

# I. Membership, Authority and Role

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi

Original English



## I. Membership, Authority and Role

— 1 —

Regarding the establishment of “National Assemblies”, it is of vital importance that in every country, where the conditions are favourable and the number of the friends has grown and reached a considerable size, such as America, Great Britain and Germany, that a “National Spiritual Assembly” be immediately established, representative of the friends throughout that country.

Its immediate purpose is to stimulate, unify and co-ordinate, by frequent personal consultations, the manifold activities of the friends as well as the local Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.

It serves also another purpose, no less essential than the first, as in the course of time it shall evolve into the National House of Justice (referred to in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will as the “secondary House of Justice”), which according to the explicit text of the Testament will have, in conjunction with the other National Assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world, to elect directly the members of the International House of Justice, that Supreme Council that will guide, organize and unify the affairs of the Movement throughout the world.

It is expressly recorded in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings that these National Assemblies must be indirectly elected by the friends; that is, the friends in every country must elect a certain number of delegates, who in their turn will elect from among all the friends in that country the members of the National Spiritual Assembly....

This National Spiritual Assembly, which pending the establishment of the Universal House of Justice will have to be re-elected once a year, obviously assumes grave responsibilities, for it has to exercise full authority over all the local Assemblies in its province, and will have to direct the activities of the friends, guard vigilantly the Cause of God, and control and supervise the affairs of the Movement in general.



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With it too rests the decision whether a certain point at issue is strictly local in its nature, and should be reserved for the consideration and decision of the local Assembly, or whether it should fall under its own province and be regarded as a matter which ought to receive its special attention. The National Spiritual Assembly will also decide upon such matters which in its opinion should be referred to the Holy Land for consultation and decision.

From a letter 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan and Switzerland

'Bahá'í Administration', p. 39

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It is, I firmly believe, of the utmost urgent importance that, with unity of purpose and action firmly established in our midst, and with every trace of the animosity and mistrust of the past banished from our hearts, we should form one united front, and combat, wisely and tactfully, every force that might darken the spirit of the Movement, cause division in its ranks, and narrow it by dogmatic and sectarian belief.

It is primarily upon the elected members of the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world that this highly important duty devolves, as in their hands the direction and management of all spiritual Bahá'í activities have been placed and centralized, and as they constitute in the eyes of the people of their country the supreme body in that land that officially represents, promotes and safeguards the various interests of the Cause. It is my fervent prayer and my most cherished desire that the unfailing guidance of Bahá'u'lláh and the blessings of our beloved Master will enable them to set a high and true example to all other Bahá'í institutions and Local Assemblies, and will show them what absolute harmony, mature deliberation and whole-hearted co-operation can achieve.

Should such a representative and responsible body fail to realize this fundamental requisite for all successful achievement, the whole structure is sure to crumble, and the Great Plan of the Future, as unfolded by the Master's Will and Testament, will be rudely disturbed and grievously delayed.

From a letter 9 April 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 45

Regarding the method to be adopted for the election of the National Spiritual Assemblies, it is clear that the text of the Beloved's Testament gives us no indication as to the manner in which these Assemblies are to be elected. In one of His earliest Tablets, however, addressed to a friend in Persia, the following is expressly recorded:

“At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme Baytu'l-'Adl (Universal House of Justice)”.

These words clearly indicate that a three-stage election has been provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the formation of the International House of Justice, and as it is explicitly provided in His Will and Testament that the “Secondary Houses of Justice (i.e. National Assemblies) must elect the members the Universal One”, it is obvious that the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies will have to be indirectly elected by the body of the believers in their respective provinces....

Should the appointing of the delegates be made a part of the functions of Local Spiritual Assemblies, who are already elected bodies, the principle of a four-stage election would be introduced, which would be at variance with the provisions explicitly laid down in the Master's Tablet. On the other hand, were the Local Spiritual Assemblies, the number of whose members is strictly confined to nine, to elect directly the members of the National Spiritual Assembly — thus maintaining the principle of a three-stage election — all Bahá'í localities, which must necessarily differ in numerical strength, would then have to share equally in the election of the National Spiritual Assembly — a practice which would be contrary to fairness and justice. Moreover, the central principle guiding for the present the administration of the Cause has been to make the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies as independent as possible in the conduct of such affairs as fall within their province, and to lessen the hampering influence of any institution within their jurisdiction that might, whether directly or indirectly, impair their authority and prestige.

