

# Participant Handouts

*Loving Shepherds of the  
Multitudes:*

## **Applying Spiritual and Administrative Principles**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

# Application of Spiritual and Administrative Principles

## OVERVIEW FOR PARTICIPANTS

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### **Purpose**

- ★ To strengthen the Assembly's ability to apply principles to decision making

The subject of this workshop is the application of Bahá'í principles to matters within the jurisdiction and function of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Its goal is to strengthen the Assembly's ability to apply principles to decision making. The workshop clarifies the difference between principles and procedures, and it enhances participants' ability to perceive the unity underlying the seemingly opposite responsibilities of being loving shepherds and upholding justice. The workshop provides practice in recognizing and extracting principles from text. Use of case studies allows practice in applying principles to the facts of particular situations.

### **What you will find inside your handouts:**

- ★ Quotations and worksheets for the various segments of the workshop
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by you
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by the Assembly within two months after the workshop

If you would like to have information on additional workshops or other Assembly development resources, ask your Assembly Development representative or contact the Office of Assembly Development at (847) 733-3490, by mail at 1233 Central Street, Evanston, IL 60201, or by e-mail at [OAD@usbnc.org](mailto:OAD@usbnc.org).

**Note:** If time is short for any exercise, focus on the quotations in bold

# The Call to a New State of Mind

*“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them. . . .”*

**“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá’í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá’u’lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize\* the forces of a new civilization.**

“. . . Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counselors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the function of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believer’s capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, 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, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.”

The Universal House of Justice , 1996 Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World.

“An expansion of thought and action in certain aspects of our work would enhance our possibilities for success in meeting our . . . commitments

The Universal House of Justice , 1990 Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World.

\***Canalize:** to channel into a particular direction; provide an outlet for

**“The burgeoning influence of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation seemed . . . to have assumed the character of an onrushing wind blowing through the archaic structure of the old order, felling mighty pillars and clearing the ground for new conceptions of social organization . . . . Even the Community**

*“Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one’s self and others. . . .”*

**of the Most Great Name itself is experiencing the rigorous effects of this quickening wind as it ventilates the modes of thought of us all, renewing, clarifying, and amplifying our perspectives as to the purpose of the Order of Bahá’u’lláh in the wake of humanity’s suffering and turmoil.”**

The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World.

“But, O my brother, when a true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge. . . .”

Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 192.

**“Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships – among human beings themselves, between human beings and nature, between the individual and society, and between the members of society and its institutions – reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development. If humanity is indeed coming of age, if all the inhabitants of the planet constitute a single people, if justice is to be the ruling principle of social organization – then existing conceptions that were born out of ignorance of these emerging realities have to be recast.**

**“Movement in this direction has barely begun.”**

Baha’i International Community’s Office of Public Information, dated January 23, 1995, in *Prosperity of Humankind*, section III.

“. . . change, ever more rapid change, is a constant characteristic of life at this time. . . .”

The Universal House of Justice, 1990 Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World.

**“Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one’s self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.”**

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 25 July, 1984, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 634.

# Loving Shepherds and Local Houses of Justice: The Administration of Justice

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*“The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. . . .”*

“The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers. And this they can adequately achieve provided they are motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with firm determination to act with justice in all cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated March 9, 1934, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 23.

“In all cases submitted for its consideration the Assembly must uphold the standard of justice in delivering its verdict. . . .”

The Universal House of Justice, dated July 30, 1972, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 224.

“Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá’í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor and courage on the other.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, pp. 63-64.

“One might liken Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 5, 1947 in *Issues Concerning Community Functioning*, 2.0.

“Beware lest, through compassion, ye neglect to carry out the statutes of the religion of God; do that which hath been bidden you by Him Who is compassionate and merciful.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 45, p. 36.

“Membership in the Bahá’í community is open to all who accept Bahá’u’lláh as the Manifestation of God, and who thereupon embark on the process of changing their conduct and refining their character. It is inevitable that this community will, at times, be subject to delinquent behavior of members whose actions do not conform to the standards of the Teachings. At such times, the institutions of the Faith will not hesitate to apply Bahá’í law with justice and fairness in full confidence that this Divine Law is the means for the true happiness of all concerned.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 24, 1993.

