

III. Relation to the Community

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

Original English



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What has given me still greater pleasure is to learn that the members of this Central Body, which has assumed so grave a responsibility and is facing such delicate and difficult tasks, command individually and collectively not only the sympathy of their spiritual brethren and sisters but also can confidently rely on their active and whole-hearted support in the campaign of service to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. It is indeed as it should be, for if genuine and sustained co-operation and mutual confidence cease to exist between individual friends and their Local and National Assemblies, the all-beneficent work of the Cause must cease and nothing else can enable it to function harmoniously and effectively in future.

True, the Cause as every other movement has its own obstacles, complications and unforeseen difficulties, but unlike any other human organization it inspires a spirit of Faith and Devotion which can never fail to induce us to make sincere and renewed efforts to face these difficulties and smooth any differences that may and must arise.

I look forward with fervent hope to hear of these renewed efforts on your part and of the strong determination which you will never suffer to slacken, to maintain at any cost the unity, the effectiveness and the dignity of the Cause.

From a letter 23 December 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 28

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The need for the centralization of authority in the National Spiritual Assembly, and the concentration of power in the various local Assemblies, is made manifest when we reflect that the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is still in its age of tender growth and in a stage of transition; when we remember that the full implications and the exact significance of



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the Master's world-wide Instructions, as laid down in His Will are as yet not fully grasped, and the whole Movement has not sufficiently crystallized in the eyes of the world.

It is our primary task to keep the most vigilant eye on the manner and character of its growth, to combat effectively the forces of separatism and of sectarian tendencies, lest the Spirit of the Cause be obscured, its unity be threatened, its Teachings suffer corruption, lest extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the other, cause it to deviate from that Straight Path which alone can lead it to success.

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

'Bahá'í Administration', p. 42

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Let us ... remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views...

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand and fellowship, candour and courage on the other.

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they should serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must at all times avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves

from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.

And when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious, and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.

From a letter 23 February 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 63

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The News-Letter which you have lately initiated fulfils a very vital function and has been started admirably well. I would urge you to enlarge its scope, as much as your resources permit, that in time it may devote a special section to every phase of your activities, administrative, devotional, humanitarian, financial, educational and otherwise. That it may attain its object it must combine the essential qualities of accuracy, reliability, thoroughness, dignity and wisdom. It should become a great factor in promoting understanding, providing information on Bahá'í activity both local and foreign, in stimulating interest, in combating evil influences, and in upholding and safeguarding the institutions of the Cause. It should be made as representative as possible, should be replete with news, up-to-date in its information, and should arouse the keenest interest among believers and admirers alike in every corner of the globe. I cherish great hopes for its immediate future, and I trust you will devote your special attention to its development, and by devising well-conceived and world-wide measures transform this News-Letter into what I hope will become the foremost Bahá'í Journal of the world.

From a letter 10 April 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 82

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Let it be made clear to every inquiring reader that among the most outstanding and sacred duties incumbent upon those who have been called upon to initiate, direct and

co-ordinate the affairs of the Cause are those that require them to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve. Theirs is the duty to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments, the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote. Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short from every word and deed that might savour of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant member of the Bahá'í Family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the spirit of individual initiative and enterprise, and fortify the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all Local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.

From a letter 18 October 1927 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

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Regarding the proposed News-Letter ... this, the Guardian feels, is a splendid idea and can render a unique and much-needed help to your Assembly in its efforts for the establishment of the Administration, and the more effective functioning of its institutions throughout Australia and New Zealand. It has not only the great advantage of keeping the friends well informed about the events and developments in the Cause, but in addition can help in consolidating the organic unity of the believers by bringing them within the full orbit of the National Spiritual Assembly's jurisdiction. It is hoped that this body will do its utmost to maintain the publication of this bulletin, and will make full use of this splendid medium for the further widening and consolidation of the foundations of the Local as well as National Assemblies.

From a letter 23 September 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand

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This contact between the members of the National Assembly and the individual believers is certainly of immense value to the Cause, as it serves to promote, more than any other means, intelligent co-operation, fellowship and understanding among the friends. It is the National Spiritual Assembly's responsibility, therefore, to foster by every

means in its power this growth, and thus help in further consolidating its authority and prestige in the community. There is nothing that can inflict upon it a greater harm than the attitude of aloofness, of isolation from the general body of the believers.