From a letter 12 May 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 84

High aims and pure motives, however laudable in themselves, will surely not suffice if unsupported by measures that are practicable and methods that are sound. Wealth of sentiment, abundance of goodwill and effort, will prove of little avail if we should fail to exercise discrimination and restraint and neglect to direct their flow along the most

profitable channels. The unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice, and the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.

It would be impossible at this stage to ignore the indispensability or to overestimate the unique significance of the institution of the National Spiritual Assembly — the pivot round which revolve the activities of the believers throughout the American continent. Supreme is their position, grave their responsibilities, manifold and arduous their duties. How great the privilege, how delicate the task of the assembled delegates whose function it is to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause!

If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies, as enumerated in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets, we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. Hence it is incumbent upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.

May the incoming National Spiritual Assembly — the privileged and chosen servants of the Cause — immortalize their term of stewardship by deeds of loving service, deeds that will redound to the honour, the glory and the power of the Most Great Name.

From a letter 3 June 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the delegates and visitors at the Convention of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 87

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The administrative machinery of the Cause having now sufficiently evolved, its aim and object fairly well grasped and understood, and its method and working made more familiar to every believer, I feel the time is ripe when it should be fully and consciously utilized to further the purpose for which it has been created. It should, I strongly feel, be made to serve a twofold purpose. On one hand, it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion of the Movement along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal; and on the other, it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved. It should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a

medium for the interchange of thought and the co-ordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá'í community...

Such in their broad outline are the guiding principles which those who have been placed in charge of the administration of the affairs of the Cause should at present endeavour to promote, explain and securely establish. Nothing short of the spirit of unwavering faith, of continuous vigilance and patient endeavour can hope to secure eventually the realization of this our cherished desire.

May America's national representatives arise with clear vision, with unswerving determination and renewed vigour to carry out in its entirety the sacred task they have purposed to perform.

From a letter 11 May 1926 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 109

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Now that the N.S.A. has been properly constituted and its officers duly appointed, it is incumbent upon each and all to introduce and promote such measures as will consolidate the work that you have so well begun. The institution of the National Fund, a Bahá'í Bulletin similar to the News Letter issued by the American N.S.A., a vigorous and well-conceived campaign of Teaching, a continuous and purposeful endeavour to co-ordinate the activities of the Local Assemblies and groups throughout India and Burma and the sending of detailed and frequent reports to the Holy Land are among the most primary and urgent requirements of the new day that has dawned upon India. I eagerly await your reports and assure you of my continued prayers for the success of your arduous labours.

In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter 28 October 1926 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma, 'Dawn of a New Day' New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d. 1970, pp. 1415

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I wish to reaffirm, in clear and categorical language, the principle already enunciated upholding the supreme authority of the National Assembly in all matters that affect the interests of the Faith in that land. There can be no conflict of authority, no duality under any form or circumstances in any sphere of Bahá'í jurisdiction whether local, national or international. The National Assembly, however, although the sole interpreter of its Declaration of Trust and by-laws, is directly and morally responsible if it allows any body or institution within its jurisdiction to abuse its privileges or to decline in the exercise of

its rights and prerogatives. It is the trusted guardian and the mainspring of the manifold activities and interests of every national community in the Bahá'í world. It constitutes the sole link that binds these communities to the International House of Justice — the supreme administrative body in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

In the hand writing of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter 11 June 1934 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

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...The Guardian was very pleased to learn of the progress made by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in its efforts to consolidate, widen and maintain the scope of its national activities. The difficulties in your way are tremendous. The differences of language and of social and intellectual background do, undoubtedly, render the work somewhat difficult to carry out and may temporarily check the efficient and smooth working of the national administrative machinery of the Faith. They, nevertheless, impart to the deliberations of the National Assembly a universality which they would be otherwise lacking, and give to its members a breadth of view which is their duty to cultivate and foster. It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any National or Local Assembly. For the bedrock of the Bahá'í administrative order is the principle of unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause. Differences which are not fundamental and contrary to the basic teachings of the Cause should be maintained, while the underlying unity of the administrative order should be at any cost preserved and ensured. Unity, both of purpose and of means, is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national.

