

Participant Handout

*Loving Shepherds
of the Multitudes:*
**Advanced Practice in
Administering Justice -
Focus on Domestic
Violence**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Administering Justice: Focus on Domestic Violence

Overview for Participants

Purpose

- ★ To strengthen the Assembly's ability to apply principles to decision making
- ★ To become familiar with guidance on domestic violence

This workshop provides Assemblies with further opportunities to practice administering justice, focusing on the specific issue of domestic violence. Participants will become familiar with guidance concerning violence and abuse. They will also refine their skills of principle-based decision making through use of case studies. While the content of the subject matter is limited to one area, the skills developed will readily generalize to a wide range of matters coming before an Assembly.

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**.

Appreciating Justice

“The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee.”

“O Son of Spirit! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 2.

“Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 20.

“The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: ‘Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.’ Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 20-21.

“By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 21.

“Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight!”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 21.

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.”

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

“. . . 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, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1996.

“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 of this quickening wind as it ventilates the modes of thought of us all, renewing, clarifying, and amplifying our perspectives as

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

The Call to a New State of Mind, continued

“Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships . . . reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development.”

to the purpose of the Order of Bahá’u’lláh in the wake of humanity’s suffering and turmoil.”

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

“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, January 23, 1995, in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, section III.

“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, July 25, 1984, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 634.

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse

A letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated January 24, 1993

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Further to our letter of 14 November 1991, the Universal House of Justice has now completed its consideration of your letter of 21 September 1991, in which you raised a number of questions pertaining to violence and to the sexual abuse of women and children. We have been instructed to provide the following response to your questions. [1]

As you know, the principle of the oneness of mankind is described in the Bahá'í Writings as the pivot round which all the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve. It has widespread implications which affect and remold all dimensions of human activity. It calls for a fundamental change in the manner in which people relate to each other, and the eradication* of those age-old practices which deny the intrinsic* human right of every individual to be treated with consideration and respect. [2]

Within the family setting, the rights of all members must be respected. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved. . . . [3]

The use of force by the physically strong against the weak, as a means of imposing one's will and fulfilling one's desires, is a flagrant transgression of the Bahá'í Teachings. There can be no justification for anyone compelling another, through the use of force or through the threat of violence, to do that to which the other person is not inclined. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, "O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned." Let those who, driven by their passions or by their inability to exercise discipline in the control of their anger, might be tempted to inflict violence on another human being, be mindful of the condemnation of such disgraceful behavior by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. [4]

- * **Eradicate:** to destroy utterly, exterminate; to pull up by the roots
- * **Intrinsic:** belonging to a thing by its very nature

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“This principle [of the equality of the sexes] . . . has profound implications in all aspects of human relations and must be an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life.”

Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining social order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse. It is essential that the members of the community of the Greatest Name take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence. They must be ever mindful of their obligation to exemplify a new way of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse. [5]

Consultation has been ordained by Bahá’u’lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed, in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured or their views belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse is present. [6]

A number of your questions pertain to the treatment of women, and are best considered in light of the principle of the equality of the sexes which is set forth in the Bahá’í Teachings. This principle is far more than the enunciation* of admirable ideals; it has profound implications in all aspects of human relations and must be an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life. The application of this principle gives rise to changes in habits and practices which have prevailed for many centuries. An example of this is found in the response provided on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a question whether the traditional practice whereby the man proposes marriage to the woman is altered by the Bahá’í Teachings to permit the woman to issue a marriage proposal to the man; the response is, “The Guardian wishes to state that there is absolute equality between the two, and that no distinction or preference is permitted. . . .” With the passage of time, during which Bahá’í men and women endeavor to apply more fully the principle of the equality of the sexes, will come a deeper understanding of the far-reaching ramifications of this vital principle. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated, “Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible.” [7]

* **Enunciate:** to proclaim; to state or declare definitely

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation.”

The Universal House of Justice has in recent years urged that encouragement be given to Bahá’í women and girls to participate in greater measure in the social, spiritual, and administrative activities of their communities, and has appealed to Bahá’í women to arise and demonstrate the importance of their role in all fields of service to the Faith. [8]

For a man to use force to impose his will on a woman is a serious transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. [9]

Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out in response to questions addressed to it that, in a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place. [10]

From the Pen of Bahá’u’lláh Himself has come the following statement on the subject of the treatment of women:

The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God. He, verily, speaketh the truth and commandeth that which benefitteth His servants and handmaidens. He is the Protector of all in this world and the next. [11]

No Bahá’í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment; to do so would be an unacceptable abuse

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“No Bahá’í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment; to do so would be an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.”

of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. [12]

The lack of spiritual values in society leads to a debasement of the attitudes which should govern the relationship between the sexes, with women being treated as no more than objects for sexual gratification and being denied the respect and courtesy to which all human beings are entitled. Bahá’u’lláh has warned: “They that follow their lusts and corrupt inclinations, have erred and dissipated their efforts. They, indeed, are of the lost.” Believers might well ponder the exalted standard of conduct to which they are encouraged to aspire in the statement of Bahá’u’lláh concerning His “true follower,” that: “And if he met the fairest and most comely of women, he would not feel his heart seduced by the least shadow of desire for her beauty. Such an one, indeed, is the creation of spotless chastity. Thus instructeth you the Pen of the Ancient of Days, as bidden by your Lord, the Almighty, the All-Bountiful.” [13]

One of the most heinous* of sexual offenses is the crime of rape. When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community, and she is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so. If she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá’í institutions to marry. As to whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, it is for her to decide on the course of action she should follow, taking into consideration medical and other relevant factors, and in the light of the Bahá’í Teachings. If she gives birth to a child as a result of the rape, it is left to her discretion whether to seek financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father; however, his claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá’í law, be called into question, in view of the circumstances. [14]

The Guardian has clarified, in letters written on his behalf that, “The Bahá’í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse,” and that, “The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established.” In this aspect of the marital relationship, as in all others, mutual consideration and respect should apply. If a Bahá’í woman suffers abuse or is

* **Heinous:** hateful; odious; abominable, totally reprehensible

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out ‘gently and patiently’ and with ‘loving care’”

subjected to rape by her husband, she has the right to turn to the Spiritual Assembly for assistance and counsel, or to seek legal protection. Such abuse would gravely jeopardize the continuation of the marriage, and could lead to a condition of irreconcilable antipathy.* [15]

You have raised several questions about the treatment of children. It is clear from the Bahá’í Writings that a vital component of the education of children is the exercise of discipline. Shoghi Effendi has stated, in a letter on his behalf about the education of children, that:

Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element. The child when born is far from being perfect. It is not only helpless, but actually is imperfect, and even naturally inclined towards evil. He should be trained, his natural inclinations harmonized, adjusted and controlled, and if necessary suppressed or regulated, so as to ensure his healthy physical and moral development. Bahá’í parents cannot simply adopt an attitude of non-resistance towards their children, particularly those who are unruly and violent by nature. It is not even sufficient that they should pray on their behalf. Rather they should endeavor to inculcate,* gently and patiently, into their youthful minds such principles of moral conduct and initiate them into the principles and teachings of the Cause with such tactful and loving care as would enable them to become “true sons of God” and develop into loyal and intelligent citizens of His Kingdom. . . . [16]