It is Shoghi Effendi's hope that the success that has attended this last session of the National Spiritual Assembly at San Francisco will stimulate the members to hold their meetings in as many different centres as possible. He is fervently praying for their guidance in this matter.

From a letter 4 December 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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Before closing there is one suggestion in your letter which the Guardian wishes me to confirm, namely that it is one of the vital functions of the National Spiritual Assembly to be always in touch with local conditions in every community and to endeavour, through personal contacts and by means of regular correspondence, to guide the friends, individually and collectively, in all their activities.

From a letter 30 June 1938 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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Let every participator in the continent-wide campaign initiated by the American believers, and particularly those engaged in pioneer work in virgin territories, bear in mind the necessity of keeping in close and constant touch with those responsible agencies designed to direct, coordinate, and facilitate the teaching activities of the entire community. Whether it be the body of their elected national representatives, or its chief auxiliary institution, the National Teaching Committee, or its subsidiary organs, the regional teaching committees, or the local Spiritual Assemblies and their respective teaching committees, they who labor for the spread of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh should, through constant interchange of ideas, through letters, circulars, reports, bulletins and other means of communication with these established instruments designed for the propagation of the Faith, insure the smooth and speedy functioning of the teaching machinery of their Administrative Order. Confusion, delay, duplication of efforts, dissipation of energy will, thereby, be completely avoided, and the mighty flood of the grace of Bahá'u'lláh, flowing abundantly and without the least obstruction through these essential channels will so inundate the hearts and souls of men as to enable them to bring forth the harvest repeatedly predicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Shoghi Effendi, 'The Advent of Divine Justice', p. 52

The Guardian is, doubtless, well aware of the existing imperfections in the administrative machinery of the Cause, but these, he strongly feels, should be attributed not to the administrative system itself, but to the administrators of the Faith, who by reason of their human limitations and imperfections can never hope to entirely fulfil those ideal conditions set forth in the Teachings. Many of the existing defects in the present-day activities of the believers, however, will as the Community develops and gains in experience be gradually removed, and healthier and more progressive conditions prevail. And it is towards the realization of this high aim that the friends should earnestly and unitedly strive.

The Guardian feels certain that no matter how much your heart may be afflicted at the sight of the difficulties now confronting the American Community, and however revolting may appear to you the attitude and the shortcomings of certain of its members, you will far from being discouraged be stimulated to exert every effort in your power to remedy such unhealthy conditions, confident that in your earnest and sincere attempt to do so, you will be assisted and guided by the unfailing confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh.

From a letter 14 May 1939 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

The Guardian believes that a great deal of the difficulties from which the believers ... feel themselves to be suffering are caused by their neither correctly understanding nor putting into practice the administration. They seem — many of them — to be prone to continually challenging and criticizing the decisions of their Assemblies. If the Bahá'ís undermine the very bodies which are, however immaturely, seeking to co-ordinate Bahá'í activities and administer Bahá'í affairs, if they continually criticize their acts and challenge or belittle their decisions, they not only prevent any real rapid progress in the Faith's development from taking place, but they repel outsiders who quite rightly may ask how we ever expect to unite the whole world when we are so disunited among ourselves!

There is only one remedy for this: to study the administration, to obey the Assemblies, and each believer seek to perfect his own character as a Bahá'í. We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weaknesses of others; if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength. The Bahá'ís everywhere, when the administration is first established, find it very difficult to adjust themselves. They have to

learn to obey, even when the Assembly may be wrong, for the sake of unity. They have to sacrifice their personalities, to a certain extent, in order that the community life may grow and develop as a whole. These things are difficult — but we must realize that they will lead us to a very much greater, more perfect, way of life when the Faith is properly established according to the administration.

The Guardian would advise you to abide by the decisions of the National Spiritual Assembly in all matters. If they, knowing the requirements of the Faith all over India, do not feel it the time or advisable to publish your writings, you should accept their decision. Also you should not seek to publish any books or pamphlets without their sanction. Concentrate on teaching the Holy Faith, and put your trust in Bahá'u'lláh. The Guardian will pray for you and all the dear friends there.