From a letter 2 January 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma, 'Dawn of a New Day', p. 47

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With regard to your question concerning the right of a member of the National Spiritual Assembly to disclose to that body any facts which he possesses as a member of a Local Spiritual Assembly, the Guardian thinks that the adequate presentation of all such facts is not only the right but the duty of every member of the National Spiritual Assembly. It is, indeed, the responsibility of every conscientious and loyal believer who has the privilege of being a member of the National Spiritual Assembly to provide for the general information of his co-workers in that body, all the facts which the latter requires for the study and settlement of the cases under its consideration.

From a letter 14 January 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma

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The formation of every new National Assembly must, indeed, be viewed as a step forward in the evolution of the Administration of the Faith. And not until a sufficient number of such National Assemblies has been duly constituted can there be any hope for the future expansion of the Cause.

From a letter 26 March 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 'Bahá'í News' 91, April 1935, p. 15

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With regard to your question as to the advisability of disclosing to an individual believer the contents of the National Spiritual Assembly's correspondence: The Guardian thinks that although this cannot be considered as constituting an obligation which a believer can impose upon the national body, yet it would seem highly advisable that the National Spiritual Assembly should give a sympathetic consideration to any such request made to it by a believer. This, he feels, would avoid giving the impression that the Assembly is working in an atmosphere of complete secrecy, and that it is motivated by dictatorial motives. The final decision in such matters, however, is entirely left to the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly. The basic principle that should always be remembered is that the National Spiritual Assembly cannot be required to reveal to any outsider all the details concerning its work. It may choose to do so if it wishes, but nobody has the right to enforce upon it any such action. This is, of course, the purely legal side of the question. But a purely legalistic attitude in matters affecting the Cause, particularly now that the Faith is still in a state of infancy, is not only inadequate but fraught with unforeseen dangers and difficulties. The individuals and Assemblies must learn to co-operate and to co-operate intelligently, if they desire to adequately discharge their duties and obligations towards the Faith. And no such co-operation is possible without mutual confidence and trust.

From a letter 19 June 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand 'Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, 1923-1957', p. 9

...Shoghi Effendi wishes to urge once more your Assembly to give careful and sympathetic consideration to this case, which has already engaged their attention for several months. The situation must be carefully studied, and all its aspects thoroughly investigated, and a decision should be reached and fearlessly and immediately carried out. Too much delay does not only harm the interests of the petitioner but will, in addition, have the effect of detracting from the authority and prestige of your Assembly.

From a letter 12 August 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma

The evolution of the Plan imposes a threefold obligation, which all individual believers, all Local Assemblies, as well as the National Assembly itself, must respectively recognize and conscientiously fulfil. Each and every believer, undaunted by the uncertainties, the perils and the financial stringency afflicting the nation, must arise and ensure, to the full measure of his or her capacity, that continuous and abundant flow of funds into the national Treasury, on which the successful prosecution of the Plan must chiefly depend.

Upon the Local Assemblies, whose special function and high privilege is to facilitate the admission of new believers into the community, and thereby stimulate the infusion of fresh blood into its organic institutions, a duty no less binding in character devolves. To them I wish particularly to appeal, at this present hour, when the call of God is being raised throughout the length and breadth of both continents in the New World, to desist from insisting too rigidly on the minor observances and beliefs, which might prove a stumbling-block in the way of any sincere applicant, whose eager desire is to enlist under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh. While conscientiously adhering to the fundamental qualifications already laid down, the members of each and every Assembly should endeavour, by their patience, their love, their tact and wisdom, to nurse, subsequent to his admission, the newcomer into Bahá'í maturity, and win him over gradually to the unreserved acceptance of whatever has been ordained in the teachings.

As to the National Assembly, whose inescapable responsibility is to guard the integrity, co-ordinate the activities, and stimulate the life, of the entire community, its chief concern, at the present moment, should be to anxiously deliberate as how best to enable both individual believers and Local Assemblies to fulfil their respective tasks. Through their repeated appeals, through their readiness to dispel all



misunderstandings and remove all obstacles, through the example of their lives, their unrelaxing vigilance, their high sense of justice, their humility, consecration and courage, they must demonstrate to those whom they represent their capacity to play their part in the progress of the Plan in which they, no less than the rest of the community, are involved.

May the all-conquering Spirit of Bahá'u'lláh be so infused into each component part of this harmoniously functioning System as to enable it to contribute its proper share to the consummation of the Plan.

In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter 30 January 1938 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Messages to America', p. 11

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Such a rectitude of conduct<sup>1</sup> must manifest itself, with ever-increasing potency, in every verdict which the elected representatives of the Bahá'í community, in whatever capacity they may find themselves, may be called upon to pronounce... It must be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions... It must constitute the brightest ornament of the life, the pursuits, the exertions, and the utterances of every Bahá'í teacher, whether laboring at home or abroad, whether in the front ranks of the teaching force, or occupying a less active and responsible position. It must be made the hallmark of that numerically small, yet intensely dynamic and highly responsible body of the elected national representatives of every Bahá'í community, which constitutes the sustaining pillar, and the sole instrument for the election, in every community, of that Universal House whose very name and title, as ordained by Bahá'u'lláh, symbolizes that rectitude of conduct which is its highest mission to safeguard and enforce.

So great and transcendental is this principle of Divine justice, a principle that must be regarded as the crowning distinction of all Local and National Assemblies, in their capacity as forerunners of the Universal House of Justice, that Bahá'u'lláh Himself subordinates His personal inclination and wish to the all-compelling force of its demands and implications. "God is My witness!" He thus explains, "were it not contrary to the Law of God, I would have kissed the hand of My would-be murderer, and would cause him to inherit My earthly goods. I am restrained, however, by the binding Law

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<sup>1</sup> ...with its implications of justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability and trustworthiness... (see

*"The Advent of Divine Justice"*,

p. 23)

laid down in the Book, and am Myself bereft of all worldly possessions.” “Know thou, of a truth,” He significantly affirms, “these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice.” “Say,” He again asserts, “he hath appeared with that Justice wherewith mankind hath been adorned, and yet the people are, for the most part, asleep.” “The light of men is Justice,” He moreover states, “Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.” “No radiance,” He declares, “can compare with that of justice. The organization of the world and the tranquility of mankind depend upon it.” “O people of God!” He exclaims, “That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world....”

Small wonder, therefore, that the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation should have chosen to associate the name and title of that House, which is to be the crowning glory of His administrative institutions, not with forgiveness but with justice, to have made justice the only basis and the permanent foundation of His Most Great Peace, and to have proclaimed it in His Hidden Words as “the best beloved of all things” in His sight.

Shoghi Effendi, 'The Advent of Divine Justice', p. 26

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In countries where the local Bahá'í communities had sufficiently advanced in number and in influence measures were taken for the initiation of National Assemblies, the pivots round which all national undertakings must revolve. Designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will as the “Secondary Houses of Justice,” they constitute the electoral bodies in the formation of the International House of Justice, and are empowered to direct, unify, coordinate and stimulate the activities of individuals as well as local Assemblies within their jurisdiction. Resting on the broad base of organized local communities, themselves pillars sustaining the institution which must be regarded as the apex of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, these Assemblies are elected, according to the principle of proportional representation, by delegates representative of Bahá'í local communities assembled at Convention during the period of the Ridván Festival; are possessed of the necessary authority to enable them to insure the harmonious and efficient development of Bahá'í activity within their respective spheres; are freed from all direct responsibility for their policies and decisions to their electorates; are charged with the sacred duty of consulting the views, of inviting the recommendations and of securing the confidence and cooperation of the delegates and of acquainting them with their plans, problems and actions; and are supported by the resources of national funds to which all ranks of the faithful are urged to contribute....

Shoghi Effendi, 'God Passes By', p. 332

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Now that you have been elected to the National Spiritual Assembly he feels that this offers you your greatest field of service at the present time. Every other work for the Cause should be subordinated to this, and you should conserve your strength for this work — if you feel you have not enough to go around to all the other tasks as well! Your long and devoted services to the Cause have all been a training and preparation for wider activities, and this election to the N.S.A. itself is a preparation, he hopes, for still greater work in the future.

From a letter 28 July 1944 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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He was very happy to see that changes had been made in the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly this year, not from any reasons of personality, but because change itself is good and brings a fresh outlook into the discussions of any Assembly. He was also pleased to see that these changes involved more younger people being on the National Spiritual Assembly; with the tremendous amount of work which this second Seven Year Plan is going to involve, this will be a great help to the older members of that body.

From a letter 21 May 1946 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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We should respect the National Spiritual Assembly and the Local Spiritual Assembly because they are institutions founded by Bahá'u'lláh. It has nothing to do with personality, but is far above it. It will be a great day when the friends, on and off the Assemblies, come to fully grasp the fact that it is not the individuals on an Assembly which is important, but the Assembly as an institution.

From a letter 7 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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The Guardian regrets that, in the light of the Master's statement that the deliberations of Assemblies must be secret and confidential, it is not possible to have a non-Assembly member in the National Spiritual Assembly meeting. You must always remember that, in matters of principle, there can be no deviation; in America it may be possible for you to find a wholly trustworthy believer; but if your Assembly is permitted to have non-Assembly secretaries present, then the same privilege must be accorded

oriental and Latin American Assemblies; and can these other countries be assured of finding people of the calibre you have found? Highly personal subjects, damaging to the honour and happiness of others, are often taken up by National Assemblies, and the danger that confidence will be betrayed is already great enough with the 9 chosen representatives of the whole Community, let alone introducing non-Assembly members. You will just have to make your minutes a little more compact and sacrifice, if necessary, a certain amount of efficiency in order to follow this very important principle.

From a letter 5 July 1950 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

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EVIDENCES INCREASING HOSTILITY WITHOUT PERSISTENT MACHINATIONS WITHIN FORESHADOWING DIRE CONTEST DESTINED RANGE ARMY LIGHT FORCES DARKNESS BOTH SECULAR RELIGIOUS PREDICTED UNEQUIVOCAL LANGUAGE 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ NECESSITATE THIS CRUCIAL HOUR CLOSER ASSOCIATION HANDS FIVE CONTINENTS BODIES ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES NATIONAL BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES WORLD OVER JOINT INVESTIGATION NEFARIOUS ACTIVITIES INTERNAL ENEMIES ADOPTION WISE EFFECTIVE MEASURES COUNTERACT THEIR TREACHEROUS SCHEMES PROTECT MASS BELIEVERS ARREST SPREAD EVIL INFLUENCE. CALL UPON HANDS NATIONAL ASSEMBLIES EACH CONTINENT SEPARATELY ESTABLISH HENCEFORTH DIRECT CONTACT DELIBERATE WHENEVER FEASIBLE AS FREQUENTLY POSSIBLE EXCHANGE REPORTS TO BE SUBMITTED THEIR RESPECTIVE AUXILIARY BOARDS NATIONAL COMMITTEES EXERCISE UNRELAXING VIGILANCE CARRY OUT UNFLINCHINGLY SACRED INESCAPABLE DUTIES. SECURITY PRECIOUS FAITH PRESERVATION SPIRITUAL HEALTH BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES VITALITY FAITH ITS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS PROPER FUNCTIONING ITS LABORIOUSLY ERECTED INSTITUTIONS FRUITION ITS WORLD-WIDE ENTERPRISES FULFILMENT ITS ULTIMATE DESTINY ALL DIRECTLY DEPENDENT BEFITTING DISCHARGE WEIGHTY RESPONSIBILITIES NOW RESTING MEMBERS THESE TWO INSTITUTIONS OCCUPYING WITH UNIVERSAL HOUSE JUSTICE NEXT INSTITUTION GUARDIANSHIP FOREMOST RANK DIVINELY ORDAINED ADMINISTRATIVE HIERARCHY WORLD ORDER BAHÁ'U'LLÁH.

From a cable 4 July 1957 sent by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 'Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957', p. 123

