THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE FAITH

Extracts from the 28th of December 2010 Letter from the Universal House of Justice

This study aid consists of extracts from the 28th of December 2010 letter that refers to the Institutions of the Faith. As it is extracts from the letter, one needs to refer to the letter for a fuller understanding of the background, setting and the context from which the extract is taken from.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER 2
ALL INSTITUTIONS 2
MEMBERS OF THE CONTINENTAL BOARD OF COUNCILLORS 3
THE AUXILIARY BOARD MEMBERS 4
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES AND REGIONAL COUNCILS 6
LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES 7
CLUSTER ADMINISTRATION 10
SERVING AS MEMBERS OF INSTITUTIONS 10
**Administrative Order**

§ 13 That this process will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time “its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order” is clear from his writings.

§ 28

- “Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause,” he stated, “we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created.”
- The Bahá’í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, “is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself”.
- It is intended, he made clear, “to serve a twofold purpose”.
- On the one hand, “it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion” of the Cause “along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal.” On the other, “it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved.”
- And he went on to explain: “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 coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá’í community.”

**All Institutions**

§ 5 All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members.

§ 37 It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in
study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

§41 The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe.

And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order.

MEMBERS OF THE CONTINENTAL BOARD OF COUNCILLORS

§ 1 Over the coming days you are asked to formulate a clear conception of how the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will assist the community in building on its extraordinary achievements—

– extending to other spheres of operation the mode of learning which has so undeniably come to characterize its teaching endeavours,
– gaining the capacity needed to employ with a high degree of coherence the instruments and methods which it has so painstakingly developed,
– and increasing well beyond all previous numbers the ranks of those who, alive to the vision of the Faith, are labouring so assiduously in pursuit of its God-given mission.

§ 29 It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá’í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe.

The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual
Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

§ 31 Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties

– to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God,

– to promote learning, and

– to assist all in their endeavours to develop an upright and praiseworthy character.

§ 40 To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community.

THE AUXILIARY BOARD MEMBERS

§ 5 To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants.

In this, as in all their work,

– they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought,

– flexibility and resourcefulness.

– They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends,

– supporting them through their struggles and

– partaking in their joys.

– Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service.
Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan.

Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action.

Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress.

And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

§ 8 Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics.

As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause.

In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted.

Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning.

The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.

§ 17 To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages

- the friends to be methodical but not rigid,
- creative but not haphazard,
- decisive but not hasty,
- careful but not controlling,
- recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.
§ 19 While collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils will be one of your primary concerns, your auxiliaries will need to direct more and more of their energies towards fostering institutional capacity at the local level, where the demands of community building assert themselves so unmistakably. To help you envision what lies ahead of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants everywhere, particularly in clusters experiencing large-scale expansion and consolidation, we ask you to reflect, first, on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many rural areas of the world, in which the vast majority of such clusters today are to be found.

§ 35 In promoting this environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of two fundamental, interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated by Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be eschewed.

**National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils**

§ 18 Moreover, we have no doubt that, in concert with National Assemblies, you will be able to help Regional Councils enhance their institutional capacity.

It will be imperative that all Regional Councils pay close attention to the operation of the training institute and the functioning of Area Teaching Committees.

With this in mind, they will find it necessary to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it.

These will include

- a well-functioning regional office that provides the secretary with basic organizational support;
- a sound system of accounting that accommodates divers channels for the flow of funds to and from clusters;
- an efficient means of communication that takes into consideration the reality of life in villages and neighbourhoods; and,
- where warranted, physical structures that facilitate intensified and focused activity.
What is important to acknowledge in this respect is that only if the Councils themselves are engaged in a process of learning will such mechanisms prove to be effective. Otherwise, while ostensibly created to support learning in action by an increasing number of participants in neighbourhoods and villages, systems being developed may well work against it in subtle ways, stifling, unintentionally, rising aspirations at the grassroots.

**LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES**

§ 18 Whatever the nature of the arrangements made at the cluster level for coordinating large scale activity, continued progress will depend on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and on the increased capacity of Regional Bahá’í Councils and ultimately National Spiritual Assemblies.

§ 20 Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

§ 21 What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward:

1. Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member’s personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it.

2. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá’í principle.

3. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes.
4. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose.

5. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

§ 22

6. Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it.

7. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village.

8. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

§ 23

9. Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly’s growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations.

10. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress.

11. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly’s mind.

12. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance.
13. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

§ 24

14. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised.

§ 25

15. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them—the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá’í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance.

16. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

§ 26 As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as “the trusted ones of the Merciful among men”. Thus will these Assemblies become “shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.”

§ 27 Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly’s development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population.

− The first necessitates the division of the Assembly’s area of jurisdiction into neighbourhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each.

− The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area—social, political,
and cultural—with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

**Cluster Administration**

§ 17 Though the central elements of the process of growth remain unchanged in the clusters in the vanguard of learning, sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity.

Different innovations have already been introduced, on the basis of both geographic considerations and numerical growth.

- The division of the cluster into smaller units,
- the decentralization of the reflection meeting,
- the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators,
- the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field—these are some of the arrangements that have been made thus far.

**Serving as Members of Institutions**

§ 30 Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time.

It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá’í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows.

- Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements.

- Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one’s own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate.

- Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they “must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and
inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to
the welfare and happiness of the Bahá’í Community and promote the common
weal.”

Bahá’í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual
and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such
functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service
pervades Bahá’í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner
implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith.

§ 32 Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the “justice, equity,
truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness” that must
“distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá’í community.” Though applicable to all
its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its “elected
representatives, whether local, regional, or national,” whose sense of moral rectitude
should stand in clear contrast to “the demoralizing influences which a corruption-
ridden political life so strikingly manifests”.

He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their
lives—

– in their business dealings, in their domestic lives,
– in all manner of employment,
– in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—
– and to observe its requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws
  and principles of the Faith.

Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching
Committee, every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and
all members of every local, regional and national Bahá’í body, whether elected or
appointed, appreciate the significance of the Guardian’s plea to ponder in their hearts
the implications of the moral rectitude which he described with such clarity. May their
actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its high destiny
and its inherent nobility.

§ 33 No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá’í enterprise today are the Guardian’s
forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, “with its implications
of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness”. He was unequivocal
in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied “by the indecencies, the
vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates,
perpetuates, and fosters”.

Page | 11
§ 34 The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that “any division or cleavage” in the ranks of the Faith “is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals.” He made clear that the friends should manifest “complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or colour.”

§ 36 Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá’í life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Bahá’í activity.

§ 38 Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: “We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.”

§ 39 Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. ... The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá’í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order. ... If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

§ 42 And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian’s words that “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.”

“Never” would they 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.”

“With extreme humility,” they approach their tasks 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 serve, but also their esteem and real affection."
Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see
themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment
along avenues productive and meritorious.