

Participant Handouts

*Channels of
Divine Guidance:*
**Consultation Part 2:
Consulting in Unity and
Harmony**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Consulting in Unity and Harmony

OVERVIEW FOR PARTICIPANTS

Purpose

- ★ To provide insight on how to create and maintain healthy group dynamics in the Assembly

This workshop builds on the work done by individuals to prepare for consultation in Consultation Part 1. Its primary focus is how to create and maintain healthy group dynamics in the Assembly. It includes a unity-building exercise and an evaluation of the Assembly's current consultative climate.

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.

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

The Importance of Unity in the Assembly

Focus questions

- ★ What effect does a lack of unity have on the Assembly itself?
- ★ What effect does a lack of unity have on the process of consultation?
- ★ What effect does a lack of unity in the Assembly have on the larger community?

“. . . true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 10, #22.

“The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God. . . . Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, pp. 5-6, #10.

“The first duty of the members is to effect their own unity and harmony, in order to obtain good results. If there be no unity, or the Committee becomes the cause of inharmony, undoubtedly, it is better that it does not exist. . . .”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 11, #23.

“They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 6, #10.

“. . . As long as the friends quarrel among themselves their efforts will not be blessed for they are disobeying God.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated February 24, 1950, in *Living the Life*, pp. 31-32.

“With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your life to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 184.

“Bahá’u’lláh has given the promise that in every Assembly where unity and harmony prevail*, there His glorious spirit will not only be present, but will animate, sustain and guide all the friends in all their deliberations.

“It is to unity that the Guardian has been continually calling the friends. For where a united will exists, nothing can effectively oppose and hamper the forces of constructive development.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 16.

***Prevail**: to appear or occur as the most important or conspicuous feature or element; to become dominant

The Importance of Unity in the Assembly, continued

“For where a united will exists, nothing can effectively oppose and hamper the forces of constructive development.”

“The time has come for the Bahá’í community to become more involved in the life of the society around it . . . exerting its influence towards unity, demonstrating its ability to settle differences by consultation rather than by confrontation, violence or schism, and declaring its faith in the divine purpose of human existence.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1985, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 666.

“Unity within the Assembly itself is, of course, of immediate importance to the wider unity your actions are intended to foster and sustain. At no time can any member of your Assembly afford to be unmindful of this basic requirement nor neglect to work towards upholding it.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 19, 1994, to a National Spiritual Assembly.

How Assembly Members Should See Themselves and Each Other

“One must see . . . only that which is worthy of praise.”

“They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 6, #10.

“. . . when the unity of the members . . . is established, their second duty is to read the verses and communes, to be in a state of commemoration and mindfulness, that they may see each other as if in the presence of God.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, pp. 11-12, #23.

“Every one of the friends should highly praise the other and each should regard himself as evanescent* and as naught in the presence of others.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 8, #16.

“Not infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored and inexperienced among the friends will, by the sheer inspiring force of selfless and ardent devotion, contribute a distinct and memorable share to a highly involved discussion in any given Assembly.”

Letter from Shoghi Effendi, dated January 29, 1925, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 14, #26.

“One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race. If, however, we look at people from the standpoint of their faults, then being a friend to them is a formidable task.

“It happened one day in the time of Christ – may the life of the world be a sacrifice unto Him – that He passed by the dead body of a dog, a carcass reeking, hideous, the limbs rotting away. One of those present said: ‘How foul its stench!’ And another said: ‘How sickening! How loathsome!’ To be brief, each one of them had something to add to the list.

“But then Christ Himself spoke, and He told them: ‘Look at that dog’s teeth! How gleaming white!’

“The Messiah’s sin-covering gaze did not for a moment dwell upon the repulsiveness of that carrion. The one element of that dead dog’s carcass which was not abomination was the teeth: and Jesus looked upon their brightness.