# The Importance of Principle

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***“There are spiritual principles . . . by which solutions can be found for every social problem.”***

“Few will fail to recognize that the Spirit breathed by Bahá’u’lláh upon the world . . . can never permeate and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name, wholly identify itself with His principles, and function in conformity with His laws.”

*Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 19.*

“. . . the system of Bahá’í administration . . . unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith. To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.”

*Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 5.*

“There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. . . . The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures.”

*The Universal House of Justice, “The Promise of World Peace,” in Messages from the Universal House of Justice, p. 690.*

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

*The Universal House of Justice, dated August 11, 1970, in Messages from the Universal House of Justice, p. 174.*

# Distinguishing Between Principles and Procedures

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## Distinguishing features

### Spiritual & Administrative Principles

- ★ Fundamental truths upheld by all believers as tenets of faith, many of which govern the workings of the Administrative Order, application of Bahá'í law, and unfoldment of the Faith
- ★ Divine in origin
- ★ Same in all parts of Bahá'í world
- ★ Unchangeable
- ★ Application by Assembly is flexible

### Procedures

- ★ Orderly ways of doing things
- ★ Developed by institutions
- ★ May vary from community to community
- ★ May change over time
- ★ May not contradict principles

## Examples

- ★ The oneness of humanity
- ★ All have the right to express their views in consultation
- ★ Immortality of the soul
- ★ Voting is by individual conscience
- ★ Assemblies are the bedrock of the Administrative Order
- ★ The equality of women and men
- ★ Teaching the Cause must be given preference in Assembly meetings

- ★ How believers are enrolled
- ★ How believers are deepened
- ★ How Fund donations are collected and acknowledged
- ★ How often Assemblies meet
- ★ How Assembly minutes are approved

# Principles and Procedures

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## Check your understanding

Check your understanding of the difference between spiritual or administrative principles and administrative procedures by **circling the numbers of the items** which can be classified as **procedures**.

1. All contributions to the Fund are voluntary in character
2. How donations to the Fund are collected and acknowledged
3. The oneness of God
4. Assemblies are the bedrock on which the Administration is built
5. Progressive revelation
6. The process by which believers are deepened
7. The organic oneness of humanity
8. Each voter votes according to his/her conscience
9. How to distribute the Assembly's minutes
10. The immortality of the soul
11. The equality of women and men
12. Tie votes involving a minority
13. The process by which believers are enrolled
14. Where Feasts will be held
15. The harmony of science and religion
16. All have the right to freely express views during consultation
17. Teaching must be given precedence in Assembly meetings
18. The Cause must not center on a particular personality

# Applying Principles and Procedures

*“Principles there must be, but they must be applied with wisdom to each case that arises. . . .”*

“Principles there must be, but they must be applied with wisdom to each case that arises, not every case covered, before it arises, by a codified set of rules. This is the whole spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s system: rigid conformity to great essential laws, elasticity, and even a certain necessary element of diversity, in secondary matters.”

Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated May 18, 1948, in *Unlocking the Power of Action*, pp. 15-16, #30.

**“In matters of principle, therefore, there should be uniformity, while in matters of detail and procedure not only is diversity permitted, it is also encouraged. As conditions vary from country to country and, indeed, can vary from community to community within the country, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly advised the friends that they should be uncompromising in principle but flexible in subsidiary details.”**

Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated October 22, 1986, in *Lights of Guidance*, 1996 rev. ed., p. 38, #137.

“To give rulings on the details of a large number of hypothetical situations would not only be a fruitless and never-ending task, but would result in an accumulation of petty rules and regulations that would cripple the work of the Cause and stifle the spirit of the believers.”

Universal House of Justice, dated July 21, 1968, to a National Spiritual Assembly.

“. . . It is not necessary for your Assembly to anticipate situations which have not arisen, and to lay down general rules and regulations to meet them. It would be wiser to consider every case individually as it arises, and then to resolve the problem connected with it in the most suitable and practical manner. . . .”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated November 27, 1939, in *Lights of Guidance*, 1996 rev. ed., p. 38, #135.

“. . . Assemblies must strongly guard against this marked tendency of laying down new rules and regulations all the time, which he considers unnecessary and injurious. In the end it will dampen the zeal and quench the spontaneity of the believers, and give the impression that the Bahá’í Faith is crystallizing into set forms.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated May 18, 1948, in *Unlocking the Power of Action*, p. 15, #30.

**“Over-administration can be even worse for the Faith at this time than under-administration. The believers are, for the most part, young in the Cause, and if they make mistakes it is**

*“Administrative efficiency and order should always be accompanied by an equal degree of love, of devotion and of spiritual development.”*

**not half as important as if their spirit is crushed by being told all the time – do this and don’t do that!”**

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated June 30, 1957, in *Lights of Guidance*, 1996 rev. ed., p. 38, #136.

**“The fundamentals laid down in the Bahá’í Administration must, of course, be adhered to, but there is a tendency for Assemblies to constantly issue detailed procedures and rules to the friends, and he considers this hampers the work of the Cause, and is entirely premature. As far as is possible cases which come up should be dealt with and settled as they arise, and not a blanket ruling be laid down to cover all similar cases. This preserves the elasticity of the Administrative Order and prevents red tape from developing and hampering the work of the Cause. . . . Uniformity in fundamentals is essential but not in every detail. On the contrary, diversity, the solving of the local situation in the right way is important.”**

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated November 4, 1948.

**“Administrative efficiency and order should always be accompanied by an equal degree of love, of devotion and of spiritual development. Both of them are essential and to attempt to dissociate one from the other is to deaden the body of the Cause. In these days, when the Faith is still in its infancy, great care must be taken lest mere administrative routine stifles the spirit which must feed the body of the Administration itself. That spirit is its propelling force and the motivating power of its very life.”**

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated December 10, 1933, in *Lights of Guidance*, 1996 rev. ed., p. 35, #124.

**“The whole purpose of the Bahá’í administrative bodies at this time is to teach, . . . not to create rules and regulations and impede the work through unnecessary red tape, but to insure that a great breath of spiritual vitality and inspiration goes out to the friends. . . .”**

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 5, 1948, in *The National Spiritual Assembly*, p. 52.

# Use of Authority and Administration of Justice

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*“... the manner of the use of authority is critical to the success of your work.”*

*All following quotations are from the letter dated May 19, 1994 from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.*

**“The authority of the institutions is an irrevocable necessity for the progress of humanity; its exercise is an art to be mastered.”**

“In a society where ‘telling it like it is’ employs a style of expression which robs language of its decorum, and in a time when stridency is commonly presumed to be a quality of leadership, candour is crass, and authority speaks in a loud and vulgar voice. People are frequently obliged to receive direction from their leaders in such disrespectful modes; this is a reason for resentment and suspicion towards those in authority. By contrast, Bahá’í institutions have the task of accustoming the friends to recognizing the expression of authority in language at a moderate pitch.”

**“The temperament of authority in the administration of justice varies according to the degree of the gravity of each case. Some cases require that the Assembly take action that is firm or drastic. Even so, Assembly members have always to be mindful that the authority they wield must in general be expressed with love, humility and a genuine respect for others. Thus exercised, authority strikes a natural note and accords with that which is acceptable to spiritually attuned and fairminded souls.”**

“It would be impossible to overestimate the obligation resting upon you to refine your dealings with the community in the ways already described. You cannot at any time afford to forget that the manner of the use of authority is critical to the success of your work.”

**“A wide latitude for action must be allowed them, which means that a large margin for mistakes must also be allowed. Your National Assembly and the Local Assemblies must not react automatically to every mistake, but distinguish between those that are self-correcting with the passage of time and do no particular harm to the community and those which require Assembly intervention.”**

**“You should also be fearful of laying down too many rules and regulations. The Cause is not so fragile that a degree of**

# Use of Authority and Administration of Justice, continued

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*“... our emphasis of the spiritual requisites of your functioning is not a mere expression of pious idealism.”*

**mistakes cannot be tolerated. When you feel that certain actions may become trends with harmful consequences, you may, instead of making a new rule, discuss the matter with the Counsellors, enlisting their support in educating the friends in a manner that will improve their understanding and their conduct.”**

“Do clearly bear in mind that our emphasis of the spiritual requisites of your functioning is not a mere expression of pious idealism. Far, far from it. Their exclusion from public discourse and from the considerations of world leaders largely accounts for the current state of society. Indeed, they are as practical in effect as they are spiritual in essence. Employ them consciously, constantly, confidently; and see how your actions will attract the confirmations of the Holy Spirit in the response of the community.”

## The Bahá'í Application of Justice

*“The Bahá'í application of justice . . . will increasingly be seen as a distinctive and highly attractive feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.”*

*A letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, December 9, 1991*

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 26 September 1991 which raises a number of questions concerning the exercise of your functions in situations where the Bahá'í laws are being violated. We have been asked to provide the following response. [1]

Before commenting on your specific questions, the House of Justice feels it would be useful to review some aspects of the role of the Local and National Assemblies in regulating the behaviour of the members of the Bahá'í community. [2]

The aim of any Spiritual Assembly should be to develop a warm and loving relationship with the believers in its community, so that it can most effectively nurture and encourage them in the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the teachings, and can assist them to follow the Bahá'í principles in their personal conduct. The Assembly should aspire to being regarded by the members of the community as a loving parent, wise in its understanding of the varying degrees of maturity of those entrusted to its care, compassionate in dealing with the problems which arise as a result of any shortcomings, ever prepared to guide them to the correct path, and very patient as they strive to effect the necessary changes in their behaviour. Such an approach is far removed from the harshly judgmental and punitive approach which so often characterizes the administration of law in the wider society. The Bahá'í application of justice, firmly rooted in spiritual principle and animated by the desire to foster the spiritual development of the members of the community, will increasingly be seen as a distinctive and highly attractive feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. [3]

Such an attitude of forbearance, restraint, and patience toward believers who are striving to change practices and attitudes acquired in the years before they entered the sanctuary of the Cause of God should not blind a National Assembly to the fact that, at this stage in the development of the Faith, there may well be some believers in the community whose behaviour necessitates that they be treated in a firm and uncompromising manner. The following passage from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian is of broad applicability: [4]

He feels that your Assembly must keep before its eyes the balance specified by Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, in other words, justice, reward and retribution. Although the Cause is still young and tender, and many of the believers inexperienced, and therefore loving forbearance is often called for in the place of harsh measures, this does not mean that a National Spiritual Assembly can under any circumstances tolerate disgraceful conduct,

## The Bahá'í Application of Justice, continued

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*“... your Assembly must be ever watchful and ready to take action when necessary.”*

flagrantly contrary to our Teachings, on the part of any of its members, whoever they may be and from wherever they may come. [5]

The National Assembly is the guardian of the welfare of the Faith, a most sacred and heavy responsibility and one which is inescapable. They must be ever vigilant, ever on the look-out, ever ready to take action, and, on all matters of fundamental principles, refuse to compromise for an instant. Only in this way can the body of the Faith be free of disease. [6]

... we should not confuse the true believers with those who are not quickened with the spirit of faith, have some ulterior motive, or are indifferent to the reputation they have personally, and the damage they may do the Cause in the eyes of the public. There is all the difference in the world between these two categories, and your Assembly must be ever watchful and ready to take action when necessary. [7]

A survey of the letters written on behalf of the Guardian shows that he advised the National Spiritual Assemblies that they should resort to the severe sanction of deprivation of a believer's administrative rights only for such matters as “disgraceful conduct, flagrantly contrary to our Teachings”, “seriously injuring the Faith in the eyes of the public through his conduct or flagrantly breaking the laws of God”, “gross immorality and open opposition to the administrative functions of the Faith, and disregard for the laws of personal status”, “conduct which is disgracing the Cause”, and “breaking of laws, such as the consent of parents to marriage”, or “acts of such an immoral character as to damage the good name of the Faith”. [8]