While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out “gently and patiently” and with “loving care,” far removed from the anger and violence with which children are beaten and abused in some parts of the world. To treat children in such an abhorrent* manner is a denial of their human rights, and a betrayal of the trust which the weak should have in the strong in a Bahá’í community. [17]

It is difficult to imagine a more reprehensible* perversion of human conduct than the sexual abuse of children, which finds its most debased form in incest. At a time in the fortunes of humanity when, in the words of the Guardian, “The perversion of human nature, the

- * **Antipathy:** repugnance; aversion
- * **Inculcate:** to teach persistently and earnestly
- * **Abhorrent:** abominable, causing repugnance or loathing
- * **Reprehensible:** blameworthy

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“... Bahá’í institutions must be uncompromising and vigilant in their commitment to the protection of the children entrusted to their care, and must not allow either threats or appeals to expediency to divert them from their duty.”

degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves . . . in their worst and most revolting aspects,” and when “the voice of human conscience is stilled,” when “the sense of decency and shame is obscured,” the Bahá’í institutions must be uncompromising and vigilant in their commitment to the protection of the children entrusted to their care, and must not allow either threats or appeals to expediency to divert them from their duty. A parent who is aware that the marriage partner is subjecting a child to such sexual abuse should not remain silent, but must take all necessary measures, with the assistance of the Spiritual Assembly or civil authorities if necessary, to bring about an immediate cessation* of such grossly immoral behavior, and to promote healing and therapy. [18]

Bahá’u’lláh has placed great emphasis on the duties of parents toward their children, and He has urged children to have gratitude in their hearts for their parents, whose good pleasure they should strive to win as a means of pleasing God Himself. However, He has indicated that under certain circumstances, the parents could be deprived of the right of parenthood as a consequence of their actions. The Universal House of Justice has the right to legislate on this matter. It has decided for the present that all cases should be referred to it in which the conduct or character of a parent appears to render him unworthy of having such parental rights as that of giving consent to marriage. Such questions could arise, for example, when a parent has committed incest, or when the child was conceived as a consequence of rape, and also when a parent consciously fails to protect the child from flagrant* sexual abuse. [19]

As humanity passes through the age of transition in its evolution to a world civilization which will be illumined by spiritual values and will be distinguished by its justice and its unity, the role of the Bahá’í community is clear: it must accomplish a spiritual transformation of its members, and must offer to the world a model of the society destined to come into being through the power of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. 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

* **Cessation:** complete ceasing; discontinuance

* **Flagrant:** outrageously noticeable or evident

Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

“... the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity lies not in penalties and punishments, but rather in spiritual education and illumination.”

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. [20]

However, it should be recognized that the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity lies not in penalties and punishments, but rather in spiritual education and illumination. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written:

It is incumbent* upon human society to expend all its forces on the education of the people, and to copiously* water men’s hearts with the sacred streams that pour down from the Realm of the All-merciful, and to teach them the manners of Heaven and spiritual ways of life, until every member of the community of man will be schooled, refined, and exalted to such a degree of perfection that the very committing of a shameful act will seem in itself the direst infliction and most agonizing of punishments, and man will fly in terror and seek refuge in his God from the very idea of crime, as something far harsher and more grievous than the punishment assigned to it. [21]

It is toward this goal that the community of the Greatest Name is striving, aided and reinforced by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit. [22]

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
For Department of the Secretariat

- * **Incumbent:**
obligatory
- * **Copiously:**
abundantly,
plentifully

Focus Questions for Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse

- ★ **All groups** will answer the question from paragraph 2
- ★ **Group 1** will answer questions from paragraphs 3-8
- ★ **Group 2** will answer questions from paragraphs 9-15
- ★ **Group 3** will answer questions from paragraphs 16-22

Numbers in brackets indicate paragraphs of the letter that contain pertinent information.

What is an intrinsic human right of every individual? [2]

What is a “flagrant transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings”? [4]

Can there be any justification for using force or the threat of violence to compel a person to do something he or she is not inclined to do? [4]

Who should be mindful of the condemnation in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh against inflicting violence against another person? [4]
Optional extension: What can such persons do if they still feel they cannot control their behavior?

What are three signs of moral downfall? [5]

Who must not be drawn into acceptance of such practices as violence within the family, degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and sexual abuse? [5]

What degree of care must be taken to avoid being drawn into acceptance of such practices? [5]

What way of life should they exemplify instead? [5]

Success in consultation is unattainable under what conditions? [6]

What principle must be “an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life”? [7]

What is a “serious transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings”? [9]

When should a husband or wife defer to the other? [10]

What is “an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh”? [12]

What are Bahá’í victims of rape entitled to from their community? [14]
Optional extension: How, in practice, could members of a community do this?

What four decisions are left to the judgment of Bahá’í victims of rape? [14]

Focus Questions for Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

Additional questions

Is the father of a child conceived by rape automatically entitled to parental rights under Bahá'í law? [14]

In the sexual aspect of marital life, as in all others, what two qualities should apply? [15]

What rights does a Bahá'í woman have if she suffers abuse or rape by her husband? [15]

If a child is physically disciplined, how should this be carried out? [17]

What characterizes the relationship that the weak should have with the strong in a Bahá'í community? [17] *Optional extension: Who might be considered “the weak” in a Bahá'í community? Who might be considered “the strong” in a Bahá'í community?*

List five characteristics mentioned by Shoghi Effendi that describe the time in which we live. [18]

What is the duty of Bahá'í institutions to the children entrusted to their care? [18] *Optional extension: Describe a concrete example of a threat that could divert a Local Spiritual Assembly from its duty to protect children. Describe a concrete example of an appeal to expediency that could divert a Local Spiritual Assembly from its duty to protect children.*

What is the responsibility of a parent who is aware that a marriage partner is sexually abusing a child? [18]

What should local Assemblies do in cases where the conduct or character of a parent raises questions about his or her parental rights? [19]

Under what circumstances could an individual's parental rights under Bahá'í law be called into question? [19]

What is the dual role of the Bahá'í community as humanity passes through its age of transition? [20]

Focus Questions for Guidance on Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse, continued

Additional questions

What must institutions of the Faith do at those inevitable times when the Bahá'í community is subject to delinquent behavior of members? [20]

What is and is not the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity? [21]

Initial Assembly Steps in Administering Justice

1. Deciding when to initiate action

“The Local Spiritual Assemblies should neither be like private agents prying into the lives of the believers and seeking out their personal problems, nor should they condone glaring disregard of the Holy Laws. Whenever it becomes known that one of the believers is flagrantly disobeying the Teachings of the Faith, whether spiritual, ethical, moral, or administrative, the Assemblies should not allow such a situation to become a source of backbiting among the friends or deteriorate into either the loss of the dignity of the Teachings in the eyes of the Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís, or the eventual inactivity of the believers, as you have observed. The Assemblies, with the encouragement and under the continuous guidance of your National Assembly, should, in the name of protecting the interests of the Faith, themselves initiate action for the solution of the problem, and handle it with love, wisdom, and firmness.”

The Universal House of Justice, November 12, 1965, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities*, 15.4.

