

BUILDING MOMENTUM: A COHERENT APPROACH TO GROWTH

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In its message of 17 January 2003 to the Bahá'ís of the world, the Universal House of Justice presents a cogent analysis of the progress of the Bahá'í world in advancing the process of entry by troops since the beginning of the Five Year Plan. Utilizing the 17 January message as the framework for reflecting on our “collective experience,” this document reviews the learning which underlies that experience and offers further perspectives on the challenges of promoting systematic growth. The document is divided into five sections:

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BUILDING MOMENTUM: A COHERENT APPROACH TO GROWTH

1. A VISION OF GROWTH

During the past two years the believers and institutions worldwide have focused their efforts on implementing the fundamental strategy of the Five Year Plan for creating a culture of growth, a strategy succinctly described in a message from the Universal House of Justice:

The Five Year Plan ... requires concentrated and sustained attention to two essential movements. The first is the steady flow of believers through the sequence of courses offered by training institutes, for the purpose of developing the human resources of the Cause. The second, which receives its impetus from the first, is the movement of geographic clusters from one stage of growth to the next.¹

These two movements have been at the heart of the learning experience of the Bahá'í world and are the focus of this analysis. The first movement had its beginnings with the establishment of a network of training institutes during the Four Year Plan. The second got under way only in the Five Year Plan, when national communities, in response to the guidance of the House of Justice, began by mapping their territories into geographic clusters.

... National Spiritual Assemblies proceeded with relative ease to divide the territories under their jurisdiction into areas consisting of adjacent localities, called clusters, using criteria that were purely geographic and social and did not relate to the strength of local Bahá'í communities.²

In its Riqdván 2002 message the House of Justice described how the exercise of clustering and categorizing has given the institutions and believers a vision of systematic growth: "Such a mapping ... makes it possible to realize a pattern of well-ordered expansion and consolidation."

1.1 Categorizing Clusters

Acknowledging that in some cases cluster boundaries would be only a "reasonable approximation,"³ which might be modified through experience, National Spiritual Assemblies categorized the clusters according to broad stages of the development of the Faith as outlined in the message of 9 January 2001 from the House of Justice. In this connection the House of Justice has stressed the following point:

To assign a cluster to one or another category is not to make a statement about status. Rather, it is a way of evaluating its capacity for growth, in order that an approach compatible with its evolving development can be adopted.⁴

In order to systematically advance the growth process, National Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils sought to establish criteria for determining when a cluster would move from one category to the next. In some cases such criteria were expressed in numerical goals, while in others a qualitative description was adopted. Defining minimum criteria for each category is a process that grows principally out of experience. In its message of 17 January 2003 the House of Justice described the importance of this task:

... the task of refining the criteria needed for valid assessments is proving to be an ongoing challenge to institutions.... Rigid criteria are obviously counterproductive, but a well-defined scheme to carry out evaluation is essential.⁵

Wherever Regional Councils exist, they are generally in the best position to determine the current categories of the clusters within their jurisdiction; Auxiliary Board members and agencies at the cluster level can also provide indispensable input. According to the House of Justice, “two criteria seem especially important” in this evaluation:

the strength of the human resources raised up by the training institute for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith in the cluster, and the ability of the institutions to mobilize these resources in the field of service.⁶

What is essential is that the institutions periodically assess the progress that has been made so that the strategies being applied in a cluster are “compatible with its evolving development.”⁷ When warranted, the classification of a cluster is changed and new priorities are set.

1.2 Establishing Priorities

In addition to classifying clusters according to their capacity for growth, national and regional institutions set priorities as to which clusters would receive greater focus early in the Plan. At times this involved opening a few virgin clusters and advancing some weak ones, but generally, concentration was on the well-developed clusters in a country. Once the institutions came to understand the types of strategies needed to advance each category of clusters, it became apparent that it was advantageous to select a few promising clusters where the conditions for accelerated growth were the most favorable and then work toward establishing an intensive program of growth. The following guidance in a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to a National Assembly reflects the advice given in such instances:

An important challenge now before you is to ensure that one or two clusters in Austria reach the level at which intensive growth programs can be established. This will involve, foremost, helping the institute in your country develop to a more advanced stage, endowed with the capacity to accompany a significant percentage of individuals up to the point in its sequence of courses where they can be trained to act as tutors and multiply the number of study circles in the clusters selected. Given the receptivity displayed in the past by some of the minority groups in Austria ... you would clearly do well to choose at least one cluster with a large representation of such a population.⁸

And to another National Assembly, the House of Justice explained the need for focus on a few advanced areas of high potential:

In consultation with the Councils and the Counsellors, you have identified several small geographic areas in which the local communities are gaining strength through a strong institute process. As the second year of the Plan fast approaches, the House of Justice hopes that, if it has not already been done, two or three of these clusters will be selected to receive special attention in the coming months so that they will soon reach the point where it will be possible to consider launching an intensive program of growth in each.⁹

1.3 Proceeding through a Sequence of Courses

In its 17 January message the House of Justice addresses the effort in which the believers are currently and principally engaged:

Focus in almost every country has now turned to stimulating the movement of its priority clusters from their current stage of growth to the next. What has become strikingly clear is that progress in this respect depends largely on the efficacy of the parallel process aimed at helping an ever-increasing number of friends to move through the main sequence of courses offered by the institute serving the area.¹⁰

The impetus given to the institute process in the past two years and, in particular, to having the believers proceed through a sequence of courses was felt on all continents. The number of participants who have completed at least one institute course in the basic sequence continues to rise, but the most significant achievement is that a swelling stream of friends has proceeded through higher level courses. For example, 18 months into the Five Year Plan, more than 10,000 believers had completed Ruhi Institute Book 6, accounting for an increase of over 500 percent since April 2001, and more than 8,000 had completed Ruhi Institute Book 7, resulting in a dramatically enlarged pool of trained tutors.