* **Evanescence:** vanishing, disappearing, scarcely perceptible

How Assembly Members Should See Themselves and Each Other, continued

“Thus is it incumbent upon us, when we direct our gaze toward other people, to see where they excel, not where they fail.”

“Thus is it incumbent upon us, when we direct our gaze toward other people, to see where they excel, not where they fail.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 169.

“Be in perfect unity. . . . Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 93.

Attributes Sheet

**Recognizing
Positive
Attributes of
Fellow
Assembly
Members**

Write in the names of your fellow-Assembly members on the lines below – one per line. After each name, write a brief ending to the statement “The qualities or capacities I most admire and value in you are. . .”

1. _____

✂
2. _____

✂
3. _____

✂
4. _____

✂
5. _____

✂
6. _____

✂
7. _____

✂
8. _____

Assembly Climate Survey

Rating the Climate of your Assembly

First, fill in the name of your Local Spiritual Assembly on the line above.
Next, think about the ways in which your fellow Assembly members act towards you. Choose a number from 1-7 indicating an overall rating of how Assembly members act towards you in each of the following areas.

always = 7
most of the time = 6
often = 5
sometimes = 4
seldom = 3
rarely = 2
never = 1

Most members of my Assembly act this way towards me:
(enter the number from above which reflects your answer)

- _____ 1. Are sincere and frank with me.
- _____ 2. Understand what I am trying to say.
- _____ 3. Interrupt or ignore my comments.
- _____ 4. Accept me for what I am.
- _____ 5. Feel free to let me know when I irritate them.
- _____ 6. Misunderstand things I say or do.
- _____ 7. Are interested in me.
- _____ 8. Provide an atmosphere where I can be myself.
- _____ 9. Keep things to themselves to not hurt my feelings.
- _____ 10. See what kind of person I really am.
- _____ 11. Include me in what's going on.
- _____ 12. Act "judgmental" with me.
- _____ 13. Are completely frank with me.
- _____ 14. Recognize when something is bothering me.
- _____ 15. Respect me as a person.
- _____ 16. Ridicule me or disapprove if I show any peculiarities.

Consulting with Frankness and Love

Focus questions

- ★ What elements should influence speech? What elements should not?
- ★ What elements should influence listening?
- ★ What will give birth to “an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race”?

“Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.”

Shoghi Effendi, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 13, #24.

“The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose him, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 5, #9.

“. . . it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow-members. In view of this important administrative principle of frank and open consultation, the Guardian would advise you to give up the method of asking others to voice your opinion and suggestions. This indirect way of expressing your views to the Assembly not only creates an atmosphere of secrecy which is most alien to the spirit of the Cause, but would also lead to many misunderstandings and complications.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated October 28, 1935, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 16, #33.

“The members of an Assembly must learn to express their views frankly, calmly, without passion or rancour*. They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offence or belittling the views of another. Bahá’í consultation is not an easy process. It requires love, kindness, moral courage and humility. Thus no member should ever allow himself to be prevented from expressing frankly his view because it may offend a fellow member; and, realizing this, no member should take offence at another member’s statements.”

The Universal House of Justice, in *Lights of Guidance*, Fourth Revised Edition, 1996, pp. 179-180, #590.

“The members who are consulting, however, should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 8, #15.

“We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while

***Rancour:** bitter resentment or ill will; hatred; malice

“Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors. . . .”

another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither.”

Bahá'u'lláh, quoted by The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated December 29, 1988, par. 40.

“If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and good-will. . . . Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone* of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding. . . .”

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 289.

“Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that ‘Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.’”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated December 29, 1988 in *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, par. 26.

“Clearly, then, there is more to be considered than the . . . right to self-expression; the unifying spirit of the Cause of God must also be preserved, the authority of its laws and ordinances safeguarded. . . . Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one’s fellows, love for one’s community, love for one’s institutions.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated December 29, 1988, in *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, par. 34.

“Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously*. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette* of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated December 29, 1988, in *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, par. 37.