2. Gathering information

After learning about a problem that may require action, the Local Spiritual Assembly decides what information it needs, from what sources the information will be obtained, and how it will gather the information. The persons reported to have violated Bahá’í law, created disunity, or broken civil laws must be given the opportunity to present their side of the case.

Once the Assembly determines what questions are to be asked and who is to be contacted, it may request individuals to appear before it, send a representative or representatives (who need not be Assembly members) to meet with the person, or gather information by mail or telephone. Assemblies with large Bahá’í communities have also found it helpful to appoint committees or task forces on personal status to assist them in gathering background information. Since they must receive information of a sensitive nature, members of such committees and task forces should be trustworthy, and able to maintain confidences.

Summary from *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities*, 15.6.

Initial Assembly Steps in Administering Justice, continued

3. Proceeding in the case of resistance

“When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá’í law, irrespective of the consequences in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth. Believers called upon to provide information should, if necessary, be reminded of the responsibility they bear to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts:

‘Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness, progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired.’

“If this ‘holy attribute’ should adorn the behavior of believers toward others, how much more should it characterize statements which a Bahá’í makes to a divinely ordained institution.

“The prospect of a believer’s displaying an attitude of hostility, when being interviewed by a Spiritual Assembly or its representatives who are seeking to determine the facts of a matter, is abhorrent. All believers are strongly enjoined to have the utmost respect for the Assemblies, to cooperate fully with them, and to support their decisions. An Assembly inquiring into a matter should not allow itself to be deterred by the hostility of a believer who is withholding relevant information; it should appeal to him for cooperation, remind him forcefully of his responsibilities and, in extreme cases such as threats made to the investigators, warn him of the administrative consequences of the persistence of his deplorable conduct.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 24, 1991, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities*, 4.11-4.12.

Applying Spiritual and Administrative Principles: Reviewing the Process

The following steps are 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 and the senior institutions.

1. Gather the facts from all relevant sources

This 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.

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. Some principles may be in tension with one another.

4. Apply the principles to the facts in a full, frank and loving discussion

Principles exist in the abstract, outside of particular situations. The job of the Assembly is to apply the principles involved 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

Reviewing the Process, continued

“ . . . 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.”

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, “The Promise of World Peace,” in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, pp. 689-90.

Case Study One: Spousal Abuse

Facts

A Bahá'í woman has called the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly. She and her Bahá'í husband have been married for five years; and they have two children, ages two and four. The woman is upset, saying that her husband has just left the house in a rage and that she doesn't know where he went. She says that they had been having an argument about money that night, and he just blew up, slammed her into the wall, and started hitting her. She says that she thinks that she is all right—her nose has stopped bleeding, but her head and arms still hurt. The children are okay, though, and didn't hear a thing because they were asleep in their bedroom. She states that her husband has become increasingly angry toward her and will be even more upset if he finds out that she has called the Assembly. However, she is fearful that his uncontrolled anger will result in serious harm to her and maybe even her death. She feels that she cannot turn to her family because they all see her husband as a model Bahá'í and usually take his side in things. She feels that she has nowhere else to turn but to the Assembly.

Problem

What action should the Assembly take?

Case Study One, continued

**Principles
involved:**

**Principles applied
to the facts:**

Decision(s):

Case Study Two: Child Abuse

Facts

The Local Spiritual Assembly has received the following letter from the teacher of the 8-9-year-old group in the Bahá'í Sunday school:

Dear Spiritual Assembly,

I hate to burden you with this, but I feel that I need to report a conversation that I overheard between two of the students after my class last Sunday. The class had just been discussing the virtue of honesty. Joe and Sam, both from Bahá'í families, were waiting for their parents in the hall just outside the room that I use. They were talking about whether it was important to be honest in every situation. Joe was arguing that you should always be honest, but Sam didn't agree. Sam said that there were times when he had been honest with his parents about something, and they had hit him. He said that sometimes his Mom gets really mad at some of the things that he and his sister do. When this happens, they get hit or shoved around.

I didn't know what to do when I heard this. Part of me wanted to talk to Sam right away. But then I thought that I might be overreacting if I did so. I certainly don't want to be the cause of disunity in our community. I was paralyzed by indecision. A little while later Sam's mother picked him up, and he seemed happy enough to see her. But I keep thinking, "What if what Sam said to Joe is true? Shouldn't something be done about this situation?" I just don't know, so I've decided to bring the matter to the Assembly's attention and see if you have any guidance that you can offer me.

Problem

What actions should the Assembly take after receiving this letter? What further communications should it have with the teacher? How might the Assembly handle the situation if Sam's parents are members of the Assembly?

Case Study Two, continued

**Principles
involved:**

**Principles applied
to the facts:**

Decision(s):

Case Study Three: Sexual Assault

Facts:

A nineteen-year-old female Bahá'í student at the local college has asked to meet with representatives of the Local Spiritual Assembly. At the meeting she informs the two representatives that three months earlier, when she was on a date with a twenty-three-year-old male Bahá'í student who also attends the college, he forced her to have sexual relations with him. At the time the young woman decided not to press charges against the man; but now she has seen him pressuring other young single women in the community to go out with him, and she is fearful for their safety. Prior to this time the Assembly has received no reports of concern about the man's behavior. In fact, he is perceived by many of the believers in the area to be a devoted and dynamic teacher of the Faith, especially among young adults. When the Assembly's representatives meet with the man to obtain his comments about the young woman's allegations, he admits to "a moment of weakness" and having sexual relations with the woman; but he strongly denies that it was against her wishes. He maintains that their act was by mutual consent, and he cannot imagine why the young woman is now trying to say that he forced himself upon her. He expresses his deep remorse for having violated Bahá'í law and promises to be more vigilant in the future.

Problem:

Given the disparity between the two accounts of what occurred, what guidance might the Local Spiritual Assembly give to each party and to its community?

Case Study Three, continued

**Principles
involved:**

**Principles applied
to the facts:**

Decision(s):

Case Study Four: Spousal Abuse Between Immigrants

Facts:

A female member of the Assembly has befriended an immigrant Bahá'í family that has only been in the United States for six months. The family speaks very limited English. The wife has confided to the Assembly member that she wants to get her driver's license and take English classes but her husband has told her that she cannot do anything without his permission. He has said that she does not need to drive and that he speaks enough English for the family to get by. The Assembly member has observed that the husband appears to be tightly controlling his wife's life by limiting her access to money, transportation, education, and friends. On one occasion the Assembly member noticed that the wife had a black eye. When she asked the wife about this, the wife admitted that her husband had struck her. They had gotten into an argument about the children, and the husband had lost control of himself. The wife explained to the Assembly member that that was just her husband's way. His father had yelled at and hit his wife, and he saw no reason to behave any differently. The husband has told her that the Bahá'í teachings may talk about the equality of men and women, but every household needs a head - and it is the father. Concerned about what is happening within this immigrant family, the Assembly member has sought the Local Spiritual Assembly's guidance.

Problem:

What actions can the Local Spiritual Assembly take to assist both the immigrant couple and the Assembly member who voiced the concerns?

Case Study Four, continued

**Principles
involved:**

**Principles applied
to the facts:**

Decision(s):

Closing Quotations

“Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of my loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”

“O Son of Spirit! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away there from if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”

Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 2.

