

As the new millennium approached, there was every indication that growing numbers would see in the Bahá'í Faith hope for the future of humanity and would dedicate themselves to laying the foundations of the world civilization envisioned in the Bahá'í writings. Yet, rapid growth had raised substantial questions for which there were no clear answers at the time: How could the Bahá'í world—in response to the great receptivity it was encountering virtually everywhere—learn to establish communities that would continuously grow in size and embrace people of all walks of life? At the same time, how could such communities learn to create the conditions in which more and more people would be empowered to apply Bahá'í principles and teachings to their individual development as well as for the progress of their communities?

A TURNING POINT

The year 1996 would prove to be pivotal. With the launching of a series of global plans, the Universal House of Justice set the Bahá'í community on a 25-year journey of learning in action that would enable it to address the questions before it and lead to hard-earned development and maturation.

Over that time, there were six global plans in sequence: a Four Year Plan in 1996, a One Year Plan in 2000, and four subsequent Five Year Plans, ending in 2021. Each plan built upon the achievements of the previous plan and opened new horizons in the next.

No one, at the outset, could have anticipated just how profound the global community's transformation would be or the many insights that its experience would yield. By the close of the period, a community had emerged whose boundaries were more porous, whose understanding of the implications of oneness and justice were deeper, and whose conception of the power of religion to transform individuals and communities was more profound. Its capacity to take action and to learn in systematic ways corresponded with a rise in humility born of the recognition that it aspires to achieve something that humanity does not yet know how to build.

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

The series of plans began by calling on the Bahá'í world to focus on its own growth and development and on strengthening its ability to share and apply the Bahá'í teachings for the betterment of the world. This focus proved highly generative. As the community advanced and gained new insights and capacities, it was able to apply them to other areas of activity oriented toward social transformation.

The period began with the establishment of a new institution of learning—the training institute. Over time, Bahá'ís developed and progressively refined the institute's unique system of education that has enabled millions of people to study the sacred writings in small groups and to take practical actions that help advance both the community and the wider society. The institute enabled the community to vastly multiply core activities that had proven fundamental to serving the spiritual needs of a population. In places

where such activities were open and accessible to all, these, together with other activities, began to be woven into an increasingly rich pattern of community life. The Bahá'í community came to see and describe its efforts more explicitly and clearly in terms of community building.

Whereas prior to 1996, many of the largest local Bahá'í communities comprised several hundred individuals with varying degrees of participation in community life, by the close of the period, the largest communities were learning to integrate and work with tens of thousands of people connected in varying degrees to community-building processes.

Growth, it should be plainly stated, has never been an end in and of itself. Bahá'ís see in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh a path towards a global civilization unlike anything humanity has been able to achieve at earlier stages in its collective life. Their own institutions and communities are early contributions in humanity's efforts to establish the foundations of that civilization. And the spread of the Bahá'í Faith has, in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's explicit admonitions, always been through peaceful means and free of any form of coercion, proselytization, or manipulation. One's sacred duty, Bahá'u'lláh taught, is to see with one's own eyes and to pursue truth and reality proactively.

The aim of expansion, then, has been to create a pathway for people who believe in the oneness of humankind to work together for a world which reflects that fundamental principle. How could Bahá'í communities more effectively open and widen that pathway?

In 2010, just past the midway point of the series of plans, the Universal House of Justice described the relationship between the growth of the community and its ability to contribute to social transformation:

What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá'í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.¹

The progress made by the Bahá'í world after 1996 enabled it to better appreciate how, as its resources increased, it could contribute to the civilization-building process envisioned in the Bahá'í writings. It came to

understand this contribution as having two dimensions: the growth and development of the community itself, and its involvement in society at large.

INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIETY AT LARGE

By the second half of the series of plans, the Universal House of Justice encouraged the Bahá'í community to draw on the many insights and capacities it had gained in community building and to apply these to its efforts to contribute to social transformation more broadly.

Already for many decades, the Bahá'í community had undertaken numerous initiatives in the arena of social and economic development. With an enhanced capacity at the grassroots and with clarity about the conceptual framework governing Bahá'í endeavors, efforts in social action multiplied around the world.

Initiatives of fixed duration—for example, to preserve and revive the physical environment, promote community health, or enhance literacy and education—became a natural outgrowth of community-building processes in neighborhoods and villages. Such initiatives became a regular feature of Bahá'í educational programs for youth and junior youth. In many dynamic, outward-looking Bahá'í communities, the active participation of hundreds and thousands of people in efforts to enhance the spiritual and intellectual life of the community was complemented by efforts to address social and material progress. Animating these efforts was a conviction that every population should have ownership of its own development—that development is not something one group does for another.

This conviction shaped the approaches of a growing number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations that initiated programs which were complementary to, integrated with, and mutually supportive of community-building processes at the grassroots. Programs focusing on the moral and spiritual empowerment of junior youth, on the promotion of community schools through teacher training, and on the training of young people as promoters of community well-being flourished. More broadly, the Bahá'í world experienced an efflorescence of activity in areas such as agriculture, education, arts and media, health, the local economy, and the advancement of women.

In parallel with such developments was the growing involvement of Bahá'ís in the broad conversations focused on social well-being and progress. From the workplace or school to the local community, and to the international stage, Bahá'ís sought to make a contribution in the many social spaces where thinking evolves and gives meaning and direction to action in society. Their efforts secured in many societies the trust and friendship of those who, like Bahá'ís, were striving to advance the cause of peace, justice, and social well-being.

Notably, at the international level, the Bahá'í International Community expanded its presence—opening new regional offices in Addis Ababa, Brussels,

and Jakarta—and refined and intensified the involvement of its United Nations offices in New York and Geneva in prevalent discourses. Further, scores of National Spiritual Assemblies' Offices of External Affairs emerged, many of them engaged vigorously in public discourse, making remarkable strides and helping to consolidate the Bahá'í community as a recognized contributor to social progress in their countries. All such efforts were directed at those discourses that have a significant bearing on the well-being of humanity, such as peace, religious coexistence, social cohesion, racial justice, the role of religion in society, and migration.

By seeking to foster unity and consultation; by establishing distinctive consultative spaces for respectful dialogue aimed at consensus and collective understanding; by infusing the often chaotic landscape of discourse with hope; by selflessly contributing human, material, and intellectual resources for the advancement of vital causes; by learning with others in the context of addressing the vital issues of the day—by each of these and other features of Bahá'í participation in discourse, the Bahá'í world witnessed in many societies the power of spiritual principles to effect change. In some societies, meaningful contributions to public discourse helped change the fortunes of the Bahá'í community, lifting it out of obscurity and opening the way for it to offer a greater share to the progress of society.

REFLECTIONS ON PROGRESS MADE

Today, the Bahá'í community numbers about eight million. In the progress made over the past quarter century can be found evidence of humanity's capacity to transcend division and polarization and to give expression to unity, cooperation, and the inherent nobility and goodness of people.

Certain qualities and characteristics have become the ideals toward which this growing community strives and has made progress: a posture of learning; dedication to the long-term process of action and reflection about how to translate the ideals of the Faith into reality; a sustainable and systematic approach to social change; a consciousness of oneness that transcends any sense of “us” and “them”; a long-term effort to create a new pattern of essential social relationships among the individual, the community, and the institutions; a desire to learn with and from people of goodwill everywhere; a spirit of intergenerational cooperation, with young people in many ways at the forefront; a dedication to the spiritual and intellectual development of all children; a commitment to overcoming prejudice; a pursuit of justice in unifying ways; and a perspective that seeks to harmonize faith with reason and religious conviction with scientific truth.

To work toward the realization of such ideals, of course, does not mean that the community has achieved them. Its efforts are, and no doubt will continue to be, a work in progress. The community, explains the Universal House of Justice, makes no claims to perfection. To uphold high ideals and to have become their embodiment are not one and the same. Myriad are the challenges that lie ahead, and much remains to be learned.... However idealistic the Bahá'í endeavour

may appear to some, its deep-seated concern for the good of humankind cannot be ignored. And given that no current arrangement in the world seems capable of lifting humanity from the quagmire of conflict and contention and securing its felicity, why would any ... object to the efforts of one group of people to deepen its understanding of the nature of those essential relationships inherent to the common future towards which the human race is being inexorably drawn?²

At this writing, millions inspired by the teachings of the Faith, in a wide range of settings, are participating in grassroots activities that strengthen the spiritual and social fabric of community life. Many are not formally enrolled as Bahá'ís but are increasingly identifying themselves with the Faith's ideals and exploring its prescription for the world.

A community is emerging that does not divide the world but rather encourages growing numbers of people, of various faiths and of none, to build together the elements of a more just and peaceful society—working, for instance, through its educational system to raise a generation of children whose hearts are free from prejudice and whose spiritual qualities are cultivated together with their rational and scientific faculties.

At the administrative level, the national communities with an elected governing council (National Spiritual Assembly) currently number 174. There are 228 Regional Councils in 61 countries. Nearly 330 training institutes administer a novel system of distance education that enables people to study sacred writings in small groups and to discover practical and meaningful ways to apply spiritual principles to their individual lives and in service to their locality and society.

Of the millions who have participated in at least one of the training institute courses, the majority are women—a startling fact in light of the widespread disparities that continue to define women's experience throughout most of the world. Women also comprise the majority of those serving in the appointed arm of Bahá'í administration, which includes members of the International Teaching Centre, the Continental Boards of Counsellors, and Auxiliary Board members and their assistants.

Among National Spiritual Assemblies, women make up 42 percent of the membership and 53 percent of their principal executive officers—another significant indicator of movement toward greater equality and a statistic that stands out dramatically when compared with society at large. Nonetheless, the community is keenly aware that the goal of a world in which women and men are regarded as equals in every sphere of society and contribute together to the advancement of civilization is still, as yet, a distant one. There is much that remains to be learned and achieved.

In the area of social and economic development, progress has also been stark. The number of social action initiatives has multiplied from around 2,000 to more than 70,000, most of which are activities of limited duration. Sustained endeavors in social and economic development have increased from around 300 to

more than 1,500. The number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations has correspondingly risen to support such efforts, from around 30 to more than 160.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

The election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963 was arguably humanity's first global democratic election. Since that time, the House of Justice has guided the Bahá'í community and ensured its dynamic unity. The flow of its encouragement and guidance was a major feature of the period under review. Through letters, the House of Justice supported the global community, harmonized thought and action, cultivated a stronger orientation toward learning, called on Bahá'ís to adopt a posture of humility, and encouraged them to be courageous in forging new pathways of service and action.

The House of Justice emphasized that development is not something one group does for another. Humanity, it asserted, is on a path toward building a global civilization that is unlike anything known to it today. Every soul, indeed every population, must therefore have the opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, the lessons learned throughout the planet.

The Bahá'í administrative system evolved to enable the Bahá'í institutions to support and cultivate learning and to allow for new insights and experience at the grassroots to be shared appropriately for the benefit of other communities. A dynamic flow of communication traveled from small pockets and unassuming settings to the regional, national, and international levels, and those insights and approaches that were universally helpful were distilled and shared in a manner that vastly extended the worldwide community's capacity to learn.

The election of the Universal House of Justice in April 2018 opened a window onto the vast diversity of the Bahá'í community and the distance the global community has traversed. Members of the National Spiritual Assemblies, representing the diverse peoples of the world, gathered at the Bahá'í World Centre. The delegates sat side by side as one family. Some arrived after weeks of travel—beginning in remote villages, traveling by foot, by bus, by car, by boat, by plane—to represent their respective national communities. Some came from the major cosmopolitan centers of the planet. Some represented historically ostracized or oppressed populations. Some were from among the indigenous people of their land. Some were refugees. This most diverse of groupings of the human family was united as one people with shared convictions and aspirations.

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh over a century and a half ago. “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.” “So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.” With such evocative images and concepts, He set in motion a process which is releasing humanity's spiritual potential in ever greater measure. In the series of plans from 1996 to 2021, a community of millions—a cross section of the peoples of the world—took a great leap forward in its efforts to make that vision a reality. Today, the

global community stands at the start of yet another series of plans that will carry it 25 years into the future, the scope of another generation.

Notes:

1. To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 December 2010, <https://www.bahai.org/r/242741298>.

2. To the Bahá'ís of Iran, 2 March 2013, <https://www.bahai.org/r/063389421>.

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