It is clear that the removal of voting rights is a serious action which an Assembly should take reluctantly when the circumstances require that the Bahá'í community or its reputation in the eyes of the public must be protected from the effects of an individual's behaviour, and where the authority of the laws of the Faith must be upheld. It should be the hope and prayer of the Assembly that the believer who has been administratively expelled from membership in the Bahá'í community will come to see that his behaviour is in violation of the teachings, will endeavour to rectify his conduct, and will thus open the way to being welcomed back into the community so that he can lend his support to the vital and glorious task of establishing the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. . . . [9]

As regards the need to warn an individual before his voting rights are removed, the basic principle is expressed in the following passage written on behalf of the Guardian:

## The Bahá'í Application of Justice, continued

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*“... before anyone is deprived of their voting rights, they should be consulted with and lovingly admonished...”*

... before anyone is deprived of their voting rights, they should be consulted with and lovingly admonished at first, given repeated warnings if they do not mend their immoral ways, or whatever other extremely serious misdemeanour they are committing, and finally, after these repeated warnings, be deprived of their voting rights.

There are, however, many different ways in which this is applied, depending upon the nature of the offence and the situation in each case. [10]

For example, when there is an isolated but serious offence, such as that of a Bahá'í woman who indulges in one act of immorality as a result of which she gives birth to a child out of wedlock, this is no grounds for the removal of administrative rights. But the Assembly, when it learns of the situation, should certainly arrange for the believer to be met and consulted with, to assist her in her difficulties, to ascertain her attitude to the situation. If she has no regret for the offence and indicates that she feels free to repeat it in future, she will need to be educated in the teachings, counselled and, if she does not change her attitude, to be warned that a continuation of such actions would cause forfeiture of her administrative rights. If, however, she is contrite and is determined to lead a moral life henceforth, there would be no question of sanctions. The same course would be followed with the man involved, if he were a Bahá'í. [11]

Another example would involve, not a single offence, but a continuing course of behaviour, such as flagrant and continuing violation of the law prohibiting the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In such a situation the Assembly should explain the law to the believer, urge him to obey it, encourage and assist him and warn him if necessary. If the response is favourable there would, again, be no need to deprive him of his administrative rights, but, if the believer is obdurate or continues in his course of misbehaviour, he should, according to the circumstances of each case, be warned and warned again, with increasing severity and a time set for him to rectify his conduct. If this produces no amelioration, he would have to lose his administrative rights. [12]

A third example involves the taking of a definite step which violates a clear law with which the believer is familiar. In this instance, the Assembly may conclude that the believer has been warned repeatedly of the consequences of such behaviour through statements in widely circulated Bahá'í publications or in the deepening which a member of the community might reasonably be expected to have received. Into this category would fall the offences against the Bahá'í

*“... every case should be considered on its merits and in light of the particular circumstances.”*

requirement of parental consent to marriage, and the violations of law about which general warnings have been given in your news letter. [13]

Circumstances may arise where the offence is so serious that immediate action is required by the National Assembly to protect the Faith. In this connection, it is stated in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian:

You should vigilantly watch over and protect the interests of the Bahá'í Community, and the moment you see that any of the . . . Bahá'ís . . . are acting in a way to bring disgrace upon the name of the Faith, warn them, and, if necessary, deprive them immediately of their voting rights if they refuse to change their ways. Only in this way can the purity of the Faith be preserved. Compromise and weak measures will obscure the vision of its followers, sap its strength, lower it in the eyes of the public and prevent it from making any progress. [14]

The Universal House of Justice has stated that, in matters concerning the deprivation of voting rights, an Assembly should bear in mind that, at the present time, when Bahá'í laws are being progressively applied and a sizeable proportion of a community consists of newly declared believers, an Assembly may accept ignorance of the Bahá'í law as a valid excuse when it is convinced that such ignorance existed; great wisdom is required in the application of this provision, since it is not unknown for a believer guilty of flagrant misconduct to attempt to escape the administrative consequence of his behaviour through a fervent but spurious claim of ignorance of the law. [15]

