



Ridván 2007 Annual Report

*National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States and its Agencies*

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION



2006-2007

Ridván 2007 Annual Message

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States



Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We greet you with wholehearted love and admiration as we offer this report of our efforts to achieve significant progress in the process of growth in the United States Bahá'í community.

Our assessment of the Bahá'í community's spiritual vitality and prospects for growth inspires our confidence that "the elements required for a concerted effort to infuse [our country] with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation" are robust and capable. Public awareness and receptivity to the Bahá'í Faith are high, tens of thousands of Bahá'ís are trained in the core activities, well over 1,100 children's classes are held regularly, 42 programs of intensive growth are in operation, and Local Spiritual Assemblies and cluster agencies evince increasing vigor in their pursuit of the Plan's goals. Nevertheless, as we reported last year, growth remains low. The past 10 years have witnessed a sharp decline of enrollments (50 percent). This year the current rate of net growth is nearing 0 percent.

At present, we feel that the community as a whole is still learning to appreciate fully the vision and broad range of requirements of the "framework for action" of the Five Year Plan. Having recently completed the Inter-Institutional Conference at Pensacola, we observed that the consultation of the institutional leaders mirrors issues identical to those being raised in clusters across the national community, an indication that inter-institutional meeting participants are actively involved in the clusters. As we approach the end of the first year of the Plan, we take this opportunity to report what we are learning in our efforts to advance the process of growth, and the actions we feel are needed to accelerate our progress.

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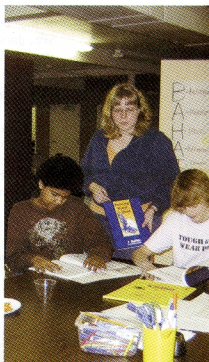
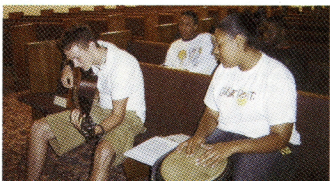
Signs of progress

Following receipt and initial study of the December 27, 2005, letter of the Universal House of Justice, we launched a series of communications to Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Bahá'í community urging the institutions and individual believers to study this seminal document of the Five Year Plan. Among these communications were reports to the friends describing the National Assembly's own approach to the letter's study, and its adoption of the "Framework for Action" as the community's operational plan and baseline for measuring its progress. There is gratifying evidence that the Spiritual Assemblies and friends have taken this duty to heart and are using the letter as the standard reference document of the Plan.

Currently over 22,000 Bahá'ís have taken at least one institute course, nearly one-third of the believers with known addresses. Some 6,000 are tutors. Slightly fewer than 1,900 study circles function regularly in the community, a trend that has held steady for the past six months. Regular devotional meetings are holding steady at 1,600 nationally. It is noteworthy that the data cited here are conservative undercounts of the total numbers, based only on registered participants.

There are well over 1,000 regular children's classes, predominantly in centralized Bahá'í schools, with a small but growing number of neighborhood classes. Non-Bahá'í participation in Bahá'í schools averages 36 percent nationally, with neighborhood classes slightly higher. Junior youth groups are increasing slowly and currently number 109.

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Growth

In addition to the 42 clusters that have launched intensive programs of growth, there are another 100 clusters advancing toward that stage and 100 more that should achieve that level of advancement by the end of the Five Year Plan. We note with great satisfaction that communities where the friends are increasingly involved in the institute process, participating in reflection meetings, and holding devotionals and children's classes are experiencing impressive advances in unity and vitality. Moreover, study circles are proving to be an effective means for the consolidation of new believers, instilling confidence and an intimate sense of connection to the Bahá'í community. We are confident that the habituation of these practices will lay the foundation of a Bahá'í culture that shares a common vocabulary about growth, and habits of regular engagement with the Word of God, communal prayer, meetings for reflection and planning, and a disciplined focus on the spiritual and social quality of community life, all of which are essential to the long-term development and growth of the Bahá'í community.