Gradually most national communities around the world adopted for their basic sequence of courses the Ruhi Institute curriculum, which had been developed over many years specifically in response to large-scale expansion. In light of the focus and energy being devoted to furthering the institute process in every national community, concerns were expressed by some believers about the emphasis on training and the use of a uniform curriculum. In such a wide-scale enterprise of taking great numbers of friends through a set curriculum, it is to be expected that some individuals might not find the materials suited to their learning style. Responding to this circumstance, the House of Justice made the following comment in a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer:

... reports from countries of diverse backgrounds suggest that many national Bahá'í communities which have adopted the books of the Ruhi Institute are finding them highly effective. It is natural that any given educational program would not appeal to everyone and that some would not wish to participate.... Nevertheless, a choice has been made by the institutions in your country to offer certain courses to the believers in the context of their plans to advance the process of entry by troops. The House of Justice is happy to see from your letter that you respect this decision and do not want to make your own evaluation of the program a cause for disunity.¹¹

In another letter written on behalf of the House of Justice, the relationship of the individual believer to the institute process is given further clarification:

To say that the institute is only useful for newly enrolled believers and those who read little is not correct. Many mature and deepened believers are participating in the institute process, both as students and as teachers of various courses, in an effort to contribute directly to the promotion of entry by troops in their respective countries. Through such participation they have furthered their understanding of the requisites of growth and of the action required to maintain it, have caught fresh glimpses of spiritual truths, and have developed their skills and abilities of service. Far from interfering with their own study of the Writings, each according to his or

her own capacity and needs, their association with a training institute has enhanced the process. Yet clearly such participation is not a requirement for every Bahá'í, who, in the final analysis, can choose the manner in which he or she will serve the Faith. What is essential is that the institute process be supported even by those who do not wish to take part in it.¹²

At the same time the House of Justice has explained that no special designation should be accorded to those who are studying in the institute or serving as tutors, nor should the friends feel any demarcation based on participation in the institute:

It is quite reasonable to expect that, as far as training by the institute is concerned, certain courses would have as their prerequisite the completion of other courses. However, this notion should not be carried over into other Bahá'í activities, and clearly no distinction should be made between “trained” and “untrained” believers in the country. That for certain types of service the qualifications of the believers would need to be taken into account is natural. Yet the way should be open for all the friends, irrespective of the degree of their knowledge and experience, to participate in the affairs of the Faith....¹³

Those communities that did not become absorbed with issues of curriculum but turned their attention to putting a system in place were able to learn more quickly how to deliver their courses to large numbers of believers and to consolidate the institute process. Nevertheless, by the outset of the Five Year Plan the believers in most countries had not proceeded beyond the first few courses of the institute. The challenge for National Spiritual Assemblies of furthering the institute process and maintaining a clear focus was aptly described in a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to a National Assembly:

To help large numbers of believers go through a sequence of courses is a formidable task, involving systematic work with an increasing number of tutors, the establishment of study circles, and measures for monitoring the progress of the participants. The friends in charge of the process need to have clarity of vision and should be allowed to carry out their mission without distraction.¹⁴

1.4 “Evoking the Spirit of Enterprise”

During the Four Year Plan, guidance from the House of Justice had stressed that as the believers completed higher courses in the sequence, their capacity to serve the Cause would be enhanced. In its message of 17 January this dynamic was confirmed:

The rise in activity around the world testifies to the success of these courses in evoking the spirit of enterprise required to carry out the divers actions that growth in a cluster, at whatever stage, demands.¹⁵

Nowhere was this “rise in activity” more evidenced than in the increase in study circles and other core activities. According to the data available at the Bahá'í World Centre, the number of study circles worldwide increased from 3,600 in April 2001 to almost 9,000 in October 2002. The participation of individuals in devotional gatherings and children's classes increased by 80 and 63 percent respectively in the same period, with the highest percentage rise in both categories registered by countries in Asia. For the most part this proliferation of

community activities was the expression of individual initiative by believers who translated into action what they had internalized from their training institute courses.

2. MOVEMENT OF CLUSTERS FROM ONE STAGE OF GROWTH TO THE NEXT

2.1 Opening Virgin Areas

The newfound zeal and initiative of the believers have been manifested at one level in the opening of virgin clusters. Although in the first two years of the Five Year Plan most countries have focused on advancing well-developed clusters toward intensive programs of growth, whenever virgin areas were opened to the Faith, a concentrated effort was made to lay a solid foundation for systematic expansion. Cognizant of the advice from the House of Justice of the value of pioneers being “experienced in institute programs,”¹⁶ National Assemblies encouraged homefront pioneers (short- and long-term) who settled in unopened clusters to promote the institute process. In general, study circles represented a principal means of teaching in these areas, along with devotional gatherings and firesides, as human resources began to emerge. This met with a warm response from the House of Justice:

As we had hoped, goals for the opening of virgin clusters are being readily met by enthusiastic participants of institute programs who, equipped with the knowledge and skills acquired through training courses, set out to establish the Faith in a new area and bring a fledgling community into being.¹⁷

In Canada, the National Assembly announced the goal of settling homefront pioneers in all of the country’s nine unopened clusters by Riḍván 2002. To this end the Assembly organized two national institute campaigns of five weeks each whereby a total of 39 believers completed the books in their institute’s sequence. By Riḍván 2002, six of the nine goal areas had been filled, and five of the pioneers were trained tutors. As of September 2002, all the homefront goals were achieved.

Foremost among the strategies for virgin clusters, therefore, have been encouraging homefront pioneers to become trained as tutors and implementing homefront pioneering projects that emphasize the establishment of the institute process in these areas. It has sometimes proved advantageous to identify goal areas adjacent to well-developed clusters, as these are more accessible to believers who can facilitate study circles. In fact, with a growing number of tutors being trained in the well-developed clusters, homefront goals can increasingly be met when such friends come forward to offer this kind of service. Reports on pioneer movement during the first year of the Five Year Plan indicate that about 725 believers arose to pioneer on the home front, nearly half of them in the Americas.

2.2 Establishing the Institute Process in Emerging Clusters

Clusters at the next level of development, characterized in the 9 January message as having “a few isolated localities and groups,” often encompass a broad spectrum of Bahá’í activity, depending on the country, the history of growth in the cluster, and whether the area is rural or urban.

Two different conditions have predominated in this category. There are a number of clusters that experienced large-scale growth in the past but had no functioning Local Spiritual Assemblies and very few active believers. Also prevalent are clusters that had, in addition to isolated localities and groups, functioning Local Assemblies, some with only basic capacity and others with longstanding experience and active communities, but with minimal or no institute activity. The general approach in both these types of clusters has been to strengthen the institute process, but the means and pace have differed according to their particular circumstances.

In clusters that have experienced large-scale expansion, an approach that has proved effective is for a teaching team to reestablish contact with responsive friends and gradually introduce institute courses in the area. In recommending such an approach to a National Assembly that faced the challenge of having areas with great numbers of believers who had not been contacted for years, the House of Justice explained:

In many countries of the world, meeting this challenge requires that attention be concentrated on those localities for which long lists of believers often exist, but which, with the passage of time, have ceased to have any Bahá'í activity. In your case you would do well to establish a specific program according to which teams of able teachers would visit such communities one after another, spend time with the believers they can locate, and teach receptive souls until the conditions become favorable for the institute to enter and offer its courses.¹⁸

In several national communities in Asia, believers who had completed their institutes' second book in the sequence undertook visits of this kind. In Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines, this effort resulted in a number of believers' joining institute courses and devotional gatherings and becoming reactivated after many years. In the letter cited above, the House of Justice elaborated further on this approach:

... the purpose of such campaigns in local communities which have been dormant for years would not be to find every Bahá'í whose name appears on the membership list and verify his or her status. The list of names should be considered, rather, as a starting point, leading to opportunities to meet individuals who are willing to engage in meaningful conversation, exploring spiritual realities and learning more and more about the Faith.¹⁹

In clusters that had active communities but lacked a strong presence of the institute, a first requirement has been for the institutions and believers in such areas to acquire a clear vision of the pivotal role of the training institute in the implementation of the Plan and to commit themselves to this priority. Once this is grasped, these clusters can progress fairly rapidly to develop the institute process.

In practical terms, advancing the institute process in this category of clusters has meant increasing the number of tutors and study circles so that more believers become involved in the institute process. This objective can be achieved in a number of ways, depending on the level of human resources in the cluster—for example, by short-term homefront pioneers serving as tutors, by tutors from a nearby cluster facilitating study circles, or by friends from these emerging clusters participating in centralized training courses or extension courses in their area.

As more study circles have been established in these clusters, a growing number of friends have become engaged in the study of the first one or two books of the institute. However, the House of Justice highlighted the value of putting in place a system for taking believers through a full sequence of courses and the potential impact of this arrangement:

The challenge is not simply to have a certain percentage study one or two courses, but a sequence of several courses through an effective system of distance education. And if the institute succeeds in accomplishing this, there should be a corresponding increase in the tempo of the teaching work as more and more friends arise to serve the Faith. A steady stream of newly enrolled believers will, in turn, enter the institute's program, and in this way the system as a whole will be in a constant state of expansion.²⁰

2.3 Advancing Clusters with a Vigorous Institute Process

In order “to ensure that one or two clusters ... reach the level at which intensive growth programs can be established,”²¹ a great deal of attention has been directed toward further developing strong clusters and preparing them for intensive growth. The principal means to advance these clusters have been institute campaigns, reflection meetings, and a gradual multiplication of core activities. This latter objective is most easily fulfilled by inviting seekers to these activities. The experience of the institutions and believers in this category of clusters has been substantial and instructive.

2.3.1 Institute Campaigns

Although the meaning of a “vigorous” institute process was interpreted in a variety of ways, efforts to further the institute process in the more well-developed clusters have involved taking significant numbers of friends through the sequence of courses and rapidly increasing the number of trained tutors. In some instances this has been swiftly and effectively accomplished through institute campaigns, which have augmented ongoing efforts to expand the number of study circles. In most instances these campaigns have been designed to enable the believers who have already completed the first few books in the sequence, and preferably have served as tutors, to move in an accelerated manner through the remaining books. This process has generated a great deal of enthusiasm and helped create a sizable group of capable believers who have begun to understand “the prerequisites for sustainable growth.”²²

In Asiatic Russia an institute campaign in the first few months of the Five Year Plan resulted in 76 believers completing all six books of the institute and becoming prepared to act as tutors for any of the books in the sequence. Urban clusters such as Perth, Australia; Minsk, Belarus; Vancouver, Canada; Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Karachi, Pakistan; and Los Angeles, the United States; and well-developed rural or semi-urban clusters in, for example, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Kenya, India, and Italy undertook such campaigns and registered immediate gains in the number of study circles in the clusters. The House of Justice commented on this type of endeavor:

It is most encouraging to see that the progress of this work [the internal development of the clusters] is being energized through the training institute process, which was considerably strengthened ... by the campaigns undertaken in many countries to increase the number of trained tutors.²³

In areas with active, deepened believers, the progression of individuals through the sequence of courses has moved quickly, once the community members committed themselves to the process. A good example of this dynamic is evidenced in the experience of Western Australia. A concentrated focus in this state on involving increasing numbers of friends in the institute, aided by a series of campaigns, resulted in more than half of its 1,500 believers participating in institute courses. In less than three months the number of study circles, which included seekers, doubled from 52 to 103 and as a consequence of this “increase in the tempo of the teaching work,” 36 new believers entered the Faith. This was three times the number of new enrollments recorded for each of the previous two years.

2.3.2 *Multiplication of Core Activities*

Movement of the cluster toward the next stage of development is directly associated with “the multiplication of study circles, devotional meetings and children’s classes, and the expansion they engender.”²⁴ As the pool of trained human resources grows, an increase in these and other activities occurs naturally. As indicated, the attention given in the past two years to training more tutors has had a measurable impact on the number of *study circles* worldwide. Not only has this figure now reached 10,000, but one-third of the participants are studying the higher books in the institute’s sequence. Efforts to bring new believers and seekers into the institute process have created a fresh dynamic in clusters. As more and more new declarants join institute courses, “the system as a whole will be in a constant state of expansion.”²⁵

The growing pool of human resources generated by the institute process has made it possible to establish an increasing number of two other core activities: devotional gatherings and children’s classes.

Devotional meetings begin to flourish as consciousness of the spiritual dimension of human existence is raised among the believers in an area through institute courses.²⁶

In various parts of the world, special endeavors to increase the number of *devotional meetings* often begin with encouraging believers inspired by their institute course on spiritual life to undertake such meetings on their own. Another approach that has resulted in an expansion in number previously not contemplated has been to hold devotional gatherings in the homes of non-Bahá’ís, who sometimes organize the meetings themselves. Employing this arrangement over a six-month period, the believers in Malaysia were able to increase tenfold the devotional meetings in their advanced clusters and the level of participation by 40 percent.

The multiplication of devotional gatherings has taken place with seeming ease in both rural and urban areas. In only 18 months, the number of individuals participating in devotional gatherings in Asia grew by nearly 200 percent and in the Americas and Europe by about 50 percent.

A marked increase in *children’s classes* has been reported on all continents, confirming that they are also “a natural outgrowth of the training received early in the study of the main sequence.”²⁷ Efforts to multiply the number of children’s classes in a strong cluster are predicated on training a sizable cadre of children’s class teachers, and usually require a concerted outreach to the community at large, as the Bahá’í children may be few in number. Africa recorded the most significant rise in children’s classes, with the number nearly doubling between April 2001 and October 2002.

The multiplication of core activities in well-developed clusters, growing out of increased individual initiative, has been identified as an important step in advancing toward a program of intensive growth. As the House of Justice wrote:

The coherence thus achieved through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes provides the initial impulse for growth in a cluster, an impulse that gathers strength as these core activities multiply in number.²⁸

2.3.3 Reflection Meetings

A natural vehicle for multiplying core activities has been reflection meetings. These meetings at the cluster level have been particularly effective in well-established areas where an expanding pool of human resources exists. In such gatherings the institutions and the believers, many of whom are involved in the institute process, study the relevant Five Year Plan documents, share experiences, and consult on the achievements and strengths within the cluster. Avoiding "grandiose and elaborate plans,"²⁹ the friends reach a consensus on short-term goals which reflect the pledges of individual initiatives and collective actions that have emerged from the consultation. These goals are generally incorporated into a calendar of activities that becomes the framework for the subsequent two- to three-month period. In many clusters around the world, how to hold productive and enjoyable reflection meetings has become an important area for learning.

2.3.4 Reaching Out to All Inhabitants

What has helped clusters with a strong institute process move toward the next stage of development has been the efforts of Bahá'ís to open their communities to the public at large and guide ready souls to the Cause in progressively increasing numbers. In some of these advanced clusters, most of the participants in the first course of the institute have been seekers.

It is evident, then, that a systematic approach to training has created a way for Bahá'ís to reach out to the surrounding society, share Bahá'u'lláh's message with friends, family, neighbors and coworkers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings. This outward-looking orientation is one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place.³⁰

In this regard the House of Justice calls attention to the promising opportunities offered by devotional gatherings and children's classes:

As both activities are made open to the wider community through a variety of well-conceived and imaginative means, they attract a growing number of seekers, who, more often than not, are eager to attend firesides and join study circles. Many go on subsequently to declare their faith in Bahá'u'lláh and, from the outset, view their role in the community as that of active participants in a dynamic process of growth.³¹

Bahá'ís from Alaska to Australia, from Ireland to India, have prepared imaginative brochures to attract seekers to their devotional meetings. Family members, neighbors, and even respondents to newspaper advertisements have been joining the Bahá'ís for prayer and readings from the Scriptures, often enhanced by music and followed by refreshments. Reports from

75 percent of the national communities reveal that as of October 2002, approximately 12,000 of the participants in devotional meetings—20 percent—were non-Bahá'ís.

An equally effective form of outreach has been the active extension of Bahá'í children's classes to the greater community. Parents of all backgrounds and strata of society are united in their desire to guide their children to a better life. The response to offers by Bahá'ís to provide children in an area with spiritual education has been extremely encouraging. According to reports from two-thirds of the national communities, more than 27,000, or 40 percent, of the children attending Bahá'í classes at the present time are from non-Bahá'í families. In such countries as Botswana, Lesotho, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, the Mariana Islands, Albania, and Romania, as of October 2002, 75 percent or more of the participants in their children's classes were from families of non-Bahá'ís.

The experience in the state of Tamil Nadu in India offers an example of a successful approach. Bahá'ís who had completed institute training for children's class teachers visited selected villages in their cluster and held public meetings at which they presented to the public, through the use of skits and posters, the dangers facing children in today's society and the importance of spiritual education. Scores of parents enrolled their children in Bahá'í classes, resulting in an unprecedented increase in children's classes in each of the target clusters. In five clusters where previously there had been 28 classes, the total rose to 136.

Wherever systematic efforts were made to invite receptive parents who had children in Bahá'í classes or individuals who were attending devotional meetings to join study circles, the results were also encouraging. For these souls, their introduction to the Bahá'í Faith has been first and foremost the Word of God. Connecting the seekers immediately with the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh has been a uniformly effective approach, one that recalls advice from the Guardian: "we are enjoined to constantly refer the seeker to the Word itself."³²

It has also been reassuring to note that when non-Bahá'ís realize there is no pressure or proselytizing involved, but rather a genuine desire on the part of Bahá'ís to share the spiritual sustenance in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, they respond positively and readily return to Bahá'í gatherings on their own. A program recently conducted in Medchal, India, offers a striking example of such a response. A presentation on the Bahá'í Faith's perspective on moral education was delivered to 80 teachers and students at the Government Industrial Training Institute. As a result of this event, more than half of those present chose to enroll in a study circle. Similarly, in Luxembourg at the end of a public meeting organized by the Bahá'ís on the spiritual education of children, 10 local residents registered for a Bahá'í study circle.

2.4 Accelerating Expansion and Consolidation in Advanced Clusters

2.4.1 Prerequisites for Intensive Growth

As the second year of the Five Year Plan draws to a close, approximately 150 clusters worldwide have been identified as having attained conditions propitious for intensive growth. In many of these clusters the acceleration of the institute process has resulted in 50 to 60 percent of the believers being fully involved in institute courses, with a significant number having completed the current sequence. These highly motivated friends, stimulated and nurtured by the encouragement of the Local Spiritual Assemblies and Auxiliary Board members, have undertaken more and more individual initiatives in the teaching field. The number of core activities within these clusters has increased at a seemingly exponential

rate, and these “portals for entry by troops” have become the channels for most of the new enrollments in Bahá’í communities.

A high degree of enthusiasm and a strong sense of ownership are also characteristics of clusters ready to embark on an intensive program of growth. Reflection meetings are well attended and participation is lively. The feeling of ownership of the process has been manifested in, among other ways, greater contributions to the Fund. Though facing serious economic difficulties, the friends in the well-developed clusters in Moldova and the Ukraine are contributing more generously than ever to all the funds of the Faith. In an advanced priority cluster in Nepal, the contributions of the believers to the National Fund increased by 100 percent over the previous year.

2.4.2 Intensification of Teaching Efforts

The House of Justice stated in its message of 9 January 2001 that at the core of an intensive program of growth “must lie a sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development.” The teaching work will include “a range of teaching efforts ... involving both activities undertaken by the individual and campaigns promoted by the institutions.”³³

In a letter to a National Assembly, the House of Justice explained that the implementation of well-conceived teaching projects,

which are linked with the systematic training of a large number of believers for service to the Faith, ... is an important step towards invigorating and sustaining the growth of the Cause.³⁴

In its 17 January message the House of Justice has specifically identified teaching projects as a step toward intensive growth:

... carefully designed projects are being added to the existing pattern of growth to reach receptive populations and lift the rate of expansion to a higher level.³⁵

In many parts of the world, “bringing large numbers into the ranks of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers has traditionally not been a formidable task.”³⁶ With the institute system in advanced clusters ready to absorb a periodic influx of new declarants, it is now timely in such areas to initiate short-term, direct teaching projects in order to “lift the rate of expansion to a higher level.” A recent five-day teaching campaign in the Medak cluster in Andhra Pradesh, India, led to 194 individuals’ embracing the Faith, of which 114 immediately joined a first level institute course. The House of Justice, in its 17 January message, praised this course of action for the more developed clusters:

Such projects accelerate the tempo of teaching, already on the rise through the efforts of individuals. And, where large-scale enrollment is beginning to result, provision is being made to ensure that a certain percentage of the new believers immediately enter the institute program, for, as we have emphasized in several messages, these friends will be called upon to serve the needs of an ever-growing Bahá’í population.³⁷

After a sizable percentage of the new believers who have enrolled through teaching projects join institute courses and become integrated into core activities, another similar project can soon be undertaken. Not only will periodic teaching projects act as a catalyst for growth but continuing this cycle of expansion and consolidation will help accelerate and sustain the growth process.

Teaching projects will be especially effective if they are “carefully designed” and reach specific segments of the population in a cluster. Teaching approaches and materials may be tailored to persons, for example, of particular occupations (schoolteachers, university students, lawyers), ethnicities (Aborigines, Chinese, Roma), and religions (animist, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim), or to women and youth. After substantial experience accumulates in the field as to the appropriate methods and contexts for teaching special populations, Bahá’ís involved in this work can assist the institute by designing a course that is specific to a particular group; such a course could be offered as a branch of the basic institute course on becoming an effective teacher.

2.4.3 The Dynamics of Intensive Growth

A question often asked by the friends is how they will know when their cluster is ready for an intensive program of growth. One indicator that cannot be overlooked is growth itself—an increase in the number of Bahá’ís in the cluster. A vigorous institute process, the multiplication of core activities and their integration, a successful outreach to local inhabitants, an ever-growing number of individual and collective teaching initiatives, a vibrant community life, and a commitment to an ongoing learning process will result in growth. This includes new enrollments as well as reactivated Bahá’ís who have been roused by the newfound spirit and activity in their area. These elements will also naturally lead to and foster the conditions for intensive programs of growth identified by the House of Justice in its message of 9 January 2001, such as the “pronounced spirit of collaboration” among the institutions and “a reasonable degree of administrative capacity.”

An intensive program of growth suggests just that—intensification—an intensification of activity that contributes to systematic growth. The friends in advanced clusters will become aware of a perceptible change in the intensity of activity in their area, and this will be reflected in the growth pattern. An intensive program of growth implies a pattern that is progressively accelerated and fully sustained.

3. ENHANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The process of dividing a country into clusters undertaken in the first year of the Five Year Plan has made it possible for the institutions of the Faith “to realize a pattern of well-ordered expansion and consolidation.”³⁸ National Assemblies and Regional Councils have formulated their plans of action, supported by a system for training the necessary human resources, with an eye toward moving clusters from one stage of development to the next. And when an active cluster has the necessary elements in place and is registering new enrollments, it is the institutions that confirm its readiness to embark on an intensive program of growth.

Achieving and sustaining intensive growth demand a variety of capabilities and new approaches on the part of Bahá’í institutions. Reports indicate that the building of capacity,

though gradual, takes place more readily when members of institutions have had first-hand experience with the dynamics of cluster development and the processes that contribute to growth.

3.1 Managing the Process of Growth

In promoting and overseeing the process of growth, Bahá'í institutions have been demonstrating a range of motivational and organizational capacities. These skills are enhanced when an attitude of learning prevails and an appreciation of the essential harmony between individual initiative and collective action exists.

3.1.1 Fostering an Encouraging Environment

Chief among the requirements for motivating believers and nurturing a culture of growth is the capacity to foster an encouraging environment where, as the Universal House of Justice wrote in its 9 January message, “teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers” and “mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms.” In the same message, the House of Justice also stated that an upsurge in teaching activity depends on “sustained encouragement.”

In clusters preparing for intensive growth, it has been observed that the collaborating institutions have demonstrated the ability to create an atmosphere of mutual trust with the friends, utilize their talents, praise their accomplishments, and overlook minor mistakes. These are hallmarks of the emerging Bahá'í culture, and the success of this Plan depends in no small measure on the extent to which the institutions and individuals alike demonstrate these capacities. In a letter written on his behalf to a National Assembly, Shoghi Effendi made a comment about encouragement that is relevant to institutions at all levels of the Cause:

... the National Body is like the beating of a healthy heart in the midst of the Community, pumping spiritual love, energy and encouragement out to all the members.³⁹

3.1.2 Coordination at the Cluster Level

The actual work of promoting the process of growth in the clusters requires skills of organization and coordination. These functions are being carried out within a new framework of collaboration, as described by the House of Justice:

The implementation of such a program [of intensive growth] will require the close collaboration of the institute, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, and an Area Teaching Committee.⁴⁰

To the extent that these institutions, through effective collaboration, have been able to systematically enlarge the pool of human resources in a cluster and mobilize these resources for teaching and other acts of service, they have been successful in advancing the cluster toward a program of intensive growth. Underlying their efforts has been the realization that success would depend “on the manner in which lines of action are integrated and on the attitude of learning that is adopted.”⁴¹

In clusters where well-functioning Local Spiritual Assemblies exist, a coordinating committee has at times replaced the role of an Area Teaching or Growth Committee as the agency collaborating with the Auxiliary Board members and the institute. In either case, meeting the challenges of furthering the institute process and promoting systematic growth have required increasing administrative capacities, not the least of which is effective consultation. The ability to organize productive and enjoyable reflection meetings has also been a feature of well-developed clusters.

3.1.3 *The Ongoing Collection of Statistics*

Managing the growth process necessitates certain practical skills such as collecting statistics, because to monitor growth it is essential to be able to measure it. The friends are learning to maintain an accurate database at the grass roots by recording on a regular basis such information as the number of individuals going through the institute's sequence of courses, the number of core activities, the number of persons who attend these activities, and the number of new enrollments. Special training in collecting statistics has often been necessary for the friends at the cluster level. This task needs to be carried out in such a way that it does not overburden communities but provides data sufficient for planning and for identifying measures to accelerate growth. Particular emphasis has been given to tracking the statistics in the most promising clusters at about three-month intervals, so that appropriate steps can be taken to move these clusters toward intensive growth.

3.2 Reexamining Administrative Approaches

Gradually National Spiritual Assemblies are coming to recognize that the administrative structures they put in place in their national communities should reflect and support the primary aim of the Plan. While in earlier years national committees and task forces were established for an array of local and national activities and proclamation events, the current focus on promoting systematic growth has influenced the nature and number of committees a National Assembly may wish to appoint. Some Assemblies, particularly in countries with small national communities, have found it useful to reduce the number of national committees to allow more time and energy for the priorities of the Five Year Plan. Eliminating or consolidating less vital committees has also enabled National Assemblies to better fulfill their responsibilities for monitoring the overall growth of the Faith in their countries and has freed up the believers for teaching activities.

A significant development that has made it possible for a number of National Spiritual Assemblies to modify the approach to their work was the establishment of Regional Bahá'í Councils. Under the guidance of the House of Justice, these National Assemblies are gradually learning to delegate responsibilities and authority to this new institution. Charged with overseeing the plans for expansion and consolidation in their regions, the Councils are able to analyze specific approaches to be adopted in the execution of the Five Year Plan, and design plans of action consisting "essentially of those provisions needed to help each cluster in the region move from its current stage of growth to the next advanced stage."⁴² Again, the result has been that the National Assemblies are free to focus on larger strategic issues and other pressing matters, and the teaching plans and priorities have become more responsive to the conditions and resources at the grass roots. In countries where the organization of the teaching work has been carried out by Regional Teaching Committees, under the supervision of a National Teaching Committee, the benefits of this principle of decentralization are evident as well.

Delegation of authority has also been exercised by National Assemblies and Regional Councils with respect to Institute Boards. In a letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice has given the following advice on the delegation of responsibilities and the administration of the institute process:

In the case of the boards of the regional institutes ... one of the challenges before the Regional Bahá'í Councils is to delegate to them the functions that are properly theirs and to give them the freedom needed to discharge those functions. The boards, likewise, have to provide enough latitude to the coordinators of the institutes, and invest them with enough authority, for them to perform their daily work effectively....

... The coordinator needs to operate at the level of implementation, carrying out day-to-day plans and activities and ensuring that the basic function of the institute is performed—this, with the assistance of the tutors and any staff if necessary. The board oversees the institute process as a whole, largely through the periodic reports of the coordinator and through occasional consultations. It will want to make itself readily accessible to the coordinator, providing the atmosphere in which he or she can share ideas, seek the board's views on the possibilities and challenges facing the institute, and benefit from its advice. To carry out its role, the board does not need to meet frequently, as does a committee charged with undertaking a set of specific tasks.

As for the Regional Council, it is, naturally, interested to know that such an important agency under its aegis as the institute is accomplishing the tasks for which it was created and is functioning in full capacity. Even more important, the Council must ensure that, as the ranks of avowed supporters of the Faith swell through the institute process, they are deployed in the field of service, reinforcing the work of large-scale expansion and consolidation. This multiplication and deployment of human resources is to be carried out, of course, in the context of a regional plan to move each cluster in the region from its current stage of growth to the next advanced stage.⁴³

Experience has indicated that when Institute Boards have been given a sufficient degree of autonomy to administer their work, they have been more effective in advancing the institute process than those in countries where the Assemblies or Councils have attempted to retain the process tightly within their control.

3.3 Facilitating Individual Initiative

The growing contingents of friends eager to find their paths of service have had implications for the role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Five Year Plan and beyond. The House of Justice calls attention to the challenge:

All of this opens thrilling opportunities for Local Spiritual Assemblies. Theirs is the challenge, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members who counsel and assist them, to utilize the energies and talents of the swelling human resources available in their respective areas of jurisdiction both to create a vibrant community life and to begin influencing the society around them.⁴⁴

Intensive growth depends upon encouraging individuals to carry out a rapidly increasing number of core activities and other endeavors, and Local Assemblies have been instrumental in this process. Through their inspiration and support, a host of individual and collective actions have resulted. By recognizing and facilitating the initiatives of the many friends proceeding through the institute courses, as well as of other devoted servants in their communities, the Assemblies are assuming a style of leadership urged by the Guardian:

The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers.⁴⁵

Because the planning environment has now broadened to the level of the cluster, often involving several Local Assemblies and the active participation of the believers in formulating short-term goals, an Assembly's scope of interest has begun to stretch beyond its boundaries. Its vision is expanded, its resources magnified, and its opportunities enlarged. In describing the character of cluster meetings, the House of Justice alludes to features of this wider perspective:

The Universal House of Justice hopes that the consultations which take place in periodic meetings at the level of the cluster will generate such unity of thought about the growth of the Faith that, in those cases where the lines of action affect localities with Local Assemblies, the requirement of receiving their approval will easily be met. It should be remembered that the aim of such consultations, beyond addressing certain practical considerations, is to maintain a high level of enthusiasm and to create a spirit of service and fellowship among those present. Discussions should not become bogged down by undue concern for procedural issues, but should focus on what can be achieved and on the joy of witnessing the fruits of hard work and diligent effort.⁴⁶

3.4 Serving Large Numbers

The challenges of growth will test and develop the capacities of our institutions at all levels, but ultimately these bodies were designed to serve large numbers of people. Indeed, "so much of the ability of the Faith to develop capacity for community building depends upon the size of our membership."⁴⁷ Shoghi Effendi has assured us that growth is the answer to fulfilling the potentialities of our Administrative Order:

The problems which confront the believers at the present time, whether social, spiritual, economic or administrative, will be gradually solved as the number and the resources of the friends multiply and their capacity for service ... develops.⁴⁸

And in the same vein, the Universal House of Justice states:

A massive expansion of the Bahá'í community must be achieved far beyond all past records.... The need for this is critical, for without it the laboriously erected agencies of the Administrative Order will not be provided the scope to be able to develop and adequately demonstrate their inherent capacity to minister to the crying needs of humanity in its hour of deepening despair.⁴⁹

The ability to guide and sustain a growth process will contribute toward the capacity and maturation of institutions at all levels. The House of Justice highlighted this point in its Riḍván message at the beginning of the Four Year Plan:

... the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í membership.⁵⁰

This maturation comes about through the enhancement of the capabilities of Bahá'í institutions as they are involved in promoting growth, responding to the needs of increasing numbers of believers, and facilitating their service to the Cause.

4. CHANGE IN THE CULTURE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

At the end of the Four Year Plan the Universal House of Justice wrote that “the culture of the Bahá'í community [had] experienced a change.”⁵¹ The “new patterns of thought and action”⁵² introduced by the training institutes were having a profound impact on individuals, institutions, and communities. Fundamental to this new orientation was an attitude of learning, along with an appreciation of systematization and focus, a commitment to enlisting a greater number of believers in the work of the Cause, and a conscious outreach to society at large.

At the level of the cluster and the community, where the culture of learning is taking root, a new dynamic has emerged whereby the friends are engaged in actions that are purposeful, systematic, and energizing.

4.1 Learning and Planning at the Grass Roots

Two observations that are important to the ongoing prosecution of the Five Year Plan can be made about the experience of working in clusters. First, reflection meetings have become the learning matrix of the clusters. These periodic consultations have enabled the believers to “reflect on issues, consider adjustments, and maintain enthusiasm and unity of thought.”⁵³ The value of short-term goals is immediately recognized, as accomplishments and challenges can regularly be evaluated, “obstacles removed, resources multiplied and lessons learned,”⁵⁴ and modifications in the goals made without losing continuity of action. Flexibility and patience are encouraged, as essential prerequisites of the learning process. The friends have begun to appreciate that not all answers can be tied down in advance but are garnered through experience. In describing this process, the House of Justice wrote:

Meetings of consultation held at the cluster level serve to raise awareness of possibilities and generate enthusiasm. Here, free from the demands of formal decision-making, participants reflect on experience gained, share insights, explore approaches and acquire a better understanding of how each can contribute to achieving the aim of the Plan. In many cases, such interaction leads to consensus on a set of short-term goals, both individual and collective. Learning in action is becoming the outstanding feature of the emerging mode of operation.⁵⁵