***Lodestone:** magnet

***Judicious:** exercising good judgment, discreet, prudent, wise, sensible, well-advised

***Etiquette:** conventional requirements governing social behavior

“The qualities by which the individual can achieve the personal discipline necessary to successful consultation find their full expression in . . . the ‘spirit of a true Bahá’í.’”

“The qualities by which the individual can achieve the personal discipline necessary to successful consultation find their full expression in what Shoghi Effendi regarded as the ‘spirit of a true Bahá’í.’ Ponder, for instance, the appealing remark addressed to your own community in one of his earliest letters: ‘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.’ This was an appeal to the maturity and the distinction towards which he repeatedly directed their thoughts.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated December 29, 1988, in *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, par. 30.

Maintaining Unity while Handling Differences

Focus questions

- ★ What are indicators that consultation is on the verge of breaking down?
- ★ What are some options an Assembly has if this takes place?
- ★ What can individual Assembly members do?

“Through the clash of personal opinions, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and Divine guidance revealed. The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly, for these, as experience has shown, and as the Master’s words attest, fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 18, 1939, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, pp. 16, #34.

“It is important to note that truth emerges after the ‘clash’ of carefully articulated views (which may well be expressed with enthusiasm and vigour), not from the clash of feelings. A clash of feelings is likely to obscure the truth, while a difference of opinion facilitates the discovery of truth.”

Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, “*Issues Concerning Community Functioning*,” section 2, p. 6.

“The honoured members of the Spiritual Assembly should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings*, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious* time is at hand.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 9, #19.

“If any differences arise amongst you, behold Me standing before your face, and overlook the faults of one another for My name’s sake and as a token of your love for My manifest and resplendent Cause.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 315.

“Patience and restraint, however, should at all times characterize the discussions and deliberations of the elected representatives of the local community, and no fruitless and hair-splitting discussions indulged in, under any circumstances.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 18, 1939, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, pp. 16-17, #34.

“If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible* law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute may arise; that they may speak with

***Wrangling:** a noisy or angry dispute

***Propitious:** presenting favorable conditions

***Incontrovertible:** indisputable; undeniable; unquestionable

Maintaining Unity while Handling Differences, continued

“Personal animosities, suspicions, accusations, wounded pride, controversial issues must all be laid aside.”

each other with infinite amity and love. Should there appear the least trace of controversy, they must remain silent, and both parties must continue their discussions no longer, but ask the reality of the question from the Interpreter. This is the irrefutable* command!”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 56.

“All should be ready and willing to set aside every personal sense of grievance – justified or unjustified – for the good of the Cause, because the people will never embrace it until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking in the world: love and unity.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Fostering the Development of Bahá’í Communities, #9.

“Personal animosities, suspicions, accusations, wounded pride, controversial issues must all be laid aside. Members of assemblies, national and local, must be the first to set a worthy example to their fellow-believers.”

Shoghi Effendi, in Light of Divine Guidance, Vol. 1, p. 155.

“However, he feels very strongly that if . . . is in the state your letter would seem to indicate, it is certainly conducting its affairs in the wrong way. . . . For where is Bahá’í love? Where is putting unity and harmony first? Where is the willingness to sacrifice one’s personal feelings and opinions to achieve love and harmony? What makes the Bahá’ís think that when they sacrifice the spiritual laws the administrative laws are going to work?”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Living the Life, p. 31.

“The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule.

“The believers, loving the Cause above all else and putting its interests first, must be ready to bear the hardships entailed, of whatever nature they may be. Only through such persistence and self-sacrifice can we ever hope to preserve on the one hand our divine institutions intact, and on the other force ourselves to become nobler, better instruments to serve this glorious Faith.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 20, 1941, Consultation: A Compilation, p. 17, #36.

***Irrefutable:**
indisputable;
undeniable;
unquestionable

Supporting the Assembly's Decisions

“... members should automatically and unreservedly obey it. . . .”

“There is only one principle on which to conduct the work of an assembly, and that is the supremacy of the will of the majority.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated November 20, 1941, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 19.

“If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 5, #9.

“And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate*, anxious* and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated February 23, 1924, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 14, #25.

“The assembly members must have the courage of their convictions, but must also express whole-hearted and unqualified obedience to the well-considered judgment and directions of the majority of their fellow-members.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated October 28, 1935, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 16, #33.

“But once the opinion of the majority has been ascertained, all the members should automatically and unreservedly obey it, and faithfully carry it out.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 18, 1939, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 16, #34.

***Dispassionate:** fair, impartial; not influenced by strong feeling; not affected by personal or emotional involvement

***Anxious:** full of eagerness, earnestly desirous (e.g. anxious to please)

“The laws, commandments, injunctions and exhortations we have all agreed to obey and follow as Bahá’ís include a clearly defined approach to decision-making and to the implementation of decisions. You are, undoubtedly, well familiar with the various aspects of this approach, which is built on the conviction that the path of unity is the only path that can lead to the civilization envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. So strong is the emphasis on unity that, for example, once a decision has been made by an Assembly, everyone is expected to support that decision wholeheartedly, relying confidently on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurance that, even

Supporting the Assembly's Decisions, continued

“... whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light. . . .”

if the decision is wrong, ‘as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.’”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated July 2, 1996, to a National Spiritual Assembly.

“It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 6, # 10.

Thoughts of John Kolstoe on Supporting Assembly Decisions

“It is easy to say: ‘If they did the right thing I would support them.’ The method for the New Day functions in the reverse condition: ‘I pledge my support so that they will ultimately do the right thing.’ Mature faith is the understanding that in the long run upholding all decisions is best. Indeed, it is when a person most strongly disagrees with a decision, sacrifices his opinion and supports the assembly that the system of Bahá’u’lláh shines at its resplendent best.”

John Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, p. 64.

Case Study

Facts

Having now mastered the art and skills of consultation ☺, you have been asked to serve as advisors to the Office of Community Administration and Development, which just received the following letter. For the purpose of this exercise please assume that these are all the facts available.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Our Assembly is experiencing severe difficulties in functioning. One of our members, John, has such a strong and aggressive personality that he stifles consultation. He often finds fault with the ideas of others and treats other members of the Assembly like they don't know what they are doing. If anybody disagrees with a point he has made, he becomes upset. Our Chairperson tries to be fair by giving everybody an opportunity to speak, but sometimes John is so intimidating that people are afraid to say what is on their minds lest they set him off. It is not unusual for one or more members to be reduced to tears by John's statements. As a result, some of us feel so emotionally drained and distraught after coming to Assembly meetings that we are thinking of resigning our membership on the Assembly. We can't believe that this is how a Local Spiritual Assembly is supposed to function.

We have tried our best to deal with the problem. For example, we have tried to meet without John present, but he either insists on being present at each meeting or, if he hasn't been present, insists upon a review of the decisions taken in his absence, saying that he has a right, as a member of the Assembly, to comment on what was decided. Sometimes he will even convey erroneous information about what the Assembly has decided to the community, and when another Assembly member tries to correct the information, he will make it seem like he has been wronged and the other Assembly member doesn't know what they are talking about.

Complicating the situation is the fact that John does not behave this way when interacting with other members of the community. He has been a Bahá'í for twenty years and was a pioneer for five years in another country, where he served on a National Spiritual Assembly, so everyone else in the community thinks he is a wonderful, dedicated Bahá'í and member of the Assembly.

Please, please help us resolve this dilemma. Many of us just don't feel that we have the expertise or energy to deal with it, and it is keeping us from serving our beloved Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Four concerned members of the Assembly

Case Study Worksheet

Focus questions

- ★ What are some of the principles that apply to this situation?
- ★ What counsel would you give to this Assembly?

Principles involved:

Suggested guidance in light of these principles: