

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

November 22, 2015

To the American Bahá'í community
for the Feast of Qawl

Dearly loved Friends,

So moved were we by the thoughtful, richly informative report we recently received from the Spiritual Assembly of New York—significantly designated the “City of the Covenant” by a loving Master during His 1912 American sojourn—we felt sharing it with you at this Feast, just days before November 26 and the Day of the Covenant, to be perfectly timely, appropriate, and, we hope, inspiring.

With all five of the city’s boroughs within its bounds, the New York Assembly’s jurisdiction is vast, encompassing more than eight million people who constitute perhaps the most diverse population of any city on the planet. With several hundred Bahá’ís dispersed among the boroughs from Staten Island to Queens, the demands on that institution are complex and challenging. For many years, the New York Assembly has, like so many others, struggled to find sufficient energy and resources to devote to the process of growth while managing other pressing responsibilities. Over time, however, it has gained a new effectiveness by paying attention to certain fundamentals. Chief among these, according to the Assembly’s report, is “keeping a constant focus on the guidance. Time and again, and often in partnership . . . with the Auxiliary Board members, the Assembly would return to key passages and paragraphs [of the letters of the Universal House of Justice], most especially those related to LSAs.” Such study increasingly illuminated the path of service for the Assembly—and, as its members served, their experiences helped them to attain increasingly deeper levels of understanding.

Over time, the Assembly also developed a greater awareness of the need for unity among its members and the vital importance of calling upon the spiritual forces that such unity makes available. So acutely did the members sense this that they agreed to take a retreat together at Green Acre Bahá'í School. Their report recounts the experience:

“In that rarified atmosphere, the Assembly prayed together in the Master’s room, faced its inadequacies, beseeched the Blessed Beauty for assistance, acknowledging its own powerlessness . . . about how to tackle the often overwhelming amount of work and responsibilities of the Local Assembly. Finally, a deep realization set in—the realization that the work could only be accomplished when the Assembly became so unified that the Holy Spirit could work through the institution of the Assembly as an instrument instead of the nine members thinking they had to somehow accomplish the work alone. . . . As soon as the focus was on building true unity and becoming a source of divine attraction, a new unity of vision began to slowly emerge and the dynamics in the Assembly chamber radically shifted. . . . The nature of the consultation changed from a struggle among competing views to seeking truth, detaching from personal notions of the ‘right way,’ trusting that wrong decisions made in love and unity would be made right. . . . The Assembly’s agenda shifted from an emphasis on solving problems to building capacity.”

Capacity building was not seen as a concern confined to Assembly members, however; rather, it was seen to include all of the believers and any others who are involved in the life of the community. Understanding that “the Administrative Order is not an end in itself, but a means for serving the community,” Assembly members began to ask themselves how they could better focus on “serving the servants.” This realization

quickly gave way to another insight, which they described as follows:

“Of all the capacities needed for service . . . perhaps one of the most overlooked is the ability to function in a constant, humble mode of learning. The Assembly is in what can be described only as a massive learning mode—and as such, it is most interested in finding ways to collaborate with others who are interested in being in a similar learning process. . . . The Assembly began to see one of its primary roles in the Plan . . . as a facilitator for developing a unified vision for growth for the whole cluster—a plan that would not be dictated by the Assembly ‘from above,’ but that would be co-evolved by the various institutions and agencies and that also engaged the broad base of the Bahá'í community—and then finding ways to support and encourage those who were actively carrying it out—whether as individuals, teaching teams, neighborhoods, or those serving in official capacities.”

Working now in close and joyful collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members, the Area Teaching Committee, the training institute, and others, the Assembly is confident that the number of core activities will expand dramatically in the coming months, from about 70 to at least 100, engaging many new participants in addition to the current 500 and bringing the current Plan to a victorious conclusion at Ridván 2016.

To sum up its learning, the Assembly made use of an incident in the life of the Master:

“A child once asked ‘Abdu'l-Bahá why all the rivers of the earth flow into the ocean. The Master’s reply [was], ‘Because it sets itself lower than them all and so draws them to itself.’ Like ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, the Assembly constantly seeks to maintain a humble attitude in its approach. It does so first and foremost by listening and, increasingly, by creating spaces for others to share and learn.”

Friends, the confirmations experienced by New York’s esteemed Assembly are assuredly available to any institution, individual, or community that is engaged wholeheartedly in the work of the Cause. Just as surely, that Assembly—and all of us—will continue to grow in capacity the more we strive to serve and to learn with unity, purity of motive, and perseverance. We are reminded of these words of our beloved Master:

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them.

Be assured our abiding love travels with you in all your devoted efforts to advance this sacred Cause, as do our prayers for your well-being, happiness, and great success.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
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Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary