

“Service for the Betterment of Humanity”

Beloved friends and co-workers in the service of Bahá'u'lláh,

Alláh'u'Abhá

[Introduction]

It was 20 years ago that the Universal House of Justice, in its seminal message of October 20, 1983, introduced the Bahá'í community as a whole to the concept of social and economic development. For Bahá'ís all over the world this message propelled us on a journey of collective learning about service in a way that had not been fully contemplated before. It was a thrilling and momentous call to embrace a new manner of engaging in the world around us. For most of us, this was a new path, first trodden by our brothers and sisters in the Cradle of the Faith. Now we were all, albeit in varying degrees, going to be part of an endeavor to “more systematically apply the principles of the Faith to upraising the quality of human life” in ways that we had never before imagined.

I'd like to start this first, then, by taking a moment to review some of the basic ideas in that message and to remind ourselves how it is that we come to be at a conference whose specific aim is to further us along in this learning adventure of applying Bahá'í principles to the service of humanity.

The Universal House of Justice began its auspicious message by reminding us that the concept of social and economic development was not a new idea; indeed, it is enshrined in the Teachings of the Faith, and its best example are the Houses of Worship, those spiritual centers around which will “flourish dependencies dedicated to the social, humanitarian, educational and scientific advancement of mankind.”¹ The House of Justice went on to observe that “Progress in the development field will largely depend on natural stirrings at the grassroots” and that these stirrings should receive their impetus at that level and not from “an imposition of plans and programs from the top.”² They cautioned us to not see social and economic development as separate from teaching, but rather “as a reinforcement of the teaching work, as a greater manifestation of faith in action.”³ They described this “call to action” as an “arena of service”, an arena where all Bahá'ís could use their “talents and skills, their specialized training, their material resources, their offers of

time and energy and, above all, their dedication to Bahá'í principles” to improve “the lot of man.”⁴

In conclusion the House of Justice quoted the Guardian who wrote that

“The problems which confront the believers at the present time, whether social, spiritual, economic or administrative will be gradually solved as the number and the resources of the friends multiply and their capacity for service and for the application of Bahá'í principles develops. They should be patient, confident and active in utilizing every possible opportunity that presents itself within the limits now necessarily imposed upon them. May the Almighty aid them to fulfill their highest hopes.”⁵

It's been twenty years since this message from our infallible source of divine guidance was first given to us and we now have the opportunity to reflect on two decades of learning, experimentation, and application in the field of social and economic development. It seems in the spirit of reflection that it would behoove us to consider our progress and learning in light of the fundamental concept of service of which social and economic development is its more practical and concrete manifestation. Central to the October 1983 message is the concept of service, of faith in action. So this morning, I'd like us to examine anew the Bahá'í perspective of service and then consider its relationship to development within the framework of the Five Year Plan.

[Service for the Betterment of Humanity]

The concept of service to humanity has been given a higher station in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh than at any other time in human history. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that in “past dispensations, with the exceptions of acts of charity, concern for the common good was largely confined to the religious community itself. In the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, however, efforts to improve material and social conditions are conducted for the benefit of all humanity.”⁶ Bahá'u'lláh enjoins upon His followers to “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.”⁷ Thus has He revolutionized religion's relationship to the external world. He has created a religious community whose mission is to strive to serve all humanity and meet its needs, spiritual as well as material.

It is interesting to consider how extraordinarily different is the Bahá'í perspective on religion's role from how it is perceived in society. One example seems particularly striking: a prominent book from the early 1970's declared that

“Religion should be studied for what it really is among the people: a ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs and valuations that give the sanction of sacredness, taboo, and immutability to inherited institutional arrangements, modes of living, and

attitudes. Understood in this realistic and comprehensive sense, religion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia.”⁸

Let me repeat: “religion usually acts as a **tremendous force for social inertia.**” Friends, this is how religion’s role in improving the lot of men is viewed in our time! Religion has been relegated to a by-stander’s role. Its “role in contributing to the betterment of the world” has been completely “marginalized.”⁹ How radically different is the Bahá’í perspective!

In these days when religion is so prominently on the front page of newspapers and in the top stories of our nightly news as the alleged motivator for acts of hate and violence; when religious institutions have become corroded by scandal and corruption; is it any wonder that seeing religion as a force for change and progress and development would be hard to do? It is in the midst of this hopelessness about religion and lack of faith in religion that we Bahá’ís in the name of our religion and inspired by our religion have been asked “to arise and energetically devote [ourselves] to the service of the masses, forgetting [our] own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good.”¹⁰ Bahá’u’lláh Himself has declared that the “day of service is now come.”¹¹ This is our calling; this is our summons. Service is central to living a Bahá’í life.

Yet, Bahá’u’lláh does not merely announce the change in the nature of this time as a new time for service, but further requires of every believer “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action” and promises that whoso “ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth” will be “Blessed and happy.”¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further affirms that there is no deed “nobler than service to the common good.”¹³

Such is the concept of service in the Bahá’í Faith that it has been elevated to the state of worship. Our Writings declare “Work done in the spirit of service is worship”¹⁴ and that “all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and minister to people’s needs. Service is prayer.”¹⁵ And in a beautifully simple phrase that sums up, in my mind, the relationship between the improvement of the material world and our inner lives, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts “Success and prosperity depend upon service to and worship of God.”

It is in the context of this guidance that Bahá’ís all around the world find themselves engaged in multiple kinds of service in the field of social and economic development. Examples are as diverse

in type as they are varied in duration and scope. To cite just a few: a group of Portuguese students clean a local dam and learn about the importance of the environment; a Zambian woman's individual efforts with health activities leads to the formation of a local women's club dedicated to sanitation in the home and the community; a man in Vanuatu experiments with using coconut oil, an economical and plentiful fuel, to power diesel engines; an Assembly in India helps establish a fish pond that funds a hatchery and a program to train people in acquiring and using appropriate technologies; a literacy project in Guyana trains more than 3,000 volunteers and has reached more than 10,000 young people; and the Children's Theater Company in New York City works to incorporate spiritual values into artistic performances.¹⁶ We could go on and on. It is clear that Bahá'ís the world over have taken to heart the guidance of the Universal House of Justice outlined just two decades ago. And the fruits of this systematic learning in action in the field of social and economic development are there for the world to see and benefit from.

With the start of the Four Year Plan in Ridvan 1996, the Universal House of Justice launched the Bahá'í world on "a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops."¹⁷ As the plan unfolded and as we studied the guidance more carefully, it became clear that what we were embarked upon was also a development endeavor, but of a scale and type not previously contemplated. This endeavor was the "determined, worldwide effort"¹⁸ to develop "human resources on a large scale."¹⁹ The Supreme Body explained that this large-scale effort was intended "not only to increase the size and consolidate the foundations of our community, **but more particularly to exert a positive influence on the affairs of the entire human race.**"²⁰ They promised that the "next four years [would] represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude."²¹ And indeed as the House of Justice had anticipated, such was the change in the Bahá'í world that at the beginning of the Twelve Month Plan, they announced that "The culture of the Bahá'í community experienced a change."²² They called the system of training institutes throughout the world "the chief propellant of this change"²³ and the "single greatest legacy"²⁴ of the Four Year Plan.

In that same message of Ridvan 2000, the House of Justice then drew our attention to "a pressing challenge" facing the Bahá'í community namely that of needing to spiritually nurture our children and to "integrate them into the life of the Cause."²⁵ They also emphasized the importance of junior youth and asked that we give them our "creative attention."²⁶ Further, they affirmed that the

“spiritual education of children and junior youth are of paramount importance” and declared that it was “imperative that this deficiency be remedied.” We were reminded that “The regular holding of Bahá’í children’s classes should be given high priority”²⁷ and that “Particular attention needs to be given to the youth, who are often the Faith’s most enthusiastic supporters.”²⁸ This focus on children has its roots in the Sacred Scriptures of our Faith which are replete with relevant guidance. For instance, Bahá’u’lláh prescribed

“. . . unto all men that which will lead to the exaltation of the Word of God amongst His servants, and likewise, to the advancement of the world of being and the upliftment of souls. **To this end, the greatest means is education of the child.** To this must each and all hold fast. We have verily laid this charge upon you in manifold Tablets as well as in My Most Holy Book.”²⁹

Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserted that “The **primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education.** It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward.”³⁰

It is natural then that the House of Justice should have reminded us of this “most urgent requirement” and the Bahá’í community, in just a few short years, is responding marvelously to this call. Various initiatives around the world have developed and refined materials for children and junior youth, and well-developed training institutes and development organizations are focusing their efforts on reaching and serving these highly capable populations. The human resources raised by the training institutes have increased the numbers of children’s classes substantially while ever greater strides are being made to reach junior youth.

Midway through the Twelve Month Plan, the Supreme Body announced “in a spirit of exultation” that the “Faith of Bahá’u’lláh had now entered the fifth epoch of its Formative Age.”³¹ A few months later, in its Ridvan 2001 message formally launching the present Five Year Plan, the House of Justice elaborated that “a freshness of vitality” evident at the Conference in January was understood to be “a manifestation of the rising quality of activity throughout the community.”³² This quality of activity could be directly linked to the training institute process and the growth and learning created through its application. At the beginning of this year, the House of Justice delivered a “cogent analysis”³³ of the progress of the Five Year Plan thus far and helped us to see, even more clearly, the role of the training institute in fostering an “outward-looking orientation,”³⁴ in accelerating the expansion and consolidation of clusters in a sustainable and systematic way.

Indeed, it is in looking back over the steady flow of guidance over the past seven years that we see more clearly the vital role of the training institutes in completely changing our communities. How does the House of Justice describe the training institutes? They are described as the “chief propellants”³⁵ of the change in culture; the “crucial instrument” for the systematic development of human resources; the “vitalize[r]s [of] communities and institutions” and “enhance[r]s [of] the powers of the individual;”³⁶ they are the primary “engine[s]” of the process of entry by troops³⁷; the “most potent instrument[s] for realizing the potential”³⁸ within our clusters; “the most effective means to mobilize believers”³⁹; and “an indispensable element”⁴⁰ for advancing the process of entry by troops. Further, study circles, as critical components of training institutes, have “created a new dynamic” within communities, and have become “nuclei of community life” and “catalysts for teaching, service, and community development.”⁴¹

Is it any wonder, then, that at the onset of the Four Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice issued this summons?: “What the friends throughout the world are now being asked to do is to commit themselves, their material resources, their abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted.”⁴² Such commitment is what has brought us to this mid-point of the Five Year Plan where we can begin to see the fruits of obedience to this summons in the growing strength of our communities.

Does this response of the Bahá’í world not remind us of a similar call, issued by the beloved House of Justice twenty years earlier, to rise up in service to all humankind? In their message of October 20, 1983, referenced above, they stated:

“Ultimately, the call to action is addressed to the individual friends, whether they be adult or youth, veteran or newly-enrolled. Let them step forth to take their places in the arena of service where their talents and skills, their specialized training, their material resources, their offers of time and energy and, above all, their dedication to Bahá’í principles, can be put to work in improving the lot of man.”⁴³

Can we not see the similarity between these two calls to arise and commit? Is there not clearly a direct relationship between the service of the friends in the training institutes and the service of the friends through social and economic development projects? Indeed, as I was meditating on these three recent global plans and their cumulative transforming effects on our community, a thought came to mind that brought together these two parallel thrusts of action—training institutes and development activities—under the umbrella of service. What I saw was that, in a way, the Four

Year Plan, the Twelve Month Plan, and the Five Year Plan have all been successive steps in a world-embracing development endeavor.

What do I mean by that? I mean that these plans for the prosecution of the Divine Plan have each strengthened our resources, have effectively established the groundwork for a worldwide social and economic development endeavor, an endeavor that covers the Earth and crosses all cultural, social, national, economic, and ideological barriers. Its purpose is to bring us ever closer to that time where a critical mass of people will be endowed with the knowledge, skills and spiritual insights to effect a transformation of society, the repercussions of which will be felt at every level. Through this world-wide institute process, we are acquiring the tools for creating a spiritually-based culture, a new civilization where efforts to address the needs of society at large will be aided by skilled human resources and mature institutions.

The network of training institutes is a flexible, adaptable grass-roots system of education and it is a “successful spiritual education” that will “cultivate virtue as the foundation for personal and collective well-being, and will nurture in individuals a deep sense of service and an active commitment to the welfare of their families, their communities, their countries, indeed, all mankind.”⁴⁴ Is this not a recipe for changing the world?

And if we don't realize the potential of the training institutes, what else will be able to “endow” sufficient human resources with the “skills and abilities”⁴⁵ needed to initiate and, more importantly, sustain service to our wider communities? How else are the institutions going to learn to “utilize these resources in the field of service”?⁴⁶ By what other method can Bahá'í communities assure that children and youth are empowered to take their place as active participants in their community's life? Up to now, there is no other way than through the programs of the training institutes. The Bahá'í world's collective learning and experience has brought us to this point. As outlined so beautifully in *Century of Light*, we can now see the purpose of the “succession of efforts, experiments, heartbreaks, and victories” that “prepared the Bahá'í communities” for the challenges and opportunities we are now facing.⁴⁷

I would like to suggest that we take a step back from the nitty-gritty details of daily implementation of the Five Year Plan and consider its wider implications for the betterment of humanity. The Supreme Body states:

“The greatest need of all peoples is for the Faith itself, so that they may know the destiny towards which they as individuals and members of society must strive, and will learn from the teachings those virtues and methods which will enable them to work together in harmony, forbearance and trustworthiness. . . . The principle remains, however, that **the spiritual precedes the material**. First comes the illumination of hearts and minds by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, and then the grass roots stirring of the believers wishing to apply these teachings to the daily life of their community.”⁴⁸

The House of Justice, in one short paragraph, lays out for us the relationship between these efforts in developing human resources for teaching and the betterment of humanity. They explain:

“The friends who participate in these intensive programmes of growth should bear in mind that the purpose is to ensure that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh **reaches the masses of humanity and enables them to achieve spiritual and material progress** through the application of the Teachings. Vast numbers among the peoples of the world are ready, indeed yearn, for the bounties that Bahá’u’lláh alone can bestow upon them once they have committed themselves to building the new society He has envisioned. **In learning to systematize their large-scale teaching work, Bahá’í communities are becoming better equipped to respond to this longing.** They cannot withhold whatever effort, whatever sacrifice, may be called for.”⁴⁹

In sum, development efforts within the framework of the trainings institutes begin by believers acquiring knowledge, spiritual insights and the skills to arise to serve the Cause of God. And as the abilities for service increase and the skills become more focused, and the “worldwide Bahá’í community grows in size, its ability to address human problems and influence society will correspondingly increase.”⁵⁰

[Conclusion]

Dear friends, what an amazing time we live in! What a privilege to have recognized the Manifestation of God for this day, the Day of God, and to be offering ourselves in service to Him and to the world He has come to transform.

Sometimes, as we live out our lives day by day, as we struggle to work and serve and live the Bahá’í life, as we take care of our families and participate in community life, it can be hard to

remember the big picture. The grandeur and awe of this time of which we are so privileged to be a part can get lost in the grind of our daily realities.

With this in mind, I would like us to recall the story of Bahá'u'lláh's arrival in the prison-city of Akka. After a dangerous and uncomfortable trip by sea, Bahá'u'lláh, His family and a small band of companions disembarked at the sea gate on a hot, humid, oppressive August day. The arrival of this group had been announced by the city and throngs had gathered as they disembarked, not to greet them, but to jeer and insult them, to mock their dress and manner, to look upon them with hatred and suspicion. This was the scene witnessed by all as this Prisoner of the most powerful empire on earth, this Exile of His native land, was banished to the most desolate spot on earth. Akka in those days was so well known for the foulness of its air and the stench within its walls that it was said that a bird flying over the walled city would fall dead out of the sky, so gruesome was the odor. Friends, this scene was the outward reality of the Blessed Beauty's arrival. This was the reality that everyone witnessed. Everyone except the Blessed Beauty. And what did He see? Bahá'u'lláh reveals that upon His arrival in that desolate prison-city, He was "welcomed with banners of light" and the "Voice of the Spirit cried out 'Soon will all that dwell on earth be enlisted under these banners.'"

Friends, that was the true reality; that was the spiritual reality. How radically different from what the outer eye was beholding! That reality described by Bahá'u'lláh is our history. That inner reality is our spiritual heritage. Things are seldom what they seem to outward eyes. So if in the midst of our personal tests and trials we remember that our mission is glorious, our **reality** is that we are carrying God's divine Plan for the healing and transforming of all mankind. Let us always recall our higher purpose in every service we undertake. Our service, however small and insignificant it may seem to the eyes of the world, is no less than to usher in the "Golden Age of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh which will witness the unification of all the peoples and nations of the world."⁵¹

Fortunately for us, we don't have to guess and wonder how to go about contributing to this peerless mission. The steps are being laid out for us, Plan by Plan, through the divine, infallible guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Our only task then is to commit ourselves to it, to keep our eyes on the bigger picture, and to see the glorious end even in these modest beginnings.

In closing, I would like to leave this thought with you from the beloved Guardian who re-shaped for us the notion of service, who gave us a way of thinking about service that is opposite from how we usually approach it. Shoghi Effendi said: “The time has come for the friends, the world over, to think not how they should serve the Cause, but how the Cause should be served.”⁵²

Let us then turn our sights towards the guidance of the beloved Universal House of Justice and with confidence carry out their instructions to the fullest. Let us seize every opportunity to further advance the process of entry by troops and let us give thanks to the Blessed Beauty for the gift of living in this time. For we live, in the words of the Guardian, in “the Era of Service.”⁵³

¹ Universal House of Justice, October 23, 1983.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Creating a New Mind*, Paul Lample, p.107

⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 231

⁸ Quoted in *For the Betterment of the World*, OSED, p.2

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p.103

¹¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p.92

¹² Ibid. p.250

¹³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 103

¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Compilations, Bahá’í Scriptures*, p.278

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 452

¹⁶ Examples excerpted from *For the Betterment of the World*, OSED.

¹⁷ Universal House of Justice, December 26, 1995 to Conference of Continental Board of Counsellors

¹⁸ Universal House of Justice, December 31, 1995 to the Bahá’ís of the world

¹⁹ Universal House of Justice, December 26, 1995 to Conference of Continental Board of Counsellors

²⁰ Universal House of Justice, December 31, 1995 to the Bahá’ís of the world

²¹ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 to the Bahá’ís of the world

²² Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2000 to the Bahá’ís of the world

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Universal House of Justice, December 26, 1995 to Conference of Continental Board of Counsellors

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Social and Economic Development*, #33

³⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p.109

³¹ Universal House of Justice January 16 2001 to the Bahá’ís of the world

³² Ibid.

³³ *Building Momentum*, International Teaching Centre, p. 1

³⁴ Universal House of Justice, January 17, 2003 to the Bahá’ís of the world

³⁵ *Building Momentum*, International Teaching Centre, p.

³⁶ Universal House of Justice, January 9 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors

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- ³⁷ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2000 to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³⁸ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Cambodia, Hong Kong, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- ³⁹ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka
- ⁴⁰ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in North America: Alaska, Canada, Greenland and the United States
- ⁴¹ International Teaching Center, Training Institutes and Systematic Growth, p.8
- ⁴² Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1996 to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴³ Universal House of Justice, October 20, 1983 to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴⁴ Valuing Spirituality in Development, Bahá'í International Community, February 18, 1998
- ⁴⁵ Training Institutes, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, April 1998
- ⁴⁶ Universal House of Justice, January 17, 2003 to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴⁷ Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, p.110
- ⁴⁸ Universal House of Justice, Social and Economic Development, p. 25
- ⁴⁹ Universal House of Justice, January 9, 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ⁵⁰ Paul Lample, Creating a New Mind, p. 108
- ⁵¹ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 411
- ⁵² Shoghi Effendi, quoted in the Priceless Pearl, Rúhíyyih Khanum, p.74
- ⁵³ Shoghi Effendi, The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Rúhíyyih Khanum, p. 9