

Participant Handouts

Cultivating Distinction: **The Spiritual Nature of Bahá'í Elections**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

The Spiritual Nature of Bahá'í Elections

OVERVIEW FOR PARTICIPANTS

Purpose

- ★ to increase electors' appreciation of the sanctity of Bahá'í elections

This workshop is targeted to individuals, rather than to Assemblies. Its objective is to increase electors' appreciation of the sanctity of Bahá'í elections. It covers how electors should prepare themselves throughout the year to perform their sacred duty; qualities to consider and ignore in deciding who to vote for; and the atmosphere that should characterize any Bahá'í election.

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 Call to a New State of Mind: The Bahá'í Electoral Process as an Expression of Rectitude of Conduct

“Such a rectitude of conduct must . . . be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions.”

“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.”

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

“How great, therefore, how staggering the responsibility that must weigh upon the present generation of the American believers, at this early stage in their spiritual and administrative evolution, to weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies which they have inherited from their own nation, and to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those distinctive qualities and characteristics that are so indispensable* to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith.

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 20.

“Upon the extent to which these basic requirements are met, and the manner in which the American believers fulfill them in their individual lives, administrative activities, and social relationships, must depend the measure of the manifold blessings which the All-Bountiful Possessor can vouchsafe* to them all. **These requirements are none other than a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color.”**

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 22.

“This rectitude* of conduct, with its implications of justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness, must distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 23.

“Such a rectitude of conduct must . . . be exemplified* in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.

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

***Indispensable:** absolutely necessary or essential

***Vouchsafe:** to give or grant; to permit or allow

***Rectitude:** rightness of principle or practice; moral virtue

***Exemplify:** to show by example

The Bahá'í Electoral Process as an Expression of Rectitude of Conduct, continued

“A rectitude of conduct . . . in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation. . . .”

“A rectitude of conduct, an abiding sense of undeviating justice, unobscured by the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 23.

“A rectitude of conduct which, in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation and of the parties and factions that compose it. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 41.

The Administrative Order: Pattern for Future Society

Focus questions

- ★ Why is it so important that we understand and build Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order? What consequences are involved?
- ★ In what ways is Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order unique?

***Dissociate:** to separate

***Tantamount** equivalent, same as

***Permeate:** to penetrate, pervade, be diffused throughout

***Incarnate:** to take on a concrete form

***Imbue:** to inspire; infuse into

***Regenerate:** to cause rebirth or complete moral reform

***Enunciate:** to proclaim; declare

***Propound:** to put forward for consideration or acceptance

“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, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 5.

“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, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19.

“For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued* mankind with a new and regenerating* Spirit. He has not merely enunciated* certain universal principles, or propounded* a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth.”

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

“It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions. Such an attempt would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 152.

“The Bahá'í Commonwealth of the future, of which this vast Administrative Order is the sole framework, is, both in theory and practice, not only unique in the entire history of political

The Administrative Order: Pattern for Future Society, continued

“It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá’í Community is wholly consecrated. . . .”

institutions, but can find no parallel in the annals of any of the world’s recognized religious systems.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 152.

“This new-born Administrative Order incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government [democracy, autocracy, and aristocracy], without being in any sense a mere replica* of any one of them, and without introducing within its machinery any of the objectionable features which they inherently possess. It blends and harmonizes, as no government fashioned by mortal hands has as yet accomplished, the salutary* truths which each of these systems undoubtedly contains without vitiating* the integrity of those God-given verities on which it is ultimately founded.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 152-53.

“The teaching of the Administration should, indeed, be considered as forming a permanent and vital feature of every Bahá’í summer school. For upon its thorough and intelligent understanding by the entire community of the believers must inevitably depend the effectiveness and continued expansion of Bahá’í activities throughout the world.”

Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 6, 1934, *Centres of Bahá’í Learning*, p. 9, #22.

“They [the community of the Most Great Name] alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity* whose fabric they themselves are weaving.

“Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can mature and develop. It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá’í Community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society. For this process is actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 194-95.

***Replica:** exact copy

***Salutary:** healthy, beneficial

***Vitiate:** to corrupt, spoil, pervert

***Polity:** system of government

Preparation for Voting

Focus questions

- ★ When should preparation for voting begin?
- ★ How should electors prepare for their sacred duty?

“... we have always and everywhere urged the National Spiritual Assemblies concerned to guide and teach the friends in proper Bahá’í administrative procedures, not only during the weeks immediately preceding local elections but indeed throughout the year, so that the friends would await the advent of Ridván with anticipation and determine to observe and uphold correct principles of Bahá’í administration.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, September 24, 1973, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 14, #51.

“To be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all of his fellow-believers, to keep in touch with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness, and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá’í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 4, 1935, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 10, #34.

“As regards the election of new members on the National Assembly, Shoghi Effendi finds no other practical method that is in conformity with the spirit of the teachings, except through better acquaintance of the friends during the annual conventions and summer schools. It is the duty of the individual friends to come to know one another and find out who are the persons best fitted to become members of that body. This is a slow process but surely the best one and gives the greatest amount of freedom of choice to the electors. It is the duty of the friends individually to become more intelligent voters and vote only after studying the situation conscientiously.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 16, 1933, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 19, #64.

“I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves

Preparation for Voting, continued

“ . . . their continuing duty [is] to familiarize themselves with the character and abilities of those who are active in the community. . . .”

the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others, of canvassing* for any particular individual, but should **stress the necessity of getting fully acquainted with the qualifications of membership referred to in our Beloved’s Tablets and of learning more about one another through direct, personal experience rather than through the reports and opinions of our friends.”**

Shoghi Effendi, May 14, 1927, *Principles of Bahá’í Administration*, p. 47; also in *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 23.

“It is expected that in the future . . . through training and experience in the process and spirit of Bahá’í elections, the members of the electorate will have raised their consciousness of their responsibility to vote for only those who satisfy the requirements that the Guardian has outlined. They will, therefore, see it as their continuing duty to familiarize themselves with the character and abilities of those who are active in the community so that, when the time for an election comes, they will already have some idea of the people from among whom they must make their choice.”

The Universal House of Justice, November 16, 1988, to the International Teaching Center, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections*, p. 6, #18.

“The electors . . . must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, July 1, 1943, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections*, p. 4, #13.

“I cannot but pray that they may be guided in their choice, and discharge honourably their functions.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 188.

***Canvass:** to ask for votes

Making Choices

Focus questions

- ★ What factors should influence my decision?
- ★ What factors should not influence my decision?

“ . . . the elector . . . is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold. . . . to vote only in favour of those who he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 136.

“The strength and progress of the Bahá'í community depend upon the election of pure, faithful and active souls.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, April 9, 1932, in *The Sanctity and Nature Bahá'í Elections*, pp. 7, #22.

“Election to an Assembly . . . is not a right that people are entitled to, or an honour to which they should aspire; it is a duty and responsibility to which they may be called. The purpose is that those who are elected to an Assembly should be the most worthy for this service; this does not and cannot mean that all those who are worthy will be elected. It is expected that in the future . . . there will be very large numbers of individuals who have the qualities which make them fit for service on Spiritual Assemblies. Of these only a few can be elected at any one time.”

The Universal House of Justice, November 16, 1988, to the International Teaching Centre, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 6, #18.

“Hence it is incumbent* upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion* and prejudice, and irrespective* of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 88.

“Due regard must be paid to their actual capacity and present attainments, and only those who are best qualified for membership, be they men or women, and irrespective* of social standing, should be elected to the extremely responsible position of a member of the Bahá'í Assembly.”

Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated December 27, 1923, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 4.

“ . . . I do not feel it to be in keeping with the spirit of the Cause to impose any limitation upon the freedom of the believers to choose those of any race, nationality or temperament who *best combine* the essential qualifications for membership of administrative institutions. **They should disregard personalities and concentrate their attention on the qualities and requirements of office, without prejudice, passion* or partiality*. The Assembly should be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.”**

Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated August 11, 1933, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 4, #11; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), pp. 9-10, #33.

***Incumbent:** imposed as a duty; obligatory

***Passion:** powerful or compelling emotion

***Irrespective:** without regard to; ignoring

***Partiality:** a favorable bias or prejudice; favoritism

Making Choices, continued

“... his duty is to vote for those... who, in his estimation, best meet the standards for service on a Spiritual Assembly.”

“In regard to your question about qualifications of delegates and assembly members: the qualifications which he outlined are really applicable to anyone we elect to a Bahá’í office, whatever its nature. But those are only an indication, they do not mean people who don’t fulfill them cannot be elected to office. We must aim as high as we can. **He does not feel the friends should attach so much importance to limitations – such as people perhaps not being able to attend assembly or convention meetings, because if they do, then the fundamental concept of everyone being willing to do Bahá’í service on administrative bodies will be weakened, and the friends may be tempted to vote for those who, because of independent means or circumstances in their lives, are freer to come and go but less qualified to serve.**”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 24, 1947, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 207.

“It is a basic principle of elections for Bahá’í Spiritual Assemblies that each voter must vote for the nine people who, in his or her opinion, are best suited to serve. He may have a low opinion of all those who are eligible, but his duty is to vote for those nine from among them who, in his estimation, best meet the standards for service on a Spiritual Assembly.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, October 26, 1983, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 21, #68.