“The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God. He, verily, speaketh the truth and commandeth that which benefitteth His servants and handmaidens. He is the Protector of all in this world and the next.”

Bahá'u'lláh, in Women, p. 27, #54.

“Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, care for every sick one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one, and shelter those who are overshadowed by fear.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 453.

“As humanity passes through the age of transition in its evolution to a world civilization which will be illumined by spiritual values and will be distinguished by its justice and its unity, the role of the Bahá'í community is clear: it must accomplish a spiritual transformation of its members, and must offer to the world a model of the society destined to come into being through the power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.”

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

Supplemental Readings

The following materials may be helpful to Assemblies as they administer justice in cases involving domestic violence:

Table of Contents

- ★ Violence within Marriage: A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand (Participant Handouts pp. 30-33)
- ★ Warning Signs, adapted from material prepared by Sandy Moravec (Participant Handouts pp. 34-36)
- ★ Suggestions for Helping, from *Domestic Violence: The Facts* (Participant Handouts pp. 37-38)
- ★ Personalized Safety Plan, from *Domestic Violence: The Facts* (Participant Handouts pp. 39-41)
- ★ Thoughts on the Role of the Assembly, from *Some Guidance for Spiritual Assemblies Related to Mental Illness and Its Treatment* (Participant Handouts p. 42)
- ★ Crisis Response Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, adapted from material prepared by Barbara B. Campbell (Participant Handouts pp. 43-44)
- ★ Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, an adaptation by Wilson Ballard of “The Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome” by Dr. Roland Summit (Participant Handouts pp. 45-51)

Violence within Marriage

**A statement by
the National
Spiritual
Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of New
Zealand**

This statement, published in the December 1993-January 1994 issue of New Zealand Bahá'í News, shows how one Bahá'í community is attempting to examine and address the problem of violence in its midst:

Many of the problems that exist within society also exist within the Bahá'í community. Problems do not vanish from our personal lives just because we have “signed up” as Bahá'ís, or have recognized Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age. It isn't enough to acknowledge the Divine Physician. We must apply His remedy.

Violence, wherever it occurs, is abhorred in the Bahá'í Faith. As the overwhelming experience within society and within the Bahá'í community is men's violence to women, this is the perspective of the National Spiritual Assembly in preparing this statement. This cannot be taken as indicating any less serious a view being held on other manifestations of violence.

Violence is especially debilitating and reprehensible when it takes place within what is meant to be the safety of one's own home and the sanctity of marriage.

The man who batters his wife, whether with words, fists or feet, may be an ordinary man, who, in the Bahá'í community, comes to Feast, hosts a Holy Day commemoration, participates in Assembly consultation, and on the way home will scream at and abuse his wife for not supporting his view, for smiling at another man, or for talking privately to one of the women. Any behavior of his wife that he can construe as unsupportive, provocative, or independent, may become the “cause” of an outburst. A man who behaves like this – usually only in private – will often say he “just lost control”. However, the violent, abusive man usually exercises perfect control over himself; he doesn't behave that way to his work-mates, the police, or other members of the community. He keeps himself well controlled until in the privacy of his home, where his wife and children become the victims of his abuse. Such behavior is seldom the result of a disturbed personality and it can be challenged, modified and prevented.

What is the effect for the wife and children of a violent man? The woman becomes increasingly fearful, for that is the intention of

Violence within Marriage, continued

A frightened mother will find, increasingly, that she has to make decisions about the care and well-being of her children which she knows are not good for them, but in an effort to “keep the peace” she will put her violent husband’s demands before the rights and needs of her children.

violence – it is intended to control behavior by producing fear. Such a woman manifests her fear by trying, in turn, to control the environment, so that her husband will have no cause for outbursts. It is a losing battle. The violent, abusive man will always find a reason to express his violence; the house isn’t tidy enough; the children were noisy at Feast; she bought a book without his permission; she was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly.

In addition to trying to control the environment in the home, family and community, the wife of a violent husband will begin to barter her primary responsibility as first educator of their children. In a marriage between equal and mature people, they recognise that the purpose of their marriage is “that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants.” (1) A violent husband is one who insists, overtly through his words, or covertly through his behavior, that his needs come first.

A frightened mother will find, increasingly, that she has to make decisions about the care and well-being of her children which she knows are not good for them, but in an effort to “keep the peace” she will put her violent husband’s demands before the rights and needs of her children.

Often lacking transportation (“Oh, he needs the car tonight”, or “My husband says the car wouldn’t make it to the conference”) and money (“I can’t afford to give to the Fund”), the wife of a violent husband will become increasingly isolated from the Bahá’í Community. If he physically beats her, it will be when the bruises show or she’s too sore to move easily that she retreats from the community. If his violence is verbal and psychological, she will increasingly feel unworthy to participate in Bahá’í activities. His verbal abuse will erode her self-confidence. She will become increasingly preoccupied with him and his needs, and with keeping the peace. She may become forgetful, indifferent to her appearance, fearful of saying or doing the “wrong” thing. She may become suicidal and anxious about her sanity.

The children from a violent home will usually appear subdued, unwilling to take risks, unable to try new things, and lack spontaneity. The boys will often exhibit violent, anti-social behavior in play as they mirror the same-gender role model. The

Violence within Marriage, continued

“In homes where there is violence, sons often grow up to be violent men, and daughters often grow up to be submissive, lacking in self-worth, and end up marrying violent men – thus repeating the cycle.”

girls will often be passive and may be unusually helpful, as they mimic their mother’s pacifying role. As youth they may be particularly rebellious, not only against their families but maybe against the Bahá’í Faith.

In homes where there is violence, sons often grow up to be violent men, and daughters often grow up to be submissive, lacking in self-worth, and end up marrying violent men – thus repeating the cycle.

And what of these violent men in our midst? A few of them know that what they are doing is wrong. They love Bahá’u’lláh and desire with all their hearts to align their lives with His teachings. These men are ashamed of their behavior. They will be grateful for the recognition by the Local Spiritual Assembly of their problem. They will readily acknowledge that they are at fault and eagerly pursue a prescribed course of behavior modification.

Most violent men, however, do not know that what they are doing is wrong. They sincerely believe that everyone else is to blame for their problems. Pointing out to these men that what they are doing is wrong isn’t enough. They will merely find ways of disguising their violence, rather than uprooting it from their lives. In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote: “Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace.” (2)

Husbands who act violently towards their wives and children are the men ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to as tyrants. (3) Kindness to such men only encourages their bad behavior. “Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before.” (4)

At this time in our spiritual evolution, we Bahá’ís are still far more influenced by our culture than we are by the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. It is the responsibility of the parents within the family, of the local Assembly within the Bahá’í community, and the Bahá’í communities within society, to create an environment in which men’s violence within the family is unacceptable and untolerated.

The Universal House of Justice has stated that: “No husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical.”

Violence within Marriage, continued

“The abuse by husbands of their wives is kept hidden in our Bahá’í communities because of a powerful combination of influences. . . .”