In deciding whether or not to remove voting rights, every case should be considered on its merits and in light of the particular circumstances. The purpose of the administrative sanction should be borne clearly in mind in deciding how much weight to give to factors such as the passage of time, the extent to which the individual concerned has experienced an adverse reaction in the Bahá'í community, the degree of suffering and contrition exhibited by the believer whose status is being questioned, his stature in the Bahá'í community or the wider society, and media publicity of his delinquent behaviour. While there is room for compassion, this should not deflect you from giving due consideration to the responsibility you bear to protect the community and its good name, and to uphold the authority of Bahá'í law. . . . [16]

When a believer is deprived of his administrative rights, he is entitled to clear information on the requirements to be fulfilled in order

## The Bahá'í Application of Justice, continued

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*“The institutions of the Cause are called upon to guide and regulate the conduct of the believers. . . .”*

that his rights may be restored; these may include the passage of a prescribed period of time, the performance of certain remedial actions, or the alteration of an attitude or pattern of behaviour which is considered unworthy or harmful. A condition for the restoration of voting rights is that the believer be repentant, as evidenced by his statement to that effect or by his demeanour and conduct. A believer should not feel compelled to admit his past errors in order to be regarded as repentant; you can infer repentance from his behaviour, his manifest spirit of cooperation with the Assembly, and his evident desire to scrupulously adhere to the teachings. Should he display a rebellious or resentful attitude, or be contemptuous of Bahá'í law and the consequence of violation of his provision, you would be justified in denying him the right to re-enter the Bahá'í community. [17]

The Universal House of Justice is fully cognizant of the difficulties encountered by National Spiritual Assemblies in administering Bahá'í law at this period in history when the world is afflicted with lawlessness, moral decadence, and confusion. The institutions of the Cause are called upon to guide and regulate the conduct of the believers so that the Bahá'í community may offer, to both seeker and skeptic, a compelling proof of the transforming power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. By this means will humankind be led to accept the truth of His claim, and will thereby be enabled to find that unity and harmony for which it is so desperately yearning. Upon this foundation will be constructed the future world civilization which humanity is destined to attain. [18]

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

For the Department of the Secretariat

# Applying Spiritual and Administrative Principles: Reviewing The Process

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## Components of the process

The process of identifying and applying principles to the problems and responsibilities of the Local Assembly requires careful research and reasoning. Any decision made by an Assembly should be grounded in the guidance of the Writings. The following steps are components of the process:

### 1. Gather the facts from all relevant sources

This may be done by the Assembly as a body or through delegation. It may require interviewing those involved with the situation. Facts may include emotions, such as the existence of antipathy or repentance. Organize the facts so that they can be presented with clarity. Make sure all Assembly members agree on the facts. Relevant sources include references such as *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*, *Lights of Guidance*, and *Bahá'í Administration*.

### 2. Identify and state the problem

This step provides a common focal point and enables the next steps to be done more efficiently and with greater unity of purpose. This step is often harder than it sounds.

### 3. Identify and agree upon which principles are involved

Often several principles are relevant to the problem. There is no need to be concerned if some principles appear to be in tension with one another, as this is natural.

### 4. Apply principles to facts in a frank and loving discussion

Principles exist in the abstract, outside of particular situations. The job of the Assembly is to apply principles to the specific situation at hand. While the principles are themselves unchangeable, their application is flexible. The way a principle is applied may vary from case to case.

### 5. Make a decision based on the principles

“ . . . the primary challenge in dealing with issues . . . is to raise the context to the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism . . . . There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. . . . all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them.”

The Universal House of Justice, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, pp. 689-90.

# Sample Case Study

## Facts

Community A has about 75 members, but many of the believers are inactive. The attendance at Feasts averages about 30, and about the same number participate in elections. The percentage of contributors to the local Fund is also very low. Some of the members have not been seen or heard from for months and years but continue to receive community newsletters and announcements of special events.

## Problem

**What can or should the Assembly do to clarify the Bahá'í status of the large number of inactive members on its membership rolls? What can the Assembly do to remedy the situation?**

## Principles involved

★ **The Assembly is responsible for the best interests of the community.**

“[The Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for] promoting at all times the best interests of the communities within their jurisdiction.”

*Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 331.*

★ **Do not arbitrarily remove names.**

“Your Assembly should not remove the names of Bahá'ís from the voting list just because they do not attend meetings or just because their addresses are unknown. It is hard to make Bahá'ís; and you must try and help them and reactivate them, and find those whose addresses are unknown if you can.”

*Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to several National Spiritual Assemblies, dated September 26, 1957, in Lights of Guidance, 1996 rev. ed., p. 84, #293.*

★ **Ascertain belief in Bahá'u'lláh.**

“Any member of the Bahá'í Community who finds that he does not believe in Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation is free to withdraw from the Faith and such a withdrawal should be accepted. But a Bahá'í who continues to believe in Bahá'u'lláh cannot withdraw from the Bahá'í Community.”

*Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated July 8, 1970, in Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies, 1998 ed., Chapter 6, p. 6.19.*

★ **Encourage and love inactive believers.**

“...it is very discouraging to find inactive and unresponsive believers; on the other hand we must always realize that some souls are weak and immature and not capable of carrying on an active administrative burden. They need encouragement, the love of their fellow Bahá'ís and assistance. To blame them for not doing more for the Cause is useless, and they may actually have a very firm belief in Bahá'u'lláh which with care could be fanned into flame.

“If some of these isolated and inactive people gradually turn to other work than the Cause we should not always blame them – they probably needed more help, more stimulating, more teaching and Bahá'í comradeship than they received.”

*Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 25, 1947, Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, 1998 ed., Chapter 6, page 6.20.*

## Sample Case Study, continued

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### Principles applied to the facts

**After considering the principles and their application to the facts in this situation, the Assembly decided it had two major tasks before it:**

★ **Locate the inactive believers.**

If they still live in the community, then contact them to determine whether or not they still believe in Bahá'u'lláh. The principles indicate that even though many of the inactive members have not been seen or heard from in years, their names may not be removed from the membership rolls until the Assembly has done this.

★ **Try to activate them.**

The principles also indicate that the Assembly is responsible for the well-being of the community and should encourage active participation in Bahá'í community life. The quotations above state that love, encouragement, comradeship, assistance, and deepening are some of the components needed to accomplish this goal.

### Decisions

**Here are the decisions made by Assembly A:**

**1. Locate inactive believers and determine their membership status based on residency and belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Try to determine the reason(s) for inactivity.**

The Assembly decided that these tasks had to be done with sensitivity, wisdom, and tact. It did not wish to further alienate believers who were already outside the mainstream of community life. It appointed a three person task force to develop a plan by which to accomplish decision #1. To address the root of the problem and not just the symptoms, the task force was also given the job of learning, if possible, the reasons for inactivity and collecting suggestions for remedying the problems. This process could include face-to-face or telephone conversation, a confidential mail-in survey form, or some other means. After a plan was developed, the task force was to come back to the Assembly for final approval before proceeding.

**2. Encourage active participation of inactive believers and try to prevent future occurrences.**

To prevent future inactivity, the Assembly decided it was important to ensure that each new believer be deepened, nurtured, and made to feel a part of community life. To accomplish this task, the Assembly plans to match deepened believers with new believers. This system will be used to re-connect inactive believers who need deepening and nurturing. When the task force begins to determine some of the factors leading to inactivity, the Assembly will address other solutions.

## Case Study #1

# Establishing a Year of Waiting

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### Facts

The date is June, 2002. Mr. John Doe, an isolated believer, has requested from a nearby Assembly that they establish his year of waiting. His wife Jane Doe, also a Bahá'í, returned to her home in another state in November of 1999. At the time she left, Mr. and Mrs. Doe decided not to request a year of waiting because they wanted to leave open the possibility of a reconciliation. Mr. Doe visited his wife early in 2001, and after consultation both decided that harmony could not be restored in their marriage and that, in fact, strong negative feelings persisted between them. Both have now requested to have the year of waiting begin in November of 2001 and ending in November of 2002. They have not been together in over a year. They had no children and were married for only four years. Mr. and Mrs. Doe were both well known to the Assembly during the time they lived in the area and the Assembly is aware of the facts.

