center. Registration cards can be obtained from the Office of Information Services. When the child's card is received at the Bahá'í National Center, the child will be assigned a Bahá'í identification number and the child's name will be added to the national computer records. After the child's name has been recorded on the computer, the child will receive an acknowledgement letter in care of the parents. The letter will include the child's Bahá'í identification number, which the parents should refer to when making address changes for the family. Parents may register their children at birth or any time before they reach the age of fifteen. Bahá'í birth certificates are available from the Office of Information Services for a small fee. On attaining the age of fifteen, registered Bahá'í youth receive a letter of recognition and a Bahá'í membership card from the National Spiritual Assembly. If the youth do not wish to remain registered as Bahá'ís, they may return the card at that time. After reaching the age of 15, any youth who was not registered as a child must complete a Bahá'í Declaration card to have his or her name entered on the membership rolls.

Bahá'ís in possession of their administrative rights may attend Nineteen Day Feasts, vote and be voted for in Bahá'í elections, participate in activities reserved for enrolled members in possession of their administrative rights, contribute to the Bahá'í Funds, go on pilgrimage, receive publications intended for Bahá'ís only, be appointed to service by the institutions of the Faith, be married in the Faith, and enjoy the blessings conferred through obedience to Bahá'í law.

Bahá'ís whose administrative rights have been removed do not share in the above privileges. Nonetheless, since their spiritual commitment is not in question, their continuing Bahá'í life can include loving fellowship and friendship with other believers, worship of God through the prayers of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and `Abdu'l-Bahá, and observance of the Fast, of the Bahá'í Holy Days, and of all the personal and family occasions of the Faith. They have access to the literature of the Faith and, unless specified otherwise by the National Spiritual Assembly, may attend any meetings and Bahá'í school sessions that are open to the public. They may subscribe to Brilliant Star and World Order magazines and other general publications, but cannot receive *The American Bahá'í*. Bahá'ís deprived of their administrative rights cannot attend Nineteen Days Feasts, contribute to the Bahá'í funds, have a Bahá'í marriage, or go on pilgrimage; nor may they receive mailings intended for Bahá'ís only, such as newsletters and bulletins, participate in administrative affairs, vote or be voted for, be appointed to committees, or serve as teachers or speakers in programs sponsored by Bahá'ís. At the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly, an individual's rights may be limited rather than removed completely. Bahá'ís who have lost their administrative rights may recover them through working with a Local Spiritual Assembly to correct whatever condition resulted in removal of their rights.

Bahá'ís who are transferring into the United States from another country should complete their Bahá'í transfer through the Office of Membership and Records as soon as possible. If they have current credentials from their previous country they may participate fully in the life of the community, pending transfer of their membership into the United States Bahá'í community. If they do not have current credentials from their previous country, they are not eligible to participate in Bahá'í-only activities until their status has been verified and their transfer completed. They must contact their former National

Spiritual Assembly and ask that their credentials be sent to the U. S. National Spiritual Assembly. For some believers, particularly Persians, the transfer process may take many months. Until then, their participation in the community is restricted to activities open only to non-Bahá'ís. Believers in the process of transferring into the country without current credentials are ineligible to vote or to be elected, to contribute to the Bahá'í funds, to attend Feasts, or to have access to any of the other privileges accorded Bahá'ís whose good standing is known to the National Spiritual Assembly.

From time to time it becomes necessary to provide letters of introduction to federal or state authorities, or to other National Spiritual Assemblies, to confirm that an individual is or is not a Bahá'í in good standing. All such requests should be made to the National Spiritual Assembly, which reserves the exclusive right to introduce individuals as Bahá'ís to federal or state government authorities and to other National Spiritual Assemblies.

### **1.13.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 6

## **1.14 Teaching/Consolidation**

(DDBC, Chapter 7)

As proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh himself, a fundamental precept of the Bahá'í Faith is that every believer has a responsibility for spreading and strengthening the Cause of God:

To teach the Cause of God, to proclaim its truths, to defend its interests, to demonstrate, by words as well as by deeds, its indispensability, its potency, and universality, should at no time be regarded as the exclusive concern or sole privilege of Bahá'í administrative institutions, be they Assemblies, or committees. All must participate, however humble their origin, however limited their experience, however restricted their means, however deficient their education, however pressing their cares and preoccupations, however unfavorable the environment in which they live. "God," Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, has unmistakably revealed, "hath prescribed unto everyone the duty of teaching His Cause." "Say," He further has written, "Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto everyone the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds."

*(Shoghi Effendi: The Advent of Divine Justice, Page: 45)*

The main focus of Bahá'í groups should be on developing Bahá'í community life and teaching the Faith in their locality so as to raise their status to that of a Local Spiritual Assembly as soon as possible. In their efforts to achieve their goals, groups are encouraged to develop local teaching plans in cooperation with nearby Local Spiritual Assemblies, if any are available, and to seek assistance from the National Teaching Committee and their Regional Bahá'í Council. Groups may also call upon the services of their Auxiliary Board members or assistants for propagation to assist them with these efforts, whether or not they have been adopted as an extension teaching goal by a Local Spiritual Assembly.

However, in those many communities where no organized activities are taking place, whether or not a Local Spiritual Assembly has been elected, more basic challenges have to be addressed, and in this the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants must play a fundamental role. Concerted effort must be made to help the individual believers, men and women alike, increase their love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Cause and to bring them together in the Nineteen Day Feast as well as periodic meetings aimed at raising their awareness of their identity as a community.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Dec 26, 1995, letter to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)*

The responsibility for local teaching activities rests with the individual members of the each community. Attendance at local or regional Bahá'í training institutes can assist individual believers increase their understanding and develop skills for teaching and consolidation. Whatever the identity, background, or

means of the believers, each soul that has received the bounty of knowing Bahá'u'lláh has their own special part to play in the development and growth of the community.

In principle, the initiative and responsibility for electing a Local Spiritual Assembly belong primarily to the Bahá'ís in the locality, and assistance from outside is ultimately fruitful only if the friends become conscious of this sacred responsibility. As progress is made in the training of human resources and in the development of the entire range of Bahá'í community life, the capacity of the friends to elect their Local Spiritual Assemblies on their own will certainly grow.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Dec 26, 1995 letter to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)*

The work of teaching has three aspects: proclamation, expansion, and consolidation. Proclamation involves raising public awareness of the existence of the Faith and its teachings. Expansion involves attracting individuals to the Faith, expanding their knowledge of it, and eventually enrolling them. Consolidation involves continued deepening in the teachings, increasing firmness in the Covenant, and development of skills needed in Bahá'í community life and administration. Each is important and a balance among them is essential for the healthy development of the community.

Expansion and consolidation are twin processes that must go hand in hand. The friends must not stop expansion in the name of consolidation. Deepening the newly enrolled believers generates tremendous stimulus which results in further expansion. The enrollment of new believers, on the other hand, creates a new spirit in the community and provides additional potential manpower that will reinforce the consolidation work.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance, p. 33)*

Bahá'í groups are encouraged to participate in the National Spiritual Assembly's national teaching plan, which is currently using the powerful medium of television broadcasting to proclaim and teach the principles of the Faith all over the country. Links to the 1-800-22-UNITE response system, available to Bahá'í communities at no cost, distribute seeker inquiries directly to a local community nearest to them. Media campaign videotapes are also available for communities to use on local cable TV channels. Detailed information is posted on the National Spiritual Assembly's Administrative Web Site and may also be obtained by calling the National Teaching Committee office.

In areas where there are concentrations of minority populations the believers should strive to make themselves aware not only of the needs and interests of those populations, but to be respectful of their cultural practices and sensitive to the effects of their immersion in the dominant culture. The National American Indian Teaching Committee has prepared a booklet, *Protocols for American Indian Teaching*, which has been adopted as policy of the National Spiritual Assembly for teaching American Indian people. Questions concerning teaching this and most other minority populations may be directed to the group area's Regional Bahá'í Council. Requests for assistance and questions concerning Southeast Asian teaching should be directed to the U. S. Bahá'í Refugee Office under the Office of the Secretary for External Affairs.

Believers who wish to fill a homefront pioneering goal should contact the Regional Bahá'í Council for the area in which they are interested. Believers who wish to pioneer internationally, either long or short term, or who wish to contact a Bahá'í community outside the United States should first consult the Office of Pioneering at the Bahá'í National Center.

#### **1.14.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

The Power of Divine Assistance, Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Promoting Entry by Troops, The Universal House of Justice

A Special Measure of Love: The Importance and Nature of the Teaching Work among the Masses, Messages from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

Effective Teaching Workbook, National Teaching Committee

Protocols for American Indian Teaching, National American Indian Teaching Committee

## **1.15 Building Distinctive Bahá'í Communities**

(DDBC, Chapter 8)

At the heart of every successful Bahá'í community is the love and unity of the believers. Activities and relationships within the community which promote fellowship, provide opportunities for service, increase understanding between believers of diverse backgrounds, and develop the spiritual life of the community are all essential to the development and expansion of every Bahá'í community. These principles apply to intercommunity relationships as well as local community relationships.

The people of the world not only need the laws and principles of the Bahá'í Faith - they desperately need to see the love that is engendered by it in the hearts of its followers, and to partake of that atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, forbearance and active kindness which should be the hallmark of a Bahá'í Community.

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated December 5, 1942, to an individual believer, in Lights of Guidance, #1345)*

Bahá'í communities should strive to be characterized by harmony among the believers and by freedom from prejudice, by embodying the principle of unity in diversity, and thereby demonstrating, once and for all, the unity of mankind. Building distinctive Bahá'í communities results in the transformation of collective human life and the attraction of others to the Faith:

It is in the local Bahá'í communities that the most widespread presentation of the Faith can take place....It is here that the power of Bahá'u'lláh to organize human affairs on a basis of spiritual unity can be most apparent.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated Ridván, 1985, to the Bahá'ís of the World)*

Development of spiritual characteristics, improvement of moral character, firmness in the Covenant, and striving to live up to the high ideals of the Faith are among the essential responsibilities of individual believers in developing distinctive Bahá'í communities. Since a community is a group of people with relationships to one another, the achievement of unity depends upon successful relationships among the Bahá'ís. According to the Universal House of Justice:

...where love, respect and courtesy are genuinely and mutually expressed, estrangement finds no accommodation and problems become soluble challenges.

*(May 19, 1994, letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)*

For spiritual characteristics to create unity among the believers, they must find active expression in equality between women and men and in elimination of all manner of prejudice. The full participation of minorities, whether they are African American, American Indian, Hispanic, Persian, Southeast Asian, or any other minority, can be achieved through sincere and sustained efforts to understand one another, to accept differences in perception and styles of communication, and to extend a degree of hospitality and kindness which may normally be reserved for family and close friends:

Unless and until the believers really come to realize they are one spiritual family, knit together by a bond more lasting than mere physical ties can ever be, they will not be able to create that warm community atmosphere which alone can attract the hearts of humanity, frozen for lack of real love and feeling.

*(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, The Individual and Teaching: Raising the Divine Call, pp. 25-26)*

Most people of other cultures are accustomed to establishing bonds of friendship and trust within the context of family relationships, and in general, prefer personal contact to maintain their relationships with the Bahá'í community. The social aspects of community life are likely to be most attractive to them and many may enjoy hosting unity Feasts or Holy Day observances in their homes. The customary Western practices of using bulletins and flyers to advise them of community events and of scheduling meetings to sustain their interest in community life may fall short of the desired results.

In reference to hospitality, however, a word of caution is in order. Because it is generally known that Bahá'ís are kind, generous and sympathetic by nature, training, and conviction, it is not uncommon for them to receive appeals for financial and other kinds of emergency help from itinerant Bahá'ís and others who claim to be Bahá'ís or friends of the Faith. While it is left to the discretion of individual believers to respond as they see fit, it should be remembered that the Bahá'í community is not a traveler's aid or social service agency prepared to assist the needs of itinerants, other than in some selective and discriminating cases. Although Bahá'u'lláh has told us to “be a home for the stranger . . . an answerer of the cry of the needy,” no Bahá'í should presume that the hospitality of his fellow Bahá'ís is his due. Bahá'u'lláh also states, “No man should enter the house of his friend, save at his friend's pleasure, nor lay hands upon his treasures, nor prefer his own will to his friend's, and in no wise seek advantage over him.” Thus Bahá'u'lláh makes hospitality the prerogative of the host and not of the guest. Common courtesy demands that an individual should not impose himself upon anyone without prior invitation, and Bahá'ís should be far more courteous than others in this respect. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that a person will contact a Local Spiritual Assembly or individual believer, claiming to be a Bahá'í but having no Bahá'í credentials or other forms of identification. If you do not know the person asking for hospitality, before offering aid to such a person it is advisable to check with the Office of Community Administration and Development at the Bahá'í National Center to verify that he or she is indeed a member of the Bahá'í Faith.

Group activities characteristic of a distinctive Bahá'í community life may include spiritual gatherings such as dawn prayers, devotional meetings, Nineteen Day Feasts and celebration of Bahá'í Holy Days; a wide range of socialization and fellowship that draws on the cultural diversity of the community; the practice of Bahá'í consultation for solving problems of every sort; deepenings and firesides; fund raising events; the support and promotion of unity in family life; support, encouragement, and education of children and youth; and service projects for the betterment of the community. According to the Universal House of Justice:

A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.

*(1996 Universal House of Justice Ridván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World)*

For youth in the community, the National Youth Committee can provide assistance with a variety of youth activities, including the Bahá'í Youth Service Corp (Year of Service), Bahá'í Youth Workshops, Bahá'í Campus Associations, and more. In addition, each Regional Bahá'í Council has established youth committees and desks in each region to assist with organizing and coordinating youth activities in each of the regions.

All believers are strongly encouraged to attend their annual Unit Conventions for election of delegates. These annual conventions are an integral part of Bahá'í community life and were stressed by the Guardian as particularly important for Bahá'ís to attend as a means of becoming better acquainted with other believers in the unit area. They are also the means by which every adult Bahá'í in good standing has a voice in the annual election of the National Spiritual Assembly and, periodically, of the Universal House of Justice.

Believers are also encouraged to attend local, regional, national, and international Bahá'í conferences. Such conferences enable the believers to develop broader and more inclusive views of the Faith, as they often include large numbers of participants from a wide variety of backgrounds.

### **1.15.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

The Divine Art of Living: Selections from the Bahá'í Writings, compiled by Mabel Hyde Paine

The Power of Divine Assistance, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Issues Concerning Community Functioning, prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Unrestrained as the Wind: A Life Dedicated to Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í National Youth Committee and the Bahá'í Publishing Trust

The Power of Unity: Beyond Prejudice and Racism, compiled by Bonnie Taylor, National Race Unity Committee

Women: A Compilation, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

The Pattern of Bahá'í Life, compilation of extracts published by the Publishing Trust of the United Kingdom

Living the Life, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

## **1.16 Bahá'í Holy Days and the Nineteen Day Feast**

(DDBC, Chapter 9)

The Nineteen Day Feasts and Bahá'í Holy Days are central to the life of the community, no matter how large or small the community may be. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the spirit that should permeate such gatherings:

You must continue to keep the Nineteen Day Feast. It is very important; it is very good. But when you present yourselves in the meetings, before entering them, free yourselves from all that you have in your heart, free your thoughts and your minds from all else save God, and speak to your heart. That all may make this a gathering of love, make it the cause of illumination, make it a gathering of attraction of the hearts, surround this gathering with the Lights of the Supreme Concourse, so that you may be gathered together with the utmost love.

Each one of you must think how to make happy and pleased the other members of your Assembly, and each one must consider all those who are present as better and greater than himself, and each one must consider himself less than the rest. Know their station as high, and think of your own station as low. Should you act and live according to these behests, know verily, of a certainty, that that Feast is the Heavenly Food. That Supper is the "Lord's Supper"! I am the Servant of that gathering.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, #796)*

It is preferable that Feast be observed on the first day of each Bahá'í month in the period between sunset of the preceding day and sunset of the first day, although it may be held on a later day, if necessary. The program for each Feast should consist of three parts. First a devotional portion, followed by consultation on matters of importance to the community including the sharing of news and messages, ending with a social portion. Of course, the believers are free to gather before the Feast for fellowship and meals also.

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi after Him have gradually unfolded the institutional significance of this injunction. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the importance of the spiritual and devotional character of these gatherings. Shoghi Effendi, besides further elaborating the devotional and social aspects of the Feast, has developed the administrative element of such gatherings and, in systematically instituting the Feast, has provided for a period of consultation on the affairs of the Bahá'í community, including the sharing of news and messages.

*(Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pg 202)*

Small groups and isolated believers are encouraged to come together among themselves and with larger communities for increased diversity and fellowship both in observance of the Nineteen Day Feasts and celebration of the Holy days. While larger groups are encouraged to observe the Feasts in their own

community, according to the same principles followed by Local Spiritual Assemblies, they may join with neighboring communities for other observances. According to the Universal House of Justice:

In reply to your letter of November 8th we feel that all friends, whatever their circumstances, should be encouraged to observe the Nineteen Day Feast. Obviously it can only be an official administrative occasion where there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it, present reports to the friends, and receive their recommendations. But groups, spontaneous gatherings of friends, and even isolated believers should certainly remember the day and say prayers together. In the case of a group it may well hold the Feast in the manner in which a Local Spiritual Assembly would do so, recognizing of course that it has no official administrative standing.

*(From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, December 1, 1968, Bahá'í Journal of the British Isles, No. 190, March-April 1969)*

Other observances should be held at the times indicated according to standard time. Bahá'í Holy Days are an important aspect of Bahá'í community life, whose observance was repeatedly encouraged by the beloved Guardian:

“He wishes the Bahá'ís to press for recognition of their right to observe their own Holy Days, and to observe them whenever possible in strict accordance with our teachings.”

*(Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, pg. 30)*

“He wishes also to stress the fact that, according to the Bahá'í laws, work is forbidden on our nine Holy Days. Believers who have independent businesses or shops should refrain from working on these days. Those who are in government employ should, on religious grounds, make an effort to be excused from work; all believers, whoever their employers, should do likewise. If the government or other employers refuse to grant them these days off, they are not required to forfeit their employment, but they should make every effort to have the independent status of the Faith recognized and their right to hold their own religious Holy Days acknowledged.”

*(Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, pg. 37)*

Letters from the National Spiritual Assembly explaining the importance of Bahá'í Holy Days can be obtained from the Office of the Secretary to use in obtaining recognition from schools for these important religious observances. A copy of this letter may also be printed out from the National Assembly's administrative web site.

### **1.16.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File, compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby

Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Holy Days, The Nineteen Day Feast, and Special Events (Chapter 9)

Days to Remember, a compilation by B. Forghani

The Nineteen Day Feast, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

The Ayyám-i-Há Camel, Cher Holt-Fortin, 1989 (Children's book)

### **1.17 Bahá'í Funds**

(DDBC, Chapter 10)

Only registered Bahá'ís in possession of their administrative rights may contribute to the Bahá'í funds. There are four major funds that believers may support according to their own discretion:

The Bahá'í International Fund supports the vast array of the work of the Universal House of Justice. It is used to finance, among other things, the operations of the Bahá'í World Center, assistance to various National Spiritual Assemblies, subsidies for Bahá'í social and economic development programs around the world, and work with United Nations organizations.

The Continental Bahá'í Fund supports the propagation and protection work of the International Teaching Center, the Continental Boards of Counselors, and the Auxiliary Boards and their assistants.

The National Bahá'í Fund supports the work of the National Spiritual Assembly. It is used to assist the national proclamation, expansion, and consolidation of the Faith; to maintain national properties, including the House of Worship in Wilmette; to promote external affairs work; and to support the international institutions of the Faith.

The Local Bahá'í Fund in each Bahá'í locality supports the work of the local community and may also be used to support other the Bahá'í Funds.

Registered Bahá'í groups may choose to elect a treasurer and to establish and maintain a local Bahá'í Fund, using the procedures outlined in Appendix A, but are not required to do so. If a registered Bahá'í group chooses to establish a Bahá'í fund, its treasurer must be of legal age, usually at least eighteen years of age, in the state in which the group is formed. Groups that are not registered with the National Spiritual Assembly should not undertake the establishment of a local Bahá'í Fund.

Contributions to the Bahá'í funds are sacred and confidential, and must be handled by the local treasurer with the utmost discretion and trustworthiness. Non-Bahá'ís and Bahá'ís who have been deprived of their administrative rights, as well as believers whose international transfers have not been completed, may not contribute to the Bahá'í funds.

Bahá'í funds should never be co-mingled with personal funds. Bahá'í funds for a registered Bahá'í group should be deposited in a separate checking account under the name of the local Bahá'í community. For example, if the name of the community is “Bahá'ís of Union Township”, the group account should be opened under the name of “Union Township Bahá'í Fund.”

Tax exempt status for registered Bahá'í groups may be established by applying for a Federal Tax Identification Number (EIN) from the Internal Revenue Service, as explained in Appendix B. The group's EIN should be reported to the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of the Treasurer as soon as it is received from the Internal Revenue Service.

An annual audit of the local Bahá'í fund is recommended, especially for larger groups, as a prudent safeguard and a means of evaluating the uses of the funds. Treasurers of registered Bahá'í groups are encouraged to study *Stewardship and Development 2nd Edition*, available through Bahá'í Distribution Service, for detailed information pertaining to handling Bahá'í funds.

Contributions to the local Bahá'í Fund are entrusted to the local treasurer. Personal contributions to the National Bahá'í Fund may be entrusted to the local treasurer to be forwarded to the national Office of the Treasurer, or may be sent there directly by the believer offering the contribution. Personal contributions to any of the international funds can be entrusted to the local treasurer, to the national Office of the Treasurer, or sent directly to the Universal House of Justice.

Information regarding the details of the sacred law of Huqúqu'lláh, the Right of God, which pertains only to personal contributions, can be obtained from one of the trustees or representatives of the Board of Trustees of the Office of the Secretariat of the Bahá'í Huqúqu'lláh Trust.

### **1.17.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Bahá'í Funds: Contributions and Administration

Ridván letters from the Universal House of Justice, dated 1988 & 1989

Huqú'qu'lláh, Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice

Stewardship and Development 2nd Edition

## **1.18 Bahá'í Education**

(DDBC, Chapter 11)

While Bahá'í groups have no specific responsibilities concerning the education of children, other than those that devolve upon individuals to promote education and learning, any group may establish youth and children's classes according to the needs of their community. Adult deepenings should also be held in response to the needs of the community and its seekers.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to attend local and regional Bahá'í schools and institutes whenever possible. The various Bahá'í schools, offering on-site facilities, offer a wide range of programs for children, youth, and adults. For distance learning, the Wilmette Institute offers opportunities for mature youth and adults to undertake in-depth study of the Bahá'í Writings at both the introductory and intermediate levels. College level credit is available for some courses. Scholarship funds for various aspects of Bahá'í education may be available through Local Spiritual Assemblies.