“As elections are by secret ballot only the education of the electorate can bring about changes on Assemblies which often stagnate* from lack of fresh blood. . . .”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 31, 1945, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 165, #547.

“Shoghi Effendi has never said the members of the National Assembly have to be renewed partially every year. The important thing is that they should be properly elected. It would be nice if there should be new members elected, for new blood always adds to the energy of the group and will keep up their spirit. But this depends entirely upon the will of the delegates as represented in the result of their voting.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, letter dated October 1932, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, p. 2.9.

“There is no objection in principle to an Assembly being re-elected whether in toto* or in part, provided the members are considered to be well qualified for that post. It is individual merit that counts. Novelty, or the mere act of renewal of elections, are purely secondary considerations. Changes in Assembly membership would be welcome so far as they do not prejudice the quality of such membership.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian*, page 23, #61; also in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections*, p. 5, #16.

***Stagnate:** stop developing, advancing or being usefully active

***In toto:** in whole; wholly (Latin)

Choosing How to Vote

What factors should and should not influence my decisions as an elector?

Should influence my decision

Should not influence my decision

The Electoral Choices Song

Sing the following words to the tune of “Twinkle, twinkle little star”

When con - sidering qualities,
(Twinkle, twinkle little star)

Let your mind go first to these:
(How I wonder what you are)

Devotion, experience, loyalty,
(up a- bove the world so high,)

A well-trained mind, ability.
(Like a diamond in the sky)

Combining these will guarantee
(Twinkle, twinkle little star)

Institutional quality.
(How I wonder what you are)

Creating a Spiritual Atmosphere: The Example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

“To what spiritual worlds one would be carried at this time is impossible for me to describe. . .”

“On the day of the Bahá’í festivals, a large quantity of pots filled with flowers intended for the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh were brought to the outer apartment of the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. All the pilgrims and resident believers dressed in their best clothes would assemble outside the house at a certain time. . . . The procession to the Shrine would then start. The believers walked two by two, each person carrying a flower-pot on his shoulder. . . .

“While carrying a flower-pot on His shoulders, the Blessed Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, like the commander of an army, walked sometimes in the front and sometimes beside the procession and issued various instructions on the way. Usually two or three people who had melodious voices were directed by Him to chant, one after the other, some poems of Bahá’u’lláh or other suitable verses related to a particular Bahá’í festival. In this way, solemnly and with great dignity, they would walk slowly towards the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh.

“As soon as that Holy Place became visible to the eye, all would halt at the behest of the Master . . . while someone would chant a prayer. To what spiritual worlds one would be carried at this time is impossible for me to describe. . . . As the believers approached the Shrine, the flower-pots were handed in, and another prayer chanted. Then all would retire to a room where refreshments would be served. When all had rested and refreshed themselves, they would be summoned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to enter the Shrine. The Tablet of Visitation would be chanted as usual by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Then the believers were allowed to sit down to chant prayers and Tablets. . . .”

From the memoirs of Dr. Yunis Khán, in Adib Taherzadeh’s *The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 190.

The Atmosphere of a Bahá'í Election

Focus question

- ★ What qualities or actions should characterize the atmosphere of any Bahá'í election?

“Equally significant to the procedures for election . . . is the evocation of that rarefied* atmosphere of prayer and reflection, that quiet dignity of the process . . . in which the individual’s freedom to choose is limited only by his own conscience, exercised in private in an attitude that invites communion with the Holy Spirit.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 10.

“. . . in the time of election, the friends should be in the mood of prayer, disinterestedness and detachment from worldly motives. Then they will be inspired to elect the proper members to the assemblies.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, June 7, 1924, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 11 #39.

“They must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, January 16, 1932, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 12, #44.

“The electors . . . must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, July 1, 1943, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 4, #13.

“On the election day the friends must whole-heartedly participate in the elections, in unity and amity, turning their hearts to God, detached from all things but Him, seeking His guidance and supplicating His aid and bounty.”

Shoghi Effendi, February 27, 1923, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 1; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 11, #38.

“It hath rejoiced my heart to know that, God be praised, the friends in that area, with absolute unity, fellowship and love, have held this new election and were successful in voting for souls who are sanctified, are favoured at the Holy Threshold and are well known amongst the friends to be staunch and firm in the Covenant.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 77.

“Let us recall His explicit and often-repeated assurance that every Assembly elected in that rarefied* atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is, in truth, appointed of God, that its verdict is truly inspired, that one and all should submit to its decision unreservedly and with cheerfulness.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 65.

***Rarefied:** extremely high or elevated, lofty; exalted

Personal Action Plan

**Reflect and
record your
plans**

In order to demonstrate my “new state of mind” as an elector, my contributions to the process of enhancing the purity and spiritual character of Bahá’í elections will be . . .