### Problem

**Should the Assembly grant the request for a year of waiting, and should the Assembly back date it to November 2001?**

### Principles involved

### Principles applied to the facts

### Decision(s)

## Case Study #2

# The Appearance of Drinking

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### Facts

The Local Spiritual Assembly has received a report that Edward, a member of its community, has been drinking alcohol in an area restaurant. The Assembly invites Edward to consult with it about the report. He informs the Assembly that he often has business luncheons at the restaurant where his associates (non-Bahá'ís) order alcoholic drinks, but he only orders soft drinks. He feels that the person making the report mistakenly believed that his soft drink contained alcohol, since everyone else at the table was drinking alcoholic beverages. The Local Assembly is satisfied with Edward's explanation and, because it has never had reason to question his obedience to Bahá'í laws in the past, decides to let the matter drop.

Later Edward requests another meeting with the Assembly at which he states that the report about his possible drinking has deeply disturbed him. He is concerned that his integrity as a Bahá'í has been called into question and states that his feelings have been hurt. He believes that if he is not trusted by his fellow believers, it will be difficult for him to participate in community events. He is upset with the actions the Local Spiritual Assembly had taken in this situation and questions their appropriateness.

### Problem

**How might the Assembly respond to Edward?**

### Principles involved

### Principles applied to the facts

### Decision(s)

## Case Study #3

# Bahá'í Marriage Without Consent

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### Facts

Two members of the Bahá'í community – Joe and Jackie – were married in a civil service ceremony by a Methodist minister. A year earlier, the young man's (Caucasian) parents had written their approval for the marriage. Later when he had introduced his fiancée (African American) to his family, the parents withdrew consent. Joe had not kept his parents' original letter of consent. When the couple attempted to get consent again from all parents, Joe's parents adamantly refused, stating that it was on the grounds of religious prejudice, rather than on the fact that this would be an interracial marriage. Not being able to secure the necessary consents, the couple were married in a civil service although both were aware of the Bahá'í laws on marriage and consent.

### Problem

**What action should the Assembly take towards the couple?**

### Principles involved

### Principles applied to the facts

### Decision(s)

## Case Study #4

# Homosexuality

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### Facts

Two young Bahá'í men have been Bahá'ís for approximately six months, and one was recently elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly. Unfortunately, the two men have a reputation in the town as being practicing homosexuals. They live together in an apartment and had done so for several years before becoming Bahá'ís. One is a faculty member at the college which is located outside the town. The other is a local commercial artist. Both are well known, among the youth especially, as homosexuals, and members of the Bahá'í community frequently receive inquiries about them from their non-Bahá'í friends. Several of the local Bahá'ís have had difficulty accepting the men in the Bahá'í community and have even gone so far as to stop coming to Bahá'í activities to avoid contact with them.

### Problem

**What steps should the Assembly take in dealing with these individuals regarding their purported homosexuality?**

### Principles involved

### Principles applied to the facts

### Decision(s)

# Additional Quotations from the Facilitator’s Guide

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## From “The Administration of Justice”

“There is a tendency to mix the functions of the Administration and try to apply it in individual relationships, which is abortive, because the Assembly is a nascent House of Justice and is supposed to administer, according to the Teachings, the affairs of the community. But individuals toward each other are governed by love, unity, forgiveness and a sin-covering eye. Once the friends grasp this they will get along much better, but they keep playing Spiritual Assembly to each other and expect the Assembly to behave like an individual . . .”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 5, 1950, in *The Bahá’í Life*, pp. 18-19.

## From “Applying Spiritual and Administrative Principles”

“In a general sense, it [systematization] implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá’í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. . . . it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1998.

“The principles enunciated in the Teachings are certainly very clear to you and to the majority of the believers – what is not always easy to discern is the application of those principles in any particular situation, especially one in which a number of different principles appears to be involved. . . . Hence the great need for wisdom and a deep understanding of the Teachings on the part of members of Spiritual Assemblies, both National and Local, so that they can apply the principles to whatever situations arise.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, July 21, 1968, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

## From “Closing”

“These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His Wings. What bounty is there greater than this?”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 6.