### **1.18.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Foundations for a Spiritual Education, prepared by the National Bahá'í Education Task Force

Scholarship, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Summary of the Core Curriculum for Spiritual Education (available through the National Teacher Training Center at the Louhelen Bahá'í School)

Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File, compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby

## **1.19 External Affairs**

(DDBC, Chapter 12)

As groups are not administrative bodies, they should adhere to the guidelines for individuals when dealing with external affairs matters. Bahá'í individuals and institutions must first obtain the permission of the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of the Secretary for External Affairs in Washington, D.C. before contacting the following on matters directly pertaining to the Bahá'í Faith:

Agencies and officials of federal or state governments

National or state offices of national organizations

Prominent people

Examples of official contact on behalf of the Bahá'í Faith include invitations to Bahá'í community events, presentations of Bahá'í statements, and expressions of Bahá'í support for or positions on particular policies or issues.

The policy does not apply in cases of informal contact with friends or family members who happen to hold public office or who may be publicly well known. The National Assembly would very much appreciate being informed, however, if a Bahá'í has a personal relationship with a prominent person or government official, because such relations may facilitate official contact should such contact be required.

A Bahá'í group may contact officials in their locality and local chapters of organizations under programs approved by the National Spiritual Assembly, using materials and guidance made available through offices or agencies of the National Assembly. In any communication with local officials, the friends should proceed with the utmost moderation, tact, and wisdom, keeping in mind the importance of preserving the dignity and reputation of the Faith.

Individual believers are free to contact government representatives, sign petitions, or participate in nonpartisan campaigns to express their views on non-Bahá'í matters, but they should not identify themselves as Bahá'ís or convey the impression that they are representing the Bahá'í Faith unless encouraged to do so by a Bahá'í institution. They also may associate with local chapters of national

organizations whose goals are consistent with Bahá'í teachings, and in this case may share their personal Bahá'í beliefs when appropriate. However, before taking any action or becoming involved in issues or campaigns that may have national or international implications, advice should be sought from the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of the Secretary for External Affairs in Washington, D.C.

Questions concerning contact with national or regional media should be directed to the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of Public Information in New York City. Contact with local media is governed by the same principles as contact with local officials, and questions concerning such contact may be directed to the Office of Public Information.

Questions about United Nations related activities or advocacy on United Nations issues should be addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly's U.S. UN Office in New York City.

Questions dealing with refugees and immigration should be addressed to the U.S. Bahá'í Refugee Office under the Office of the Secretary for External Affairs.

### **1.19.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 12: External Affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1998

Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 13: Social and Economic Development, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1998

## **1.20 Properties**

(DDBC, Chapter 14)

Bahá'í Groups may not acquire or lease property, nor should they refer to privately owned property as “Bahá'í Centers”. The use of the word “Bahá'í” for naming of properties is reserved exclusively for Bahá'í institutions under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly. In the event of a group having the opportunity to obtain property for the Faith, e.g., through donation, the matter should be referred to the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **1.20.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14: Properties, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1998

## **1.21 Application of Bahá'í Law**

(DDBC, Chapter 15)

“... he feels it is his duty to explain that the Laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Aqdas are, whenever practical and not in direct conflict with the Civil laws of the land, absolutely binding on every believer or Bahá'í institution whether in the East or in the West. Certain laws, such as fasting, obligatory prayers, the consent of the parents before marriage, avoidance of alcoholic drinks, monogamy, should be regarded by all believers as universally and vitally applicable at the present time. Others have been formulated in anticipation of a state of society destined to emerge from the chaotic conditions that prevail today.

*(Shoghi Effendi: Directives of the Guardian, Pages: 3-4)*

Every believer is encouraged to obtain a copy of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, familiarize himself or herself with its passages, and strive to apply its precepts in their life. A detailed list of laws that are not currently binding on Western believers is published in Developing Distinctive Bahá'í

Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies and may be obtained from any Local Spiritual Assembly.

Believers should be aware of the Bahá'í laws on marriage and divorce and that violation of these laws may result in administrative sanctions. Bahá'í marriage consists of a legally recognized union between a man and a woman with the expectation of chastity on the part of both men and women outside of marital relationships.

Bahá'ís who are sole owners of businesses are obligated to conform their practices and dealings to the laws and teachings of the Faith. For example, a restaurant owned by a Bahá'í should not serve alcohol or feature entertainment that is inconsistent with the teachings. In addition, stores and establishments owned by Bahá'ís should be closed on the nine Holy Days, even though they may have non-Bahá'ís in their employ. According to the same standards, individual Bahá'ís should, if possible, avoid employment that would involve a compromise of their principles, such as serving alcoholic beverages.

Flagrant violations of Bahá'í law that may be damaging to the reputation of the Faith should be referred either to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly or directly to the National Spiritual Assembly. The National Spiritual Assembly may then assign the matter to a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly to handle.

### **1.21.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh

A Chaste and Holy Life, Shoghi Effendi

Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi

## **1.22 Marriage**

(DDBC, Chapter 16)

Bahá'í groups do not have the authority to officiate Bahá'í marriages. Bahá'ís living outside the jurisdiction of a Local Spiritual Assembly who wish to marry may contact any nearby Local Spiritual Assembly to assist them. While they may also contact the National Spiritual Assembly directly, it will normally appoint a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly to take responsibility for the matter.

In preparation for marriage, Bahá'í couples would be well advised to attend workshops together in the practice of Bahá'í consultation, as the following extract from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice indicates its importance to the success of Bahá'í marriage, which it characterizes as:

... [a] relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings - a relationship governed by the principles of consultation...

*(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

It will be helpful for everyone involved if the friends who wish to be married are aware ahead of time of what will be expected of them and what they may expect from a Local Spiritual Assembly. The essential requirements of Bahá'í marriage are as follows:

1. Consent of both parties
2. Consents of all living, natural parents
3. Proof of divorce, if there were prior marriages
4. Compliance with local civil marriage laws
5. Performance of a Bahá'í ceremony under the prior authorization of a Local Spiritual Assembly

Two Bahá'ís who wish to marry each other must have a Bahá'í ceremony. A Bahá'í who wishes to marry a non-Bahá'í must have a Bahá'í ceremony and may also have a civil or another religious ceremony to satisfy the needs of the non-Bahá'í party. When more than one ceremony is planned, the Bahá'í ceremony may not be commingled with the other ceremony and the Bahá'í may not make commitments which are not in keeping with the principles and laws of the Bahá'í Faith. If more than one ceremony is to be held,

the order in which the ceremonies are held is not important. However, both ceremonies must take place on the same day, that is, a night should not intervene between one ceremony and the next.

All Bahá'ís wishing to marry must first contact a Local Spiritual Assembly. It is not possible to have a Bahá'í marriage ceremony without a Local Spiritual Assembly's prior authorization. There are many different circumstances that may affect how the Bahá'í marriage law is applied, and the Local Spiritual Assembly will be able to assist the couple in clarifying how it applies to their particular situation.

When a marriage is planned, the Local Spiritual Assembly selected to officiate should be informed far enough in advance that it can review and approve the parental consents and ensure that arrangements for the Bahá'í ceremony are in conformity with Bahá'í principles and the requirements of both Bahá'í and civil law. Failing to give a Local Spiritual Assembly adequate time to fulfill its responsibilities may lead to a delay of the wedding, as it cannot take place until the administrative requirements have been met. If difficulties arise in obtaining consent, the Local Spiritual Assembly should lend whatever help it can. A couple is not considered to be engaged to be married until the consent of all living, natural parents has been obtained by the Bahá'í institutions. Accordingly, a couple should not make marriage plans, and certainly should not set a date for a ceremony, send invitations, and so on, until the consent of the parents is obtained. By delaying their plans until consent has been obtained, the couple will not only show proper respect for Bahá'í law but will also avoid the awkward situation of not having the required consents as the planned marriage date approaches.

Individuals should be aware that breaches of the Bahá'í marriage law may result in removal of administrative rights. As Bahá'u'lláh has placed such emphasis upon the importance of marriage as the foundation of society, it is crucial that believers become informed about the laws pertaining to it. It should not be assumed that all the believers in a community are fully aware of the Bahá'í marriage law. As opportunities arise, whether at the Nineteen Day Feast, at community deepenings, or in local newsletters, the community should make an effort to ensure that all of its members are familiar with the basic requirements of this fundamental Bahá'í law.

### **1.22.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life: Selections from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

Family Life, Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Marriage: A Fortress for Well-Being, National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

Marriage and Family Life (available through Core Curriculum program)

Women, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

### **1.23 Divorce**

(DDBC, Chapter 17)

Just as registered Bahá'í groups do not have the authority to officiate Bahá'í marriages, they do not have the authority to initiate a year of waiting or to grant Bahá'í divorces. A year of waiting is an application for Bahá'í divorce that must run for one full year before a Bahá'í divorce can be granted and cannot begin until the couple have established separate residences. Bahá'ís living outside the jurisdiction of a Local Spiritual Assembly who wish to apply for a Bahá'í divorce should contact any nearby Local Spiritual Assembly to assist them in establishing a year of waiting. While they may also contact the National Spiritual Assembly directly to initiate a Bahá'í divorce, it will normally appoint a nearby Local Spiritual Assembly to take responsibility for the matter.

A couple experiencing difficulty in their marriage would be wise to seek the guidance and assistance of a Local Spiritual Assembly well before the situation has deteriorated to a point where one of the parties feels compelled to seek a year of waiting. Consultation with an Assembly should be entirely confidential

and might help to provide the couple with a more balanced perspective about their concerns, increased clarity about the spiritual principles involved, and one or more possible courses of action to resolve their difficulties.

When a couple or a partner to a marriage approaches a Local Spiritual Assembly with the intention of starting a year of waiting, they should expect the Assembly or its representatives to review the Bahá'í teachings on divorce with them and explain the requirements pertaining to the year of waiting. It may be pointed out that divorce is condemned in the Bahá'í teachings and that a condition of aversion, antipathy or repugnance must exist to justify the extreme measure of dissolving the marriage.

Since the Local Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility to determine whether irreconcilable antipathy exists and the duty to try to reconcile the couple, it is important that it meet with both parties, if possible. If one of the parties is not a Bahá'í, the Local Spiritual Assembly may extend an invitation for the non-Bahá'í spouse to meet with the Assembly or its representatives, but should not pursue the issue if he or she seems to have no desire to meet with the Assembly.

To obtain a Bahá'í divorce, a civil divorce must be granted in addition to the completion of a year of waiting. The date on which a Bahá'í divorce is granted will coincide with either the date of the completion of the year of waiting or the date of the civil divorce, whichever occurs later.

### **1.23.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life: Selections from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

Family Life, Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

Divorce: Writings Discourage Divorce, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Published by Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the United Kingdom

## **1.24 Burial Law, Wills**

(DDBC, Chapter 18)

According to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, every adult Bahá'í is obligated to prepare a will but the form and content is a matter of individual discretion at this time. Believers may make gifts of property or funds to the Faith through their wills and are encouraged to engage the services of a competent attorney, if they wish to do so. They should include in their wills provision for Bahá'í burial and would be wise to inform non-Bahá'í family members of their wishes in this matter.

As personal papers are an important source of information for historians and Bahá'í administrators, these may also be included in estate bequests to the Faith. The National Bahá'í Archives is trying to acquire a wide variety of collections to document the diversity of the American Bahá'í community. The Archives is interested in correspondence, photographs, personal recollections and manuscripts. Even a small collection of papers can be a valuable resource for future Bahá'í scholars.

Bahá'í groups are not officially responsible for conducting funeral services or carrying out arrangements for interment but may, nonetheless, find themselves called upon to do so in the absence of a nearby institution. All believers should be familiar with the Bahá'í burial law, as the following requirements are binding on believers in the West:

1. The body must be buried, not cremated
2. The Bahá'í Prayer for the Dead is to be recited for a believer of the age of 15 or over. This prayer appears in the Bahá'í Prayer Book and also as number CLXVII in Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh.
3. The body must not be transported more than an hour's journey from the place of death. The method of transport is not specified, but the journey must not take longer than one hour. The place of death can be taken to mean the civil boundaries of the town or city in which death occurred.

Although the following additional requirements are not currently binding on the Western believers, they are binding on the Persian believers, and Western believers may observe them, if they choose to do so:

1. The body should be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton.
2. A burial ring should be placed on the finger of the deceased before interment. (Burial rings can be purchased through the Bahá'í Distribution Service.)
3. The coffin should be made of crystal, stone or of a hard, fine wood.

#### **1.24.1.1 Suggested Reading:**

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh

Open Door

The Writing of a Will

Unto Him Shall We Return, compiled by Hugh Motlagh

Death: The Messenger of Joy, Madeleine Hellaby

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## **1.25 Appendix A — Basics of How To Be a Treasurer**

### **I. WHAT DO I NEED TO GET STARTED?**

1. Apply for a Federal tax identification number, known as an Employee Identification Number (EIN), if your group does not have one (see Appendix B).
2. Open a community checking account (see page 25) and learn how to use it.
3. Purchase a duplicate receipt book.
4. Buy pocket file folders for paid and unpaid bills.
5. See that contribution goals are established for the group.

### **RECEIVING OFFERINGS FROM THE FRIENDS**

1. Prepare duplicate receipts for all contributions.

2. Keep abreast of tax changes that affect all aspects of giving and the documentation required for receipting gifts.
3. Distribute receipts to the contributors.

### **PUTTING THE FUND TO USE**

1. Contribute regularly to the Bahá'í National Fund and the other Bahá'í Funds.
2. Pay all bills promptly.

### **MAKING REPORTS**

1. Make regular reports to the community on total income and expenses, community participation, money in the bank and bills to be paid.
2. Make regular reports to the community at Feast including:
  3. Education on the spiritual nature of giving and sacrifice.
  4. The status of the community's Fund contribution goal each Bahá'í month.
  5. The percentage of the community giving to the Fund each Bahá'í month.

### **THE ANNUAL AUDIT**

1. Arrange in order by month all bank statements, canceled checks, deposit tickets and paid bills.
2. Have the community appoint two individuals, other than the Treasurer, to audit the community's financial records, as described in Stewardship and Development.

## **1.26 Appendix B — Federal Tax Identification Number**

This compilation is online at [http://bahai-library.com/nsa\\_guidance\\_bahai\\_groups](http://bahai-library.com/nsa_guidance_bahai_groups)