The abuse by husbands of their wives is kept hidden in our Bahá’í communities because of a powerful combination of influences such as isolation; violence which is glorified, amplified and sensationalized by the media; “ownership” of family members; the idea that family violence is between two equals rather than the reality of one weaker partner; economic dependence; and lack of police, legal or community protection. The idea of protection of the Faith has, unfortunately, occasionally been used by well-meaning believers to avoid dealing with violence within a marriage.

Now is the time to face the issue of violence in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. Violence in the Bahá’í community needs to be addressed as it stunts the growth of the human resources of the Faith. It inhibits the proper functioning of our institutions.

Many institutions within New Zealand have recently taken up the challenge not only to address violence, but also to develop policies and procedures by which women can seek help. This will enable women to take their full place within society. Thus it is timely for the National Spiritual Assembly to respond to a need within the Bahá’í community by providing guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies. Assemblies will be called upon to provide guidance to men and women within their communities who need protection, challenge, and support for change.

The National Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members stand ready to support Local Spiritual Assemblies and the believers at large in their efforts to courageously address and to progressively eliminate the violence from our midst.

Footnotes:

1. Bahá’u’lláh, in *Bahá’í Prayers*, 1954 edition, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States. p. 105.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, cited in *Bahá’í World Faith*, 1943 edition, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’í of the United States, p. 445.
3. Tyrant: “Person exercising power or authority arbitrarily or cruelly.” Concise Oxford Dictionary.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 1978 edition, p. 158.
5. Universal House of Justice, in *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, December 1990, #46. Also in *The Compilation of Compilations*, p. 459, # 2347

Warning Signs

“Warning signs often precede domestic violence, but they may go unnoticed. . . .”

Warning signs often precede domestic violence, but they may go unnoticed, both by those unwilling to consider that they may be involved in an abusive relationship and by local Spiritual Assemblies, whose members are generally not trained to work with situations involving domestic violence.

The lists below, adapted from materials developed by Sandy Moravec, a psychotherapist and certified domestic violence counselor, highlight behaviors that suggest a controlling or potentially dangerous situation. Behaviors *in italics* suggest the need for immediate help.

These behaviors suggest a controlling relationship:

- ★ Your partner continually monitors your time and makes you account for every minute (when you run errands, visit friends, commute to work, etc.).
- ★ Your partner accuses you of having affairs with other men (or women) or acts suspicious that you are.
- ★ Your partner is rude to your friends.
- ★ Your partner calls you names or curses at you.
- ★ Your partner belittles you for your race, age, gender, education, abilities, or ideas.
- ★ Your partner discourages you from starting new friendships.
- ★ You feel isolated and alone, as if there is nobody close to confide in.
- ★ Your partner tells you that you’ll never “make it” without him/her, or that no one would ever want you.
- ★ Your partner is overly critical of daily things such as your clothes, your appearance, your cooking, etc.
- ★ Your partner demands a strict account of how you spend money.
- ★ Your partner has threatened to call the police, or your family, or your boss, or Social Services if you disagree or refuse to go along with what he/she wants.
- ★ Your partner has blocked your freedom of movement, i.e. blocking a doorway, taking your keys, taking your distributor cap, etc.

Warning Signs, continued

Behaviors in *italics* suggest the need for immediate help.

- ★ Your partner is disturbed by your working or by the thought of you working.
- ★ Your partner pressures you for sex much more often than you'd like.
- ★ Your partner becomes angry if you don't want to go along with his/her requests for sex.
- ★ *Your partner has threatened to take the kids so that you'll never see them again.*
- ★ Your partner has played "mind games" or made you think you were crazy.
- ★ Your partner has treated you like a servant.
- ★ Your partner has "gotten in your face" (yelling or threatening 2 or 3 inches from your nose) when angry.

These behaviors suggest a dangerous or potentially dangerous situation:

- ★ Your partner's moods change radically, from very calm to very angry.
- ★ Your partner has gotten out weapons (guns, knives, etc.) to look at, to clean, or to play with when you are having an argument.
- ★ Your partner has physically restrained you.
- ★ Your partner becomes angry more easily if he/she drinks or uses drugs.
- ★ *You have had to leave your home because you were frightened of your partner's behavior.*
- ★ Your partner blames you for his/her own acts of violence.
- ★ *Your partner has struck you with his/her hands or feet (slap, punch, kick, etc.).*
- ★ *Your partner has struck you with an object.*
- ★ *Your partner has threatened you with an object or weapon.*
- ★ *Your partner has threatened to kill himself/herself or you.*
- ★ *Your partner is obsessed with you, unwilling to let you go.*
- ★ Your partner follows you to work, to school, or repeatedly calls to check on where you are.
- ★ *There are holes in your walls, doors off hinges, or telephones ripped out of the wall caused by your partner*

Warning Signs, continued

Behaviors in italics suggest the need for immediate help.

- ★ *Your partner has given you visible injuries such as welts, bruises, cuts, lumps on the head.*
- ★ *You have had to treat with first aid an injury from his/her violence.*
- ★ *You have had to seek professional aid at a medical clinic, doctor's office, or hospital emergency room for an injury caused by your partner.*
- ★ *Your partner has hurt you sexually or forced you to have intercourse.*
- ★ *Your partner is violent toward children.*
- ★ *Your partner has choked you or pulled you by your hair.*
- ★ Your partner has been violent toward people outside your home and family.
- ★ *Your partner has thrown you, or tried to throw you, down, or into a wall, or into a kitchen counter, etc.*
- ★ *Your partner has twisted your arm, tripped you, or bit you.*
- ★ *Your partner has attacked the sexual parts of your body.*
- ★ Your partner has hurt or threatened to hurt pets.
- ★ Your partner has intentionally destroyed your property.
- ★ Your partner throws objects or breaks things when angry.
- ★ Your partner has been in trouble with the police.
- ★ *Your partner has said that if he/she can't have you, no one else will.*
- ★ You have called the police or tried to call them because you felt you or other members of your family were in danger.

Suggestions for Helping

Here are some basic steps you can take to assist someone who may be a target of domestic violence:

Do you know someone in a battering relationship? Do you suspect that a friend, relative, or someone you know is being abused? If so, don't be afraid to offer help – you just might save someone's life. Here are some basic steps you can take to assist someone who may be a target of domestic violence:

Approach your friend in an understanding, non-blaming way. Tell her/him that s/he is not alone, that there are people like her/him in the same kind of situation, and that it takes strength to survive and trust someone enough to talk about battering.

Acknowledge that it is scary and difficult to talk about domestic violence. Tell this person that s/he doesn't deserve to be threatened, hit or beaten. Nothing a person can do or say makes the abuser's violence OK.

Share information. Discuss the dynamics of violence and how abuse is based on power and control.

Support this person as a friend. Be a good listener. Encourage her/him to express her/his hurt and anger. Allow the person to make her/his own decisions, even if it means not being ready to leave the abusive relationship.

Ask if your friend has suffered physical harm. Go with her/him to the hospital to check for injuries. Help report the assault to the police, if s/he chooses to do so.

Provide information on help available to battered women, men, and their children, including social services, emergency shelter, counseling services, and legal advice. To find this information, call local listings in the Yellow Pages under Social and Human Services.

Inform your friend about legal protection that is available in most states under abuse prevention laws. Go with her/him to district, probate, or superior court to get a protective order to prevent further harassment by the abuser. If you can't go, find someone who can.