Among other indicators of the community's spiritual vitality are the continued strength of the flow of pioneers and traveling teachers to international service, and the past five years of record contributions to the Bahá'í Funds, the Kingdom Project, and now the Chilean Temple, for which \$10 million has been raised to date.

The division of the western region and the election of the respective Regional Bahá'í Councils of the Northwestern and Southwestern States has been very successful and is achieving many of the hoped-for results. Likewise, the transfer of responsibility for the Louis G. Gregory Bahá'í Institute to the Regional Bahá'í Council of the Southern States has been smooth and productive. The Institute is fast regaining its old spirit and serving an expanding audience of believers, institutions, and seekers, advancing the core activities. The Native American Bahá'í Institute and the Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute continue to be outstanding models of systematic advancement of the growth process. Moreover, a thriving network of increasingly effective Regional Training Institutes serves the needs of friends in clusters throughout the community.

Pilot projects of Internet proclamation launched last year strongly suggest that public receptivity to the Bahá'í message remains extremely high. Seekers who contact the Seeker Response System are nurtured to the point that a growing number are becoming actively engaged with the Bahá'í community. Historically, almost half (48 percent), and currently 75 percent, of the seekers who call the Seeker Response Line ask how to find the local Bahá'ís.

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And finally, our communications strategy aimed at refining Bahá'í publications and productions to reach a broader Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í audience has produced multiple national awards (including 11 more this year) for *Brilliant Star* magazine, *World Order*, *U.S. Bahá'í Newsreel*, and the Bahá'í public website (www.bahai.us). We have also made continuous improvements to *The American Bahá'í*, messages to the Nineteen Day Feasts, and to experimental communications such as "viral videos." We are especially pleased with the development of electronic regional newsletters by the Regional Councils and the National Teaching Committee, which have proven to be important resources for learning about growth.

The range of our activities and the regular flow of correspondence with the individual believers and Bahá'í institutions expose the National Assembly to a wide diversity of local experiences and perceptions by which we have gained a broad understanding of the state of the Bahá'í community. We are pleased to report that a solid core of the friends has embraced the Plan and is responsive to the guidance of the House of Justice.

The National Spiritual Assembly is compelled by profound feelings of admiration and gratitude to salute Continental Counselors Dr. Farzin Aghdasi, Dr. Eugene S. Andrews, Mr. Stephen Birkland, Ms. Rebequa Murphy, and Mr. Gerardo Vargas and the members of their Auxiliary Boards for their heroic and sacrificial leadership during the course of the Five Year Plan. The frequent and intimate collaboration we enjoy with the Counselors is a major reason for our confidence in the ultimate success of the Five Year Plan.

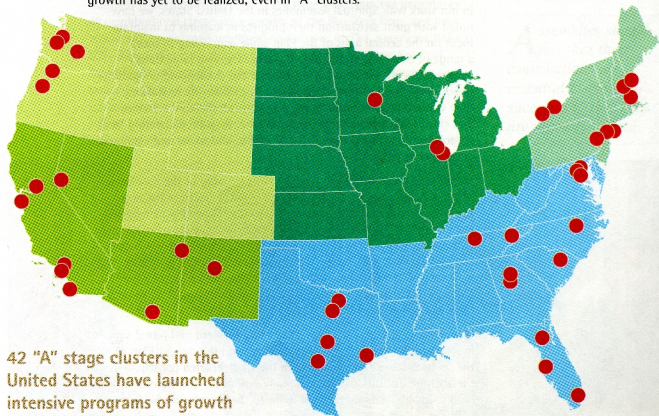
Likewise our loving admiration grows stronger for the Regional Bahá'í Councils, whose tireless devotion to the challenge of advancing the process of growth has gained the confidence of the friends and increasingly reflects their learning about growth itself.

Growth

These encouraging indices of spiritual vitality stand in sharp contrast to the persistently low rate of growth of our community. At the present rate, our net growth will approach zero. From 1980 to 1997, the Bahá'í community nearly doubled in size (77,000 to 137,000, excluding Iranian immigrants), with significant increases in the rate of retention. The 50 percent drop in enrollments since 1997 means that enrollments are now at the same level they were in the 1960s, when the Bahá'í community was a small fraction of its current size. The number of enrollments to date for this year is 872.

Although the top tier of clusters with intensive programs of growth in progress currently yields a disproportionate share of aggregate national growth, it would be misleading to suggest that this implies a new development. Historically, those same areas have always contributed disproportionately to growth in this country, as they have the largest populations of Bahá'ís. The difference now is that while their proportionate contributions remain the same, their rate of enrollments has decreased. The aim of achieving both accelerated and sustained growth has yet to be realized, even in "A" clusters.

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42 "A" stage clusters in the United States have launched intensive programs of growth as of early spring 2007.

Issues for consideration

We believe that the obstacles to growth have nothing to do with the Plan itself and much to do with how the Plan is understood and being implemented. We are optimistic that refinements in our approach to carrying out the Five Year Plan will do much to accelerate the process of growth. Several examples follow.

The role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Five Year Plan

The Universal House of Justice has issued substantial guidance on the role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Five Year Plan. That guidance describes the "thrilling opportunities" for Spiritual Assemblies to study the guidance of the Five Year Plan, to work in close collaboration with "cluster and core activities," to become "fully involved in all aspects of planning and implementation at the level of the cluster," and to provide "guidance, encouragement and support" for cluster and individual initiatives, to cite just a few examples.

Yet, there is a pervasive feeling of confusion and dislocation among many Local Spiritual Assemblies, including those in "A" clusters.

In our work with Spiritual Assemblies in the United States, we have noted with great satisfaction their progress in learning to maintain focus on the central aims of the Plan while continuing to meet a range of other responsibilities. Assemblies serving large Bahá'í communities are prime examples. Despite the challenging obligations imposed by size and complexity, these Assemblies are revitalizing their communities through steady emphasis on the core activities and cluster advancement. At the same time, they are pioneering fresh approaches to pastoral care, external affairs, and social and economic development projects.

We are also pleased to note that the clear majority of the members of these Assemblies are themselves active in the institute training process. Some 60 percent of all Local Spiritual Assembly members have completed at least one book in the Ruhi sequence of courses, 15 percent have completed the whole sequence, and 25 percent have completed Book 7. This rate of participation is disproportionately high compared to the national community. There is also a growing trend among Local Spiritual Assemblies to engage in institutional study of the sequence of courses.

We are concerned that feelings of disempowerment and mixed signals regarding roles and responsibilities are robbing the current Plan of the spiritual benefits that flow from the wholehearted participation of these divine institutions, and the many significant contributions these highly capable Assemblies could make to the progress of the teaching

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work in a number of areas of the country. Assemblies should feel that their contributions are essential to the Plan's success and that they are urgently needed.

Narrowness of focus and initiative

In many areas, exclusive focus on the two essential movements has led to misunderstandings as to the kinds of activities that are permissible for the friends to be engaged in and that are consistent with the Plan. The result is a narrowly defined model of growth that permits a small range of initiative, allows little creativity, and accepts few real innovations.

We are frequently asked whether firesides are an acceptable form of teaching, despite a clear call for "campaigns of study circles and firesides" by the Universal House of Justice.

We have received several reports of Local Spiritual Assemblies who have canceled their Bahá'í children's classes in order to increase the number of neighborhood classes. We fully appreciate the importance of neighborhood classes as a priority of the Five Year Plan, and have repeatedly encouraged neighborhood classes in *The American Bahá'í*, *U.S. Bahá'í Newsreel*, letters to the Nineteen Day Feast, Spiritual Assembly Development conferences, and other venues. However, our understanding of the January 5, 2006, letter is that both Bahá'í schools and neighborhood classes are important. A comprehensive survey of Bahá'í schools showed that 36 percent of the children attending them are not Bahá'ís. After discussion with the Counselors

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on these points, we have since issued a letter of clarification on Bahá'í schools and neighborhood classes to the community.

Another issue is proclamation. While we fully appreciate the need for Bahá'í communities to avoid placing undue emphasis on proclamation activities, we have learned from experience that the proper use of media and other forms of proclamation can be invaluable tools for generating seekers, whose interest can then be nurtured through the core activities or other forms of teaching. Our national media initiative practiced the same disciplines of planning, action, and reflection that the House of Justice is exhorting Bahá'ís everywhere to acquire.

Nearly 1,000 souls entered the Faith through experimental television broadcasts and Internet proclamations. A recent study showed that one out of every six new believers' first point of contact was the Bahá'í public website or the Seeker Response telephone line. The problem we face is that proclamation is widely considered to be inconsistent with the framework for action in the Five Year Plan, making it difficult to engage the friends in serious discussion of the uses of media to generate seekers in advanced clusters.

Past experiments have taught us that through media, especially the Internet, we can learn a great deal about seekers' hopes and cares and, especially, about the location of receptive populations.

We are concerned that—notwithstanding the persistent emphasis the House of Justice has placed on the importance of having an outward-looking orientation—hardly a word is spoken about who seekers are, what they want, or how they experienced their contact with the Bahá'í community. There is little institutional discussion about the many seekers who start one of the institute courses and do not return, or of what the important features are in a seeker's path to becoming a Bahá'í. We are concerned that such narrow definitions of the process of teaching, which are inconsistent with guidance of the House of Justice, cause us to miss important opportunities for learning how to meet the wide diversity of seekers' needs.

Another limiting factor is that our discourse about teaching does not sufficiently take into consideration issues of broad social concern. During the period from 1980 to 1997, during which the Bahá'í community nearly doubled in size, the driving forces of growth were the Bahá'í vision for social transformation and practical plans for teaching. Having gained its initial impetus from the sacrifices of the Iranian Bahá'ís, the Bahá'í community was galvanized by a series of visionary messages including the statement on Bahá'u'lláh, *The Promise of World Peace*, and the statements on human prosperity,

race, equality of the sexes—all inspirational tools for teaching in the context of the House of Justice's vision of the completion of the Mount Carmel projects and its relationship to the process of growth. During that period, Bahá'ís increased the size of the Bahá'í community, the retention of new believers, the number of functioning Spiritual Assemblies, contributions to the Funds, the spiritual education of children and youth, social and economic development, and more.

More recently, the House of Justice has published the statement on religious tolerance, emphasized study of Shoghi Effendi's *World Order* letters, published *One Common Faith*, and, in its Ridván 2006 message, restated classic themes originally addressed by the Guardian to broaden our vision, deepen our understanding, and facilitate the teaching work. However, throughout the country the visionary messages of the past and present are seldom mentioned or employed in the service of teaching, although they remain relevant to broad social concerns.

Bahá'ís are in the forefront of a divinely ordained process of transforming the world and laying the groundwork for a global civilization. Today, this sense of mission is often challenged by a narrow understanding of Five Year Plan strategies and tactics and an all-too-often inflexible system of implementation. The spirit of galvanizing vision that causes one's heart to pound and impels one to action is overshadowed by the tactical requirements of the Plan and

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a decade of no progress in growth. We do not wish to idealize the past, in which there were also many challenges. However, we want to recognize and carry forward sound approaches from past efforts as we strive to advance the process of growth today.

We feel a particular need for flexibility and innovation in reaching out to young people—Bahá'ís and others—as well as to populations that have shown historic receptivity to growth. In the latter case, there have been some noteworthy developments. For instance, a local Black Men's Gathering in the Detroit area recently was attended by nine African American non-Bahá'ís. Of these, five enrolled by the end of the weekend. This is an excellent illustration of adapting elements of the Plan, such as devotional meetings and study of the Word of God, with an issue of concern to the seekers, and central to our mission as American Bahá'ís, in a manner attractive to a specific population.

What appears to be underappreciated in most clusters is that receptive populations, and especially youth, cannot be expected to come to the Faith entirely on our terms. We must acknowledge that there is still

much to learn about reaching them, and that successful approaches will eventually emerge to the extent that we cultivate an atmosphere of experimentation, imagination, and audacity.

Next steps

We are keenly aware that a robust atmosphere of learning requires a higher level of vision and discourse and the avoidance of false dichotomies. We intend to continue using our communications outlets to highlight examples of learning about growth.

In the light of our observations on the status of the Five Year Plan in the United States, we feel that the following actions would be beneficial to its progress:

1. Emphasize vision at the local level. The friends need constant reinforcement of the great spiritual processes at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation—"souls must be transformed, new models of life thereby consolidated." They must be inspired



to relate the seminal teachings of our Faith to the great problems of society. And they must be given a freer hand to act. Analysis, planning, and strategic focus are essentials to growth, and there is no doubt about the importance of acquiring such skills. But they are matters of the intellect, and are secondary to matters of the heart in inspiring commitment and initiative.

People will make sacrifices for a great purpose that they will not make for activities. A focus on activities at the expense of vision will yield a community that is rule-bound and prone to conflict, where a culture of learning and innovation are nearly impossible, where individuals are treated as "insiders" or "outsiders" according to perceptions of their obedience to direction, and where expression of legitimate concerns is viewed as uninformed or disloyal.

A sense of vision and purpose, complemented by a practical strategy for accomplishment, inspires unity, self-organization, initiative, and innovation. We see each of these elements in the "framework for action" of the Five Year Plan, and we are wholeheartedly confident that support of their full expression will inspire a wave of teaching that will bring dramatic results.

2. **Encourage the participation of Local Spiritual Assemblies** through emphasis of the full range of guidance on the role of Assemblies in the Five Year Plan.
3. **Support a wider range of initiatives with the core activities at the hub.** Experimental approaches to media proclamation, fireside campaigns, innovative responses to seekers' needs and preferences fit easily within the "framework for action" and would stimulate the release of a great storehouse of energy among the friends. The core activities of systematic engagement with the Word of God, communal devotions, and the spiritual education of children and junior youth will always remain the foundation of Bahá'í community vitality and will only be strengthened by the complementary activities of the friends.
4. **Encourage understanding among the friends and institutional members of the complementary function of centralized Bahá'í schools and neighborhood classes.** The community must learn that both are needed and both should be multiplied. The friends must also learn to appreciate the complementary relationship between Ruhi Book 3 and the Core Curriculum. Ruhi Book 3 provides 15 lessons for children ages five and six. The Core Curriculum extends the Bahá'í education of children for seven years providing systematic education on topics including the Central Figures, the Covenant,

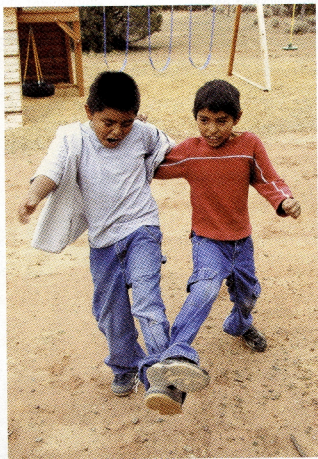
The core activities are thriving on the Navajo reservation with high levels of non-Bahá'í participation. They serve as the foundation of a variety of services and teaching activities that are designed to meet the specific needs of the resident populations.

Bahá'í history and social teachings, dealing with peers, and learning to teach the Bahá'í Faith. These two approaches must be harmonized to gain the full benefits of our efforts.

5. Engage in a deeper examination of the factors contributing to current growth. In our experience at regional and cluster meetings, it is routinely assumed for purposes of analysis that all enrollments in any given cluster can be attributed directly and only to the core activities. Further investigation almost always yields a far more complex picture that includes proclamations, firesides, striking innovations in approach, and other types of activity that go unacknowledged.

The Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI) is a good example of the benefits of broadening the scope of our work. The National Spiritual Assembly and its agencies have worked closely with NABI for many years, and some Counselors have called the cluster that is home to NABI the most advanced cluster in the United States. The core activities are thriving on the Navajo reservation with high levels of non-Bahá'í participation. They serve as the foundation of a variety of services and teaching activities that are designed to meet the specific needs of the resident populations. Special gatherings, social and economic development projects, social services, teaching projects, and other activities complement the core activities to sustain the advancement of growth in that cluster. These must all be taken into consideration to get an accurate picture of the NABI formula for growth.

6. Encourage evaluation of our implementation of the institute training process. To date, the achievement of 6,000 tutors in the United States has not yielded growth in enrollments, nor is the growth of the core activities themselves commensurate with the number of Bahá'ís who have completed courses (for example, only seven percent of those who have completed Book 1 have started devotional gatherings).



We are firm in our belief that tutor accompaniment is an important part of the solution to improving the Ruhi Institute program's effectiveness, but perhaps other ingredients are also necessary. Careful assessments could be instructive to our understanding of the dynamics of the courses' effectiveness with Bahá'ís and with seekers, and would, of course, be sent to the Universal House of Justice for its consideration.

7. Encourage cluster initiative.

8. Promote unity and mitigate conflict about the process of growth. The FACT (Faith Communities Today) Study on the dynamics of growth and decline in American congregations, in which 742 Local Spiritual Assemblies participated, noted that conflict on teaching methods and roles are primary impediments to the growth of faith communities. We fear that the widespread feelings of confusion and dislocation among Spiritual Assemblies are significant factors impeding our growth at this time. This year, withdrawals (369) from Bahá'í membership have risen 30 percent. Our Office of Community Administration reported that this unfortunate increase in withdrawals is partly attributable to the growth of conflict in the community.

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Conclusion

Our driving concern is growth. We have prepared this report in the humble hope that it will lead to a fuller implementation of the Five Year Plan's strategies and a marked advancement in the process of growth.

We are confident that continual study of the Plan's guidance will help us refine our implementation strategies to ensure that we gain a larger measure of the benefits of its elements and strategies. Moreover, we are keenly aware of the great challenge involved in advancing the process of entry by troops, and we are deeply appreciative of the devotion and sacrifice of the friends in service to the Plan's goals. We are also mindful of the need for prioritization and a unified framework for action. We feel that these important disciplines can be fundamental to an approach that inspires the believers' passions and liberates their creative energies.

We feel that the principles of leadership described in the House of Justice's letter of May 19, 1994, addressed to this National Assembly, are applicable to the current challenges we face in advancing the process of growth; that the vision and spiritual powers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan* invest the community with a special mission, the awareness of which is essential to the revitalization of the teaching work and the winning of outstanding victories on the home front. We are reminded that the Guardian's vision of the role of the American Bahá'í community, eloquently described in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, will arouse "would-be warriors" and "homefront crusaders" to the "double crusade" that is refreshed in the strategy of the core activities.

We are mindful of the need to avoid "over-controlling" the friends, conscious of the "nature of power for action which they possess." We are also mindful that a "wide latitude for action must be allowed,

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which means that a wide margin for mistakes must also be allowed." And we are keenly aware that "individual initiative is a pre-eminent aspect of this power and [it] is therefore a major responsibility of the institutions to safeguard and stimulate it."

Our present concern is to help the new system of institutions and agencies that work so hard to advance the process of growth to greater mastery of the "art" of seeing that "the importance of the Bahá'í administration is its value in serving as a facilitator of the emergence and maintenance of community life in a wholly new mode, and in catering to the requirements of the spiritual relationships which flow from love and unity among the friends. This touches upon a distinguishing characteristic of Bahá'í life which such spiritual relationships foster, namely, the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in service to the Cause, to the friends and to humanity as a whole."

We are optimistic that if adjustments are made consistent with the vision, principles, and practical requirements of the Plan, they will, as promised, "build the