

Decentralization

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DECENTRALIZATION:

A MEMO FROM THE RESEARCH OFFICE

THE HISTORY OF DECENTRALIZATION.

Decentralization in the Baha'i community, in one sense, can be traced back to the establishment of the first national committees, for at that point authority of the National Spiritual Assembly was being channeled to other bodies under its jurisdiction. A more important instance in decentralization was the establishment of regional teaching committees (RTCs), starting in the 1930s. These were under the jurisdiction of the National Teaching Committee and constituted one of the NTC's most important responsibilities (and one of its most important reasons for being). The establishment of Regional Teaching and Administrative Committees, in a sense, represents an augmentation and continuation of the earlier RTCs, except the House of Justice has said that RTACs are not under the jurisdiction of the NTC. State Baha'i Councils appear to be a bit more autonomous than RTACs--for example, they are elected by the members of local spiritual assemblies rather than being nominated by them and appointed by the NSA--but represent a direction the House of Justice appears to have discouraged in the United States.

ISSUES OF DECENTRALIZATION.

The existing guidance from the Guardian and House of Justice clarify many aspects of decentralization. Other aspects have been left to the NSA to decide.

ULTIMATE AUTHORITY.

In all cases, ultimate responsibility rests with the National Spiritual Assembly, which may grant more authority to any of its committees or take authority from them, and may create or disband them, as it determines through consultation.

TEACHING AND CONSOLIDATION WORK.

Fostering the teaching and consolidation work locally are the main reasons RTACs should be created, according to the June 27, 1994 letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. This work could include the following: appointing district teaching committees to operate within portions of the RTAC area; appointing regional and district youth committees; appointing regional and district minority teaching committees; appointing regional and district deepening committees. Rather than appointing committees, presumably the RTAC could establish networks of individuals, or foster creation of teaching institutes with specific tasks.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES.

This is a task specified in the June 27, 1994 letter. Possibly RTACs could coordinate LSA training. More importantly, RTACs must work through LSAs, encouraging them to take on added responsibility and assisting them to carry

out their new duties. If RTACs are very active and strong it is conceivable LSAs would avoid taking on tasks, making the local Baha'is dependent on the RTAC for many services. Much thought needs to go into the terms of reference of the RTACS so as to prevent them from weakening LSAs.

FUNDS.

RTACs obtain their funding two ways: from the National Fund directly, and from the friends in their area. State Baha'i Councils are to encourage support for the Baha'i Funds and presumably this is true of RTACs as well; thus fund education, conceivably, could be one of their responsibilities.

ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS.

The June 24, 1994 letter specified that State Baha'i Councils deal "with administrative matters, including the appointment of state committees for teaching or other functions which are assigned by the National Spiritual Assembly." The letter specified that RTACs "may also undertake some administrative tasks" such as arranging district conventions. The letter specifies that neither body has authority to remove administrative rights, though they may be empowered to make such recommendations. The letter provides little other guidance about the administrative work of RTACs. The letters of the Guardian, also, give only very general guidance about the evils of overcentralization or excessive decentralization. The Research Office has not yet found specific examples that are relevant to the question of what authority should be devolved to RTACs.

SIZE OF AREA OF JURISDICTION OF RTAC, AND THE NUMBER OF RTACS.

An essential concern to address is how many RTACs to establish, and how large their areas of jurisdiction should be. If the RTACs are few and their areas large, they are only marginally more useful than the National Center itself. It is of little benefit to the Baha'is in western Pennsylvania to telephone the Northeastern U.S. RTAC in New York City (if that is where its headquarters were located) than to call Wilmette. Furthermore, the requirement that local spiritual assembly members "propose confidentially" the names of potential members of RTACs dictates that the area of jurisdiction of the RTAC be relatively small. To take western Pennsylvania as an example again, the nine members of the Spiritual Assembly of Pittsburgh might have a good idea who should serve on a western Pennsylvania RTAC; they might have some idea which friends in eastern Pennsylvania could serve on a Pennsylvania-wide RTAC; but they would have little idea who is qualified to serve on an RTAC for the entire Northeastern U.S.

This suggests that the task of creating RTACs in the United States is more complicated than the task in Canada or Great Britain, for the number of RTACs that must be created is much larger (perhaps 30 to 100). If RTACs were phased in over several years, the National Spiritual Assembly could select certain areas where an RTAC should be established and use it as a pilot project to launch the effort. Other regions might then volunteer to be selected for RTACs. It might be wise not to use state boundaries for the RTAC boundaries, for creating state RTACs might foster a feeling that in the future each state will

have its own NSA.

IMPACT ON NTC.

The establishment of RTACs undercuts some of the raison d'etre of a National Teaching Committee. RTACs report to the NSA directly, not to the NTC, though perhaps the House of Justice would agree to a change of policy in the case of the United States. Presumably the NTC would be reduced to an advisory committee, providing the National Assembly with new thinking about directions that teaching could go.

OVERSIGHT OF RTACS.

The creation of RTACs will necessitate the creation of an oversight mechanism, especially if the RTACs have considerable authority. This may mean staff at the National Center will have to be reshuffled--or new staff will have to be hired--to oversee the RTACs.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS.

Because of the need to preserve confidentiality, this report was prepared without input from David Rouleau or Kenneth Bowers, both of whom have considerable experience related to the subject of decentralization. A possible next step may be to ask the two of them and myself to serve as a three-person task force to refine the enclosed. There may be additional guidance about the responsibilities of DTCs that would be relevant to decentralization. An important next step would be to obtain letters from the Baha'i World Centre to other National Spiritual Assemblies regarding decentralization.

Appendix One: Administrative Tasks to Decentralize

The following list is based on the list of committees given by Guardian in God Passes By. It has been supplemented by a few tasks that have developed since 1944.

Coordination of Teaching

Publishing of local pamphlets and statements Race Unity

Youth

Public Meetings Child Education Women's Issues

local and regional Archives Baha'i Studies

Exhibits

Regional Newsletter

Following up Contacts Media

Libraries Deepening Adult Education Social and Economic Development Baha'i

Cemetery

Local Baha'i Centers Assembly Development Traveling Teachers

Relations with Local and state governments and non-Baha'i organizations

Reaching people of capacity

NOTE: Many of these tasks are best handled by LSAs or intercommunity committees

Tasks that do not decentralize well (in the opinion of the Research Office):

filling pioneering goals; external affairs at the national level; media at the

national level; publishing at the national level; issues of individual status;

recognition of local spiritual assemblies and disbanding of same; assisting

refugees with their immigration status; review of publications for national distribution; maintaining a system of national Baha'i schools.

Tasks that may decentralize well (in the opinion of the Research Office): answering questions about the Baha'i positions on various issues (much of the time of National Center staff is devoted to answering questions!); assisting refugees locally; encouraging minority teaching efforts; some aspects of child education; some aspects of LSA development.

Appendix Two: One Possible Approach To Decentralization

[Note: This is a suggestion of the Research Office, based on existing guidance delineated above.]

SUMMARY: RTACs would be established in relatively small areas, generally a metropolitan area. Their task would be to encourage LSAs to coordinate their local efforts more and to identify gaps in current local efforts, gaps that local assemblies, teaching institutes, or individuals could fill.

SIZE OF RTAC JURISDICTION: An RTAC would be established, whenever possible, at the level of a metropolitan area, so that it could coordinate Baha'i activities at that level. One way to identify the RTAC boundaries would be to look at media markets (they are called "areas of dominant influence" in advertising). The distance a television station's signal carries, the area served by a large daily newspaper, and the distance one can drive conveniently in an hour or so are all roughly the same. Thus an RTAC serving a metropolitan area could play important roles in coordinating use of the media and in local teaching efforts.

RESPONSIBILITIES: An important task of an RTAC would be to bring LSAs and Baha'is together to establish a regional teaching and consolidation plan. It would then monitor accomplishment of the plan and suggest modifications to it. It would also be responsible for encouraging LSAs to establish their own plans, and providing some outside advice about the plan's achievements.

The RTAC might establish some committees and task forces, but normally it would not. Rather, it would identify LSAs capable of coordinating regional tasks and encourage the LSAs to establish intercommunity committees. Thus one assembly might sponsor a regional newsletter; another a regional youth workshop; another a regional Chinese teaching institute; another a task force of two people to create displays on Baha'i literature to set up in public libraries across the region. Only if no assembly could be found to coordinate a specific regional need would the RTAC sponsor the effort instead. RTACs could also be assigned certain tasks by the National Spiritual Assembly, such as sponsoring a certain number of regional LSA deepening events and fund education activities. For the RTAC to be effective in these efforts it must have a relatively small area of jurisdiction; or if the area is large it should be large because there are relatively few Baha'is and they are used to driving long distances to attend events.

ESTABLISHMENT: Since the regions would be small, RTACs should be selected as much as possible by the local Baha'is. The June 24, 1994 letter recommends that each local assembly member confidentially nominate a certain number of persons

(five? nine?). An office of the Baha'i National Center would assemble a final list of members for review by the relevant Auxiliary Board members and approval by the National Spiritual Assembly.

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