Suggestions for Helping, continued

Additional basic steps:

Plan safe strategies for leaving an abusive relationship. These are often called “safety plans.” Never encourage someone to follow a safety plan that the person believes will put her/him at further risk. And remember that your friend may not feel comfortable taking these materials with her/him.

(from *Domestic Violence: The Facts*, by Peace at Home. Used with permission)

Personalized Safety Plan

Suggestions for increasing safety while still in the relationship:

- ★ I will have important phone numbers available to my children and myself. (see below)
- ★ I can tell _____ and _____ about the violence and ask them to call the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from my home.
- ★ If I leave my home, I can go (list four places):

- ★ I can leave extra money, car keys, clothes, and copies of documents with _____.
- ★ If I leave, I will bring _____.
(see checklist below)
- ★ To ensure safety and independence, I can: keep change for phone calls with me at all times; open my own savings account; rehearse my escape route with a support person; and review safety plan on _____(date).

Personalized Safety Plan, continued

Suggestions for increasing safety when the relationship is over:

- ★ I can: change the locks; install steel/metal doors, a security system, smoke detectors and an outside lighting system.
- ★ I will inform _____ and _____ that my partner no longer lives with me and ask them to call the police if s/he is observed near my home or my children.
- ★ I will tell people who take care of my children the names of those who have permission to pick them up.
- ★ The people who have permission are:
_____,
_____ and
_____.
- ★ I can tell _____ at work about my situation and ask _____ to screen my calls.
- ★ I can avoid stores, banks, and _____ that I used when living with my battering partner.
- ★ I can obtain a protective order from _____. I can keep it on or near me at all times as well as leave a copy with _____.
- ★ If I feel down and ready to return to a potentially abusive situation, I can call _____ for support or attend workshops and support groups to gain support and strengthen my relationships with other people.

Personalized Safety Plan, continued

Suggestions for increasing safety:

Important Phone Numbers

Police _____
Hotline _____
Friends _____
Shelter _____

Items to Take Checklist

- ___ Identification
- ___ Birth certificates for me and my children
- ___ Social Security cards
- ___ School and medical records
- ___ Money, bankbooks, credit cards
- ___ Keys - house/car/office
- ___ Driver's license and registration
- ___ Medications
- ___ Change of clothes
- ___ Welfare identification
- ___ Passport(s), Green Card(s), work permits
- ___ Divorce papers
- ___ Lease/rental agreement, house deed
- ___ Mortgage payment book, current unpaid bills
- ___ Insurance papers
- ___ Address book
- ___ Pictures, jewelry, items of sentimental value
- ___ Children's favorite toys and/or blankets

(from *Domestic Violence: The Facts*, by Peace at Home. Used with permission)

Thoughts on the Role of the Assembly

“When a strong and decisive intervention is called for . . . the Spiritual Assembly may face growth-producing challenges to its own functioning as an institution.”

“When a strong and decisive intervention is called for, as in instances of family violence or child abuse, the Spiritual Assembly may face growth-producing challenges to its own functioning as an institution. Unaccustomed to intervening decisively in the lives of the friends, some Spiritual Assemblies may feel reluctant to take the risk of alienating a believer accused of violence or abuse. This is particularly true if the accused is a member of the Assembly. It would be wise, however, to take seriously all reports of rape, sexual abuse or violence and to support and encourage the victim to ask for an official investigation of such matters, trusting that such an inquiry, while threatening, is far less serious than the consequence of neglect of such a matter.

“At the same time, the Assembly should remember that an accusation in itself does not constitute the assurance of guilt of the accused. The Assembly should take strong steps to be emotionally and spiritually supportive of the accused, as well as the alleged victim. If both the accuser and the accused are members of the Bahá’í community, the Assembly must be alert to the divisive effects the accusation and investigation can have on the community. Reassurance and impartial support may be a vital role of the Assembly.

“A steadfast adherence to Bahá’í principles, a careful attention to impartiality, a union of consultation with compassion, and a commitment to confidentiality and the avoidance of even a hint of gossip will protect the Assembly as it undertakes such challenging matters. Should the Assembly find itself intimidated by addressing such a matter when it involves its own members, it might consider asking the assistance of the Auxiliary Board member in their area who has the most experience in assisting Assemblies in handling such delicate matters. Regardless of how it chooses to handle the question, however, in such a case, the Spiritual Assembly is responsible to God to offer protection to those who require it and to require justice of those who claim to believe in Bahá’u’lláh.”

(Mary K. Radpour, *Some Guidance for Spiritual Assemblies Related to Mental Illness and Its Treatment*, pp. 22-23, ©1999, Images International, Chattanooga, TN. Used with permission.)

Crisis Response Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies

These guidelines may assist an Assembly secretary or other individual who answers the Bahá'í phone in a local community

The following is intended to assist an Assembly secretary or other individual who answers the Bahá'í phone in a local community face the responsibility of responding to a crisis call. Spiritual Assemblies may modify these guidelines to better suit local needs as an aspect of developing their own response plans.

What to do

- 1) **Without making a judgment, assume that the caller is telling the truth.**
- 2) **Find out if there is any immediate danger.** Ask: *“Is anyone in any immediate danger?”*
 - a) **If the answer is yes, encourage the person to call 911 or the local police right away.** It is best if the caller makes the call. Have the number for the police at hand to give out if 911 is not available in your area.
 - b) **If the caller seems reluctant or hesitant, offer to call on her or his behalf.** *“Would you like me to call the police for you?”* If the answer is yes, find out where the person is calling from and how to get there, as well as the caller’s name and phone number, if you do not know. Immediately relay that information to the local police. **DO NOT** go to the home or location yourself.
- 3) **Determine the immediate needs of the caller.** Ask such questions as: *“Are you safe? Can you talk now?” “Do you need medical help?” “Do you need immediate help, such as a safe place to go and the means to get there or a place where you can make phone calls safely?” “Do you need someone to help take care of the children?”*
- 4) **Find out if the call is for the Assembly.** Ask: *“Are you calling to bring this to the attention of the Assembly or to talk to me personally?” “Do you want to meet with the Assembly?”* If it is a personal contact, follow the guidance in the “Role of Individual” section of the *Supplement*.
- 5) **Respond to the call in a calm, assertive, and supportive manner.** *“You were right to bring this to the attention of the Assembly, and it took courage to do it. No one has the right to abuse anyone.”* Do not express shock or disbelief, as these responses may discourage the person from contacting the Assembly again or reinforce his or her sense of embarrassment, shame, or feeling of responsibility for the abuse.
- 6) **Find out whether the person wants help and what he or she wants help with.** Use open-ended questions and let the caller speak without interruption. Ask such questions as: *“What prompted you to call?” “Would you like to tell me about what happened?” “How do you think the Assembly can help?”*
- 7) **If there is screaming or other indications of violence at any time during the call,** ask: *“Is everyone all right?” “Do you want me to call the police for you?”* If the answer is yes, respond as in 2b above.
- 8) **Provide information or referrals as needed.** A local referral list should be part of the Assembly’s plan. *“The Assembly has instructed me to maintain a file of information on legal, medical, welfare, and shelter services available, as well as a list of friends who would be glad to accompany you. Please let me know what would be helpful to you.”* (Refer to “Safety First” in the “Protect the Abused” section of the *Supplement*.)

