

Participant Handouts

*Channels of Divine
Guidance:*
**The Spiritual Nature of
the Local Assembly**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Spiritual Nature of the Local Assembly

OVERVIEW FOR PARTICIPANTS

Purpose

- ★ To help members of a Local Spiritual Assembly gain a firmer grasp of the spiritual nature of the institution
- ★ To explore what members can do individually to help the Assembly rise to a higher level of maturity

This workshop focuses in depth on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opening prayer for the Spiritual Assembly and also examines metaphors used in the Writings to describe Assemblies, such as being “channels of divine guidance.” Its purpose is to help members of a Local Spiritual Assembly gain a firmer grasp of the spiritual nature of the institution and to explore what members can do individually to help the Assembly rise to a higher level of maturity.

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 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, dated Ridván 1996, 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, dated Ridván 1990, to the Bahá’ís of the World.

“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 of the Most Great Name itself is experiencing the rigorous effects

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

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

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, dated Ridván 1992, 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.”

Bahá’í 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, dated Ridván 1990, 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.”

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

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Prayer for the Local Spiritual Assembly

Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory:

O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all besides Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this Spiritual Assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy Divine Guidance, the Standards of Thy exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High, manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom, and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thine all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard. O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world. Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Quotations related to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Prayer for the Local Spiritual Assembly

“They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God. . . .”

“At this meeting they should feel as if they were entering the Presence of God . . . The glances of God are directed towards this Assembly.”

Bahá’u’lláh in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 6.

“They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God, the Exalted, the Most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 29, par. 30.

“Everyone steps over the threshold of his individual relationship with God; the participants enter a united condition. With it comes a corporate, or single and united mind – a new entity, different from and superior to the sum of the nine parts.”

John Kolstoe, *Consultation*, p. 45.

“If thou seekest after a work which is brighter and more attractive, sweeter and more delightful than all the affairs, it is thralldom at the threshold of the Almighty and servitude to His Highness the Lord of Might.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Divine Art of Living*, p. 94, #9.

“The service of the friends belongeth to God, not to them.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Divine Art of Living*, p. 94, #8.

“That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 116.

“Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 138.

“How great the blessedness that awaiteth him that hath attained the honor of serving the Almighty!”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 334.

“Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 336.

“They who are the beloved of God, in whatever place they gather and whomsoever they may meet, must evince, in their attitude towards God, and in the manner of their celebration of His praise and glory, such humility and submissiveness that every atom of the dust beneath their feet may attest the depth of their devotion.”

Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 7.

Quotations related to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Prayer for the Local Spiritual Assembly, continued

“The members of these Assemblies . . . must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations. . . .”

“Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.”

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 267.

“O ye peoples of the earth! Turn yourselves towards Him Who hath turned towards you. He, verily, is the Face of God amongst you, and His Testimony and His Guide unto you.”

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 48.

“The members of these Assemblies, on their part, must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal.”

Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 41.

“Reflect, can a more precious, a mightier, and more glorious day than this be conceived, so that man should willingly forego its grace, and deprive himself of its bounties, which like unto vernal showers are raining from the heaven of mercy upon all mankind?”

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 143.

“In this blessed, this glorious Day, deprive not yourselves of the liberal effusions of bounty which the Lord of abounding grace hath vouchsafed unto you. In this Day showers of wisdom and utterance are pouring down from the clouds of divine mercy.”

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 85.

“The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá. . . It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth.”

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 29.

“A perusal of some of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the duties and functions of the Spiritual Assemblies in every land (later to be designated as the local Houses of Justice), emphatically reveals the sacredness of their nature, the wide scope of their activity, and the grave responsibility which rests upon them.”

Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 20.

We Are Not Alone

Divine Promises

“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.

“‘Abdu’l-Bahá is constantly engaged in ideal communication with any Spiritual Assembly which is instituted through the divine bounty, and the members of which are in the utmost devotion turning to the divine kingdom and are firm in the Covenant. To them He is heartily attached and with them He is united by everlasting ties.”

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

“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 their deliberations.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated November 17, 1933, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 16.

Metaphors of Assembly Functioning

“They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.”

Shoghi Effendi, in *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 64

Assemblies as Channels of Divine Guidance

Focus questions

- ★ What is the purpose of a channel?
- ★ What does it contain? What flows through it? What does it bring into the world?
- ★ What does it keep out?
- ★ What would happen if the channel didn't exist?
- ★ What might clog the “channel of divine guidance” that is a Local Spiritual Assembly?

“These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, pp. 6-7.

“. . . the Assembly [must] grow in awareness of its role as a channel of God’s grace not only for the Bahá’ís but for the entire village, town or city in which it serves.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated December 26, 1995, to the Continental Boards of Counselors, in *The Four Year Plan*, p. 10, 1.21.

“Should we build up the Administrative World Order to a point of absolute perfection but at the same time allow it to be hampered or disconnected from the channels within, through which channels the Holy Spirit of the Cause pours forth, we would have nothing more than a perfected body out of touch with and cut off from the finer promptings of the soul or spirit.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Principles of Bahá’í Administration*, p. 1.

“The Cause . . . is a divine institution whose responsible administrators should consider themselves as mere channels whereby God protects and guides His Faith. . . . Its custodians should continually purge themselves of every trace of personal desire or interest and become wholly imbued with the spirit of love, of cooperation and of genuine self-sacrifice.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated August 8, 1933, in *Lights of Guidance*, (5th ed.), 1996, p. 35, #125.

“I have already reiterated and emphasized that the administration of the Cause is to be conceived as an instrument and not a substitute for the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh, that it should be regarded as a channel through which His promised blessing may flow, that it should guard against such rigidity as would clog and fetter the liberating forces released by His Revelation.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 9.

Moving Towards Maturity: Improving Assembly Performance

Focus questions

- ★ Why is it imperative that Assemblies improve their performance?
- ★ On whose efforts does the proper functioning of Assemblies largely depend?
- ★ What can members of the Assembly do as individuals to improve Assembly functioning?
- ★ What are the effects of our efforts?

“The epochs of the Formative Age mark progressive stages in the evolution of the organic Bahá’í community and signal the maturation of its institutions, thus enabling the Faith to operate at new levels and to initiate new functions. The timing of each epoch is designated by the Head of the Faith. . . .”

The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986, p. 712.

“Local Spiritual Assemblies are at the present newly born institutions, struggling for the most part to establish themselves both in the Bahá’í community and in the world. They are as yet only embryos of the majestic institutions ordained by Bahá’u’lláh in His Writings.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, July 30, 1972, Messages from the Universal House of Justice, p. 223.

“With increasing public attention being focused on the Cause of God, it becomes imperative for Bahá’í institutions to improve their performance, through a closer identification with the fundamental verities of the Faith, through greater conformity to the spirit and form of Bahá’í administration and through a keener reliance on the beneficial effects of proper consultation, so that the communities they guide will reflect a pattern of life that will offer hope to the disillusioned members of society.”

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

“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, in The Local Spiritual Assembly, p. 5.

“The proper functioning of these institutions depends largely on the efforts of their members to familiarize themselves with their duties and to adhere scrupulously to principle in their personal behavior and in the conduct of their official responsibilities. Of relevant importance, too, are their resolve to remove all traces of estrangement and sectarian tendencies from their midst, their ability to win the affection and support of the friends under their care and to involve as many individuals as possible in the work of the Cause. By their constantly aiming at improving their

Moving Towards Maturity: Improving Assembly Performance, continued

“Strengthening and development of Local Spiritual Assemblies is a vital objective. . . .”

performance, the communities they guide will reflect a pattern of life that will be a credit to the Faith and will, as a welcome consequence, rekindle hope among the increasingly disillusioned members of society.”

Universal House of Justice, Ridván message to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1993.

“Of particular relevance is the attitude that the members adopt towards their membership on that exalted body. There needs to be a recognition on their part of the Assembly’s spiritual character and a feeling in their hearts of respect for the institution based upon a perception of it as something beyond or apart from themselves, as a sacred entity whose powers they have the privilege to engage and canalize* by coming together in harmony and acting in accordance with divinely revealed principles. With such a perspective the members will be able better to acquire an appropriate posture in relation to the Assembly itself, to appreciate their role as Trustees of the Merciful and to counteract any impression that they have assumed ownership and control of the institution in the manner of major stockholders of a business enterprise.”

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

“They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 64.

“Strengthening and development of Local Spiritual Assemblies is a vital objective. . . . Success in this one goal will greatly enrich the quality of Bahá'í life, will heighten the capacity of the Faith to deal with entry by troops which is even now taking place and, above all, will demonstrate the solidarity and ever-growing distinctiveness of the Bahá'í community. . . .”

The Universal House of Justice, Naw-Ruz 1974, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 264.

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

Moving Towards Maturity: Improving Assembly Performance, continued

“Every Local Spiritual Assembly which unitedly strives to grow in maturity and efficiency . . . can add to a growing groundswell of interest in and eventual recognition of the Cause of God. . . .”

“However, the believers should never, for even one moment, lose sight of the fact that the crisis now engulfing every part of the planet is essentially spiritual. . . . Our acute awareness of the magnitude of the misery which so many groups and individuals are experiencing should spur us on to ever-greater exertions, inspired and animated by an abiding consciousness that only through the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can the multitudinous* problems burdening humanity be resolved. . . . The spiritual transformation of humanity, the relief of the diverse peoples of the earth from rampant suffering, the attainment and preservation of true peace in the world, the birth of a world civilization – all such noble objectives of the Cause of God will remain unrealized unless they are associated with that radical change in the structure and functioning of human society inherent in the growth and fruition of His divinely ordained Order.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, January 4, 1994, to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

“Every Local Spiritual Assembly which unitedly strives to grow in maturity and efficiency and encourages its community to fulfill its destiny as a foundation stone of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order can add to a growing groundswell of interest in and eventual recognition of the Cause of God as the sole hope for mankind.”

The Universal House of Justice, dated Ridván, 1985, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 667.

“. . . upon the degree to which the members of these Assemblies grasp the true significance of the divine institution on which they serve, arise selflessly to fulfill their prescribed and sacred duties, and persevere in their endeavors, depends to a large extent the healthy growth of the worldwide community of the Most Great Name, the force of its outward thrust, and the strength of its supporting roots.”

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 25, 1975, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, pp. 308-9.

* **Multitudinous:**
existing in great numbers; having many parts or elements

Distinguishing Features of the Bahá'í Administrative Order

Focus questions

- ★ What features make Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order different from previous religious systems of administration?
- ★ What features make Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order different from previous political systems of administration?

“The Administrative Order . . . is, by virtue of its origin and character, unique in the annals of the world’s religious systems.”

Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 326.

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

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

“. . . this Administrative Order is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designated to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances. Therein lies the secret of its strength, its fundamental distinction, and the guarantee against disintegration and schism. Nowhere in the sacred scriptures of any of the world’s religious systems, nor even in the writings of the Inaugurator of the Bábí Dispensation, do we find any provisions establishing a covenant or providing for an administrative order that can compare in scope and authority with those that lie at the very basis of the Bahá'í Dispensation.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 145.

“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. How could it be otherwise when we remember that this Order constitutes the very pattern of that divine civilization which the almighty Law of Bahá'u'lláh is designed to establish upon earth?”

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

Distinguishing Features of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, continued

“The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God’s immutable Purpose for mankind in this Day.”

“The Administrative Order . . . incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government [democratic, autocratic, and aristocratic], is devoid of the defects which each of them inherently possesses, and blends the salutary* truths which each undoubtedly contains without vitiating* in any way the integrity of the Divine verities on which it is essentially founded. The hereditary authority which the Guardian of the Administrative Order is called upon to exercise, and the right of the interpretation of the Holy Writ solely conferred upon him; the powers and prerogatives* of the Universal House of Justice, possessing the exclusive right to legislate on matters not explicitly revealed in the Most Holy Book; the ordinance exempting its members from any responsibility to those whom they represent, and from the obligation to conform to their views, convictions or sentiments; the specific provisions requiring the free and democratic election by the mass of the faithful of the Body that constitutes the sole legislative organ in the world-wide Bahá'í community – these are among the features which combine to set apart the Order identified with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from any of the existing systems of human government.”

Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 326-27.

“The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God’s immutable* Purpose for mankind in this Day.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 156.

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

- * **salutary:** promoting health; beneficial
- * **vitiate:** impair quality or spoil; debase, corrupt or pervert
- * **prerogative:** exclusive right or privilege
- * **immutable:** unchangeable
- * **economy:** the regulation of the parts and functions of an organic whole; an organized system or method of divine administration