A second critical feature of working in clusters is the shift to planning at the grass roots. The House of Justice described this as one of the purposes of the clustering exercise, but its implications for the roles of individuals and local institutions in implementing the Plan are only beginning to be felt. Rather than “the mere enumeration of goals,”⁵⁶ often unconnected to the realities of the resources in an area, planning at reflection gatherings is based on the human resources actually available. The impact of the training institute on the planning process and the stimulation of individual initiative has been widely seen. Armed with new insights, skills, and abilities, individuals have arisen in cluster after cluster to take up tasks in support of their area plan. Through the encouragement of the institutions, particularly the Auxiliary Board members, enthusiasm for service has been generated and guided “into channels of systematic endeavor.”⁵⁷

4.2 Maintaining a Focus

At Bahá’í institutional meetings and other gatherings in every country of the world, one is struck by the clear and common focus demonstrated by the friends in their efforts to advance the process of entry by troops. The House of Justice associated this development with the change in culture:

... since the beginning of the Four Year Plan, the entire Bahá’í world has been undergoing a profound change in culture required by the single focus of the global Plans in this latter part of the first century of the Faith’s Formative Age—advancing the process of entry by troops.⁵⁸

Accustomed to pursuing a wide range of goals at the national and local levels, many Bahá’ís faced the challenge of focusing their teaching and other forms of service more directly on advancing this overriding aim of the Plan. While a “diversity of action” was expected, the guidance of the House of Justice provided an explicit framework for that action, and the believers became aware that “old modes of thinking, which, while valuable in many respects, have not been conducive to rapid growth.”⁵⁹

Coupled with the focus on advancing the process of entry by troops is a growing appreciation of the need to be systematic in action. Growth should not be explosive and short-lived but steady and sustained. By definition, a process means a systematic series of actions directed toward a specific end. A systematic approach to training human resources is already yielding substantial results, and the systematization of the teaching work through the movement of clusters is demonstrating its efficacy. As stated at the outset of this document, it is “concentrated and sustained attention” to these two movements that will lead to the fulfillment of the aim of the Five Year Plan.

4.3 Empowering the Rank and File

Referred to as the “chief propellant” of the change in culture, the training institutes, with their ability to produce an expanding number of human resources, have fundamentally altered the approach of the Bahá’í community to the tasks at hand. More than ever the rank and file of the believers are involved in meaningful and vital service to the Cause. Whether by holding devotional meetings, facilitating study circles, or teaching children’s classes, a greater number of friends have found paths of service that do not depend on public-speaking prowess. The

training institutes have imparted the necessary “spiritual insights,” “knowledge,” and “skills” that have enabled the believers to “facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.”⁶⁰ The House of Justice has remarked on this accomplishment:

It is especially gratifying to note the high degree of participation of believers in the various aspects of the growth process. In cluster after cluster, the number of those shouldering the responsibilities of expansion and consolidation is steadily increasing.⁶¹

The growing confidence and commitment of the believers, which have been reflected “in the thrust of individual initiatives,”⁶² are gathering momentum in the Five Year Plan. In this regard the House of Justice has reassured the friends that

as the believers gain confidence in their capacity to serve through the institute process, a much richer expression of the diverse talents of the friends is beginning to appear in the Bahá’í world—a richness that bodes well for the future progress of the Cause.⁶³

4.4 An “Outward-Looking Orientation”

When the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá’ís at the beginning of the Five Year Plan to open their study circles, children’s classes, and devotional meetings “to all the inhabitants of the locality,” that phrase signaled a change in the culture of Bahá’í communities, a change that is intimately linked with the efforts of the Faith to grow and to embrace humankind.

In reaching out to all inhabitants of a locality we are inspired by the words of Bahá’u’lláh: “This Day a door is open wider than both heaven and earth.”⁶⁴ Making a concerted effort to open the portals of our community life to the outside world requires both courage and imagination. Stories abound of the creative measures Bahá’í communities around the globe are employing to attract seekers to their activities.

Beyond opening the doors of the Bahá’í community to the outside world, the believers are also exerting themselves to reach out. Bahá’ís are striving to expand their social circles and ultimately their friendships, as friendship is the surest foundation for touching the hearts. To pursue these aims, individuals have begun to examine their priorities, including the services they are rendering the Faith, and to reorder their lives so as to allow themselves more time for interaction with their relatives, friends, and coworkers. Ultimately, what is the point of striving to become more effective teachers if we are not meeting people to teach?

Having an “outward-looking orientation” also suggests that it is important for Bahá’ís to understand more deeply the forces operating on the world stage and the solutions offered by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. Our task is to convey to seekers that we are all living in the same world, facing common trials, and striving to fulfill similar, long-held aspirations for the human race. Our expressions of solidarity with our fellow human beings must be sincerely voiced and genuinely felt.

5. THE MOVEMENT OF HUMANITY TOWARD BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

A premise underlying our current teaching efforts is the realization that all humanity is moving toward Bahá'u'lláh.

Let there be no doubt that what we are witnessing is the gathering momentum of that process of the entry of humanity into the Cause by troops, foreshadowed in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to the King of Persia, eagerly anticipated by the Master, and described by the Guardian as the necessary prelude to mass conversion.⁶⁵

Not everyone learns or responds at the same rate but the path to Him is wide enough to accommodate one and all regardless of their pace. "The Cause of God has room for all"⁶⁶ suggests that not only are diverse peoples welcome but that individuals may be at different points in their understanding and acceptance of the Faith. Adopting an attitude of openness and inclusion will help diminish the sharp line that believers have sometimes tended to draw between themselves and the public at large.

Bahá'is everywhere are also acutely aware that events outside the Faith are serving, as the Universal House of Justice wrote, "to awaken in the hearts of those who share this planet with us a longing for unity and justice that can be met only by the Cause of God."⁶⁷ All of the plans, campaigns, and reflection meetings are aimed at finding ways to share the Divine Message with the waiting masses. Above all, the friends should be encouraged to remember Bahá'u'lláh's call "This is the day in which to speak,"⁶⁸ and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that we "should strive with our whole hearts to offer ourselves up, guide others to His path, and train the souls of men."⁶⁹

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