Crisis Response Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, continued

These guidelines may assist an Assembly secretary or other individual who answers the Bahá'í phone in a local community

- 9) **Assure the caller of the confidentiality of information pertaining to the call.** *“The Assembly will keep this information confidential to the extent the law allows.” “Does [name of the alleged abuser] have a close friend or relative on the Assembly?”*
- 10) **Assure the caller that the Assembly will pray for everyone involved.**
- 11) **Inform the caller of actions that the Assembly will be taking on his or her behalf.** *“The Assembly is meeting Sunday and will consult on this. I will call you with more information on Monday.” “The Assembly will arrange a contact liaison for you and will let you know who that will be.”*
- 12) **Arrange promptly for a contact person** to serve as a liaison between the Assembly and the caller.
- 13) **Make a report to the Assembly.** However, if the alleged abuser, or a relative or close friend of the alleged abuser, is a member of the Assembly, the person receiving the call should contact the National Assembly for advice rather than reporting directly to the Assembly. (Refer to “When Alleged Abuser is Assembly Member” in the “Role and Responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assemblies: General Considerations.” section of the *Supplement*)

How to do it

- ★ Listen patiently and compassionately. Treat the caller with courtesy, respect, love and kindness. Recognize that each person responds differently to crisis.
- ★ Listen carefully to the caller’s story. Restate, clarify, and ask open-ended questions.
- ★ Ask questions and note the caller’s responses instead of giving answers. If there are answers the Assembly needs to provide, it will do so later.
- ★ Note any commitments or promises made and follow up on them.

How not to do it

- ★ Don’t blame, judge, or criticize the caller.
- ★ Don’t make decisions for the caller or tell him or her what to do. These are decisions for individuals to make, and our personal ideas should not be imposed on them. Only the abused party can decide whether to leave or stay in an abusive situation and may not wish to involve civil authorities.
- ★ Don’t hurry the caller’s decision process.
- ★ Don’t make promises you or the Assembly can’t keep.

Caution: While an Assembly should be prepared to do everything possible to ensure the safety of everyone involved in any domestic violence situation that comes to its attention, it should not attempt to set up a crisis hotline or response unit, as those are not its functions, nor should it place other members of the community in danger by attempting to intervene directly in a crisis situation.

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse

Sexual abuse tends to present the most extreme examples of the dynamics involved for a child who is subject to abuse. These dynamics also apply to other forms of child abuse as well.

Sexual abuse tends to present the most extreme examples of the dynamics involved for a child who is subject to abuse. These dynamics also apply to other forms of child abuse as well, though they are often less obvious. This article is an adaptation by Wilson Ballard of “The Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome” by Dr. Roland C. Summit. Quotations cited are from Dr. Summit’s essay published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Volume 7, pp. 177-193, 1983.

1. The child is helpless.

This helplessness has two dimensions. First, the child depends upon his caregivers to defend him bodily. More importantly, the child depends upon his caregivers to teach him how to understand his experience. He is very dependent upon what his caregivers say and do not say.

Child abuse involves at least the second aspect, and often the first as well.

2. The child will be told to keep the abuse secret.

“Initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, helplessness, and self-blame depend upon a terrifying reality of child sexual abuse: It happens only when the child is alone with the offending adult, and it must never be shared with anyone else.

“Virtually no child is prepared for the possibility of molestation by a trusted adult; that possibility is a well kept secret even among adults. The child is, therefore, entirely dependent on the intruder for whatever reality is assigned to the experience. Of all the inadequate, illogical, self-serving, or self-protective explanations provided by the adult, the only consistent and meaningful impression gained by the child is one of danger and fearful outcome based on secrecy.

- ★ ‘This is our secret; nobody else will understand.’
- ★ ‘Don’t tell anybody.’
- ★ ‘Nobody will believe you.’
- ★ ‘Don’t tell your mother; (a) she will hate you, (b) she will hate me, (c) she will kill you, (d) she will kill me, (e) it will kill her, (f) she will send you away, (g) she will send me away, or (h) it will break up the family and you will end up in an orphanage.’

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety: ‘Everything will be all right if you just don’t tell.’”

- ★ ‘If you tell anyone (a) I won’t love you anymore, (b) I’ll spank you, (c) I’ll kill your dog, or (d) I’ll kill you.’

“However gentle or menacing the intimidation may be, the secrecy makes it clear to the child that this is something bad and dangerous. The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety: ‘Everything will be all right if you just don’t tell.’ The secret takes on magical, monstrous proportions for the child. A child with no knowledge or awareness of sex and even with no pain or embarrassment from the sexual experience itself will still be stigmatized with a sense of badness and danger from the pervasive secrecy.

“Any attempts by the child to illuminate the secret will be countered by an adult conspiracy of silence and disbelief.

- ★ ‘Don’t worry about things like that: that could never happen in our family.’
- ★ ‘Nice children don’t talk about things like that.’
- ★ ‘Uncle Johnnie doesn’t mean you any harm; that’s just his way of showing how much he loves you.’
- ★ ‘How could you ever think of such a terrible thing?’
- ★ ‘Don’t let me ever hear you say anything like that again!’

“The average child never asks and never tells. Contrary to the general expectation that the victim would normally seek help, the majority of the victims in retrospective surveys had never told anyone during their childhood. Respondents expressed fear that they would be blamed for what had happened or that a parent would not be able to protect them from retaliation. Many of those who sought help reported that parents became hysterical or punishing or pretended that nothing had happened.

“Yet adult expectation dominates the judgment applied to disclosures of sexual abuse. When the child does not immediately complain, it is painfully apparent to any child that there is no second chance.

- ★ ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
- ★ ‘How could you keep such a thing secret?’
- ★ ‘Why did you wait until now if it really happened so long ago?’
- ★ ‘How can you expect me to believe such a fantastic story?’

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Unless the victim can find some permission and power to share the secret and unless there is a possibility of an engaging, non-punitive response to disclosure, the child is likely to spend a lifetime in what comes to be a self-imposed exile from intimacy, trust, and self-validation.”

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3. The child accommodates to survive.

Abuse is not typically a one-time event. On the physical level, especially in cases involving primary caregivers, accommodating abuse usually means enduring it.

On the psychological level the child must incorporate the abuse into his understanding of human relationships. Dependent and helpless, the child understands what it is to be human through his parents and primary caregivers. He has no basis for recognizing that his parent could act inhumanly towards him. If he should suffer inhuman treatment from his parent, recognizing and forgiving this reality may well be a life-long struggle.

“The only acceptable alternative for the child is to believe that she has provoked the painful encounters and to hope that by learning to be good she can earn love and acceptance. The desperate assumption of responsibility and the inevitable failure to earn relief set the foundation for self-hate. . . .”

“The sexually abusing parent provides graphic example and instruction in how to be good, that is, the child must be available without complaint to the parent’s sexual demands. There is an explicit or implicit promise of rewards. If she is good and if she keeps the secret, she can

- ★ protect her siblings from sexual involvement (‘It’s a good thing I can count on you to love me; otherwise I’d have to turn to your little sister’)
- ★ protect her mother from disintegration (‘If your mother ever found out, it would kill her’)
- ★ protect her father from temptation (‘If I couldn’t count on you, I’d have to hang out in bars and look for other women’)
- ★ preserve the security of the home (‘If you ever tell, they could send me to jail and put all you kids in an orphanage’)

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“There is an inevitable splitting of conventional moral values. Maintaining a lie to keep the secret is the ultimate virtue, while telling the truth is the greatest sin.”

“In the classic role reversal of child abuse, the child is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together. The child, *not the parent*, must mobilize the altruism and self-control to insure the survival of the others. The child, in short, must secretly assume many of the role-functions ordinarily assigned to the mother.

“There is an inevitable splitting of conventional moral values. Maintaining a lie to keep the secret is the ultimate virtue, while telling the truth is the greatest sin.”

A child entrapped in a continuous cycle of abuse is under severe pressure to find a way to keep some hope of goodness alive:

- ★ “She may turn to imaginary companions for reassurance.
- ★ She may develop multiple personalities, assigning helplessness and suffering to one, badness and rage to another, sexual power to another, love and compassion to another, etc.
- ★ She may discover altered states of consciousness to shut off pain or to dissociate from her body, as if looking on from a distance at the child suffering the abuse.

“The same mechanisms which allow psychic survival for the child become handicaps . . . as an adult.

“If the child [does not find a way to reconcile] the continuing outrage, the intolerance of helplessness and the increasing feeling of rage will seek active expression. For the girl this often leads to self-destruction and reinforcement of self-hate: self-mutilation, suicidal behavior, promiscuous sexual activity and repeated runaways are typical. . . . She may fight with both parents, but her greatest rage is likely to focus on her mother, whom she blames for abandoning her to her father. She assumes that her mother must know of the sexual abuse and is either too uncaring or too ineffectual to intervene. Ultimately the child tends to believe that she is intrinsically so rotten that she was never worth caring for. . . . [She may become] all the more dependent on the pathetic hope of gaining acceptance and protection with an abusive male. . . .

“The male victim of sexual abuse is more likely to turn his rage outward in aggressive and antisocial behavior. He is even more intolerant of his helplessness than the female victim and more

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Most ongoing sexual abuse is never disclosed, at least outside the immediate family. Treated, reported, or investigated cases are the exception, not the norm.”

likely to rationalize that he is exploiting the relationship for his own benefit. . . . Various admixtures of depression, counterphobic violence, misogyny (again, the mother is seen as non-caring and unprotective), child molestation, and rape seem to be part of the legacy of rage endowed in the sexually abused boy.

“It is worth restating that all these accommodation mechanisms – domestic martyrdom, splitting of reality, altered consciousness, hysterical phenomena, delinquency, sociopathy, projection of rage, even self-mutilation – are part of the survival skills of the child. They can be overcome only if the child can be led to trust in a secure environment which can provide consistent, *noncontingent* acceptance and caring. In the meantime, anyone working therapeutically with the child (or the grown-up, still shattered victim) may be tested and provoked to prove that trust is impossible, and that the only secure reality is negative expectations and self-hate.”

While the Bahá’í community is not responsible for providing therapy to its members, it is worth considering its role as a “secure environment which can provide consistent, *noncontingent* acceptance and caring.” Consider the following quotation on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

“The people of the world not only need the laws and principles of the Bahá’í Faith – they desperately need to see the love that is engendered by it in the hearts of its followers, and to partake of that atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, forbearance and active kindness which should be the hall-mark of a Bahá’í Community.” (*Lights of Guidance*, 5th ed, p. 405, #1345)

4. If the force of the secret is strong, disclosure by the child will be delayed, conflicted, and unconvincing to those who hear it.

“Most ongoing sexual abuse is *never* disclosed, at least outside the immediate family. Treated, reported, or investigated cases are the exception, not the norm.”

“Contrary to popular myth most mothers are not aware of ongoing sexual abuse. . . .

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Unless they are especially trained, adults hearing such a disclosure are inclined not to believe it.”

“Of the minority of incest secrets that are disclosed to the mother or discovered by the mother, very few are subsequently reported to outside agencies. The mother will either disbelieve the complaint or try to negotiate a resolution within the family.”

“The victim of incestuous abuse tends to remain silent until she enters adolescence when she becomes capable of demanding a more separate life for herself and challenging the authority of her parents.”

Except in cases involving incidental discovery by third parties, or sensitive outreach and education by professionals, such as child protective services, disclosure of an abuse secret is typically an impulsive act of an adolescent angered in a family fight by a parent’s infliction of a humiliating punishment: “After an especially punishing family fight and a belittling showdown of authority by the father, the girl is finally driven by anger to let go of the secret.”

Unless they are especially trained, adults hearing such a disclosure are inclined not to believe it:

- ★ They expect children to behave obediently and lovingly towards their caregivers, and are especially repelled if expressions of rage accompany the disclosure.
- ★ They do not believe that an apparently normal parent, often a respected member of the community, would be capable of such abuse, and they are likely to identify with what they see as a parent’s attempt to cope with a rebellious teenager.
- ★ The context of the family fight that motivated the disclosure suggests that the child may be fabricating the story to retaliate for a punishment. This idea has additional credence if in general the child shows a pattern of unruly, self-destructive behavior that is unattractive and seems to justify the parent’s resort to punishment. On the other hand, it also has additional credence if a punishment that appears exaggerated or extreme seems to explain why a child would be motivated to retaliate against a parent with a fictitious allegation of abuse.
- ★ They do not believe that a normal child would not have reported the abuse when it began, typically years earlier. This idea has additional credence if in general the child shows a pattern of orderly behavior that is attractive and looks “normal.”

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Unless there is special support for the child and immediate intervention to force responsibility on the father, the girl will follow the ‘normal’ course and retract her complaint.”

In short, whatever the scenario of facts, adults without training in the underlying dynamics from the child’s point of view tend to disbelieve the disclosure.

5. The child’s disclosures are likely to be retracted.

“Beneath the anger of impulsive disclosure remains the ambivalence of guilt and the martyred obligation to preserve the family. In the chaotic aftermath of disclosure, the child discovers that the bedrock fears and threats underlying the secrecy are true. Her father abandons her and calls her a liar. Her mother does not believe her or [falls apart in] hysteria and rage. The family is fragmented, and all the children are placed in custody. The father is threatened with disgrace and imprisonment. The girl is blamed for causing the whole mess, and everyone seems to treat her like a freak. She is interrogated about all the tawdry details and encouraged to incriminate her father, yet the father remains unchallenged, remaining at home in the security of the family. She is held in custody with no apparent hope of returning home if the dependency petition is sustained.”

“Unless there is special support for the child and immediate intervention to force responsibility on the father, the girl will follow the ‘normal’ course and retract her complaint. The girl ‘admits’ she made up the story:

‘I was awful mad at my Dad for punishing me. He hit me and said I could never see my boyfriend again. I’ve been really bad for years and nothing seems to keep me from getting into trouble. Dad had plenty of reason to be mad at me. But I got real mad and just had to find some way of getting out of that place. So I made up this story about him fooling around with me and everything. I didn’t mean to get everyone in so much trouble.’

“This simple lie carries more credibility than the most explicit claims of incestuous entrapment.”