From a letter 26 October 1943 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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The Bahá'ís are fully entitled to address criticisms to their Assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the Assembly, Local or National, but then they must whole-heartedly accept the advice or decision of the Assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Bahá'í administration....

He always has the right to step in and countermand the decisions of a National Assembly; if he did not possess this right he would be absolutely impotent to protect the Faith, just as the National Spiritual Assembly, if it were divested of the right to countermand the decisions of a Local Assembly, would be incapable of watching over and guiding the national welfare of the Bahá'í Community....

It is the duty of the National Spiritual Assembly to exercise the greatest wisdom, forbearance and tact in handling the affairs of the Cause. Many of the differences which arise between the believers are due to their immaturity, their extreme zeal and sincerity.

From a letter 13 May 1945 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. 55

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The N.S.A.s the world over, owing to the spiritual immaturity of the believers, must at the present time exert the greatest patience in dealing with the friends; otherwise, as

seems to be rapidly becoming the case in Australia, the friends will take sides, bitterness will increase and what started out as a small thing (however unjustified and regrettable a departure from the Bahá'í spirit) will become a menace to the progress of the Faith and definitely retard its progress.

From a letter 8 August 1945 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. 58

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Over and over, in going through the correspondence he received from your Assembly, he was struck by the fact that the friends acted so unadministratively. Instead of taking up their accusations and problems and unhappy feelings with their Local Assembly, or the National Assembly, they referred to individuals or individual members of the Assembly, or they refused to meet with the Assembly. The first thing a believer should do is to turn to an Assembly — that is why we have Assemblies! He feels this trouble would never have arisen if the Bahá'ís utilized their Assemblies as they should...

From a letter 30 June 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria

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The question of your budget, which you have raised in your letter, is one of great importance. In spite of the numbers which you represent and the enthusiasm of the Bahá'ís, your Assembly must face the fact that it represents a very poor community, financially. Any over-ambitious budget, which would place an oppressive financial burden on the friends, would be highly unwise, because, unless it is met, it will give them a feeling at the end of the year of intense frustration.

He thinks that what you have outlined is too much. Your Assembly will have to, particularly during this first year of its existence, be less ambitious as regards projects involving money, and devote itself particularly to encouraging the friends, reinforcing the foundations of the Local Assemblies, assisting the groups to attain Assembly status, and deepening in every way it can the education of the African friends in the Faith.

The other National Spiritual Assemblies, as you know, are having their own problems financially; and, although there is no objection to appealing to them to give you some help, the Guardian doubts very much whether they will be in a position to add very substantially to your funds at this time.

From a letter 6 July 1956 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Central and East Africa

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He appreciates your spirit of devotion to the Faith, but he feels that you, your husband and ... should comply with the instructions of the National Spiritual Assembly. There can be no protection for the Faith unless the friends are willing to submit to their administrative bodies, especially when these are acting in good faith; and the individual believers are not in a position to judge their National Body. If any wrong has been done, we must leave it in the hands of God, knowing, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, that He will right it, and in the mean time not disrupt the Cause of God by constantly harping on these matters.

From a letter 3 February 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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He feels that your Assembly must keep before its eyes the balance specified by Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, in other words, justice, reward and retribution. Although the Cause is still young and tender, and many of the believers inexperienced, and therefore loving forbearance is often called for in the place of harsh measures, this does not mean that a National Spiritual Assembly can under any circumstances tolerate disgraceful conduct, flagrantly contrary to our Teachings, on the part of any of its members, whoever they may be and from wherever they may come. You should vigilantly watch over and protect the interests of the Bahá'í Community, and the moment you see that any of the Persian residents in Germany, or, for that matter, German Bahá'ís themselves, are acting in a way to bring disgrace upon the name of the Faith, warn them, and, if necessary, deprive them immediately of their voting rights if they refuse to change their ways. Only in this way can the purity of the Faith be preserved. Compromise and weak measures will obscure the vision of its followers, sap its strength, lower it in the eyes of the public and prevent it from making any progress.

From a letter 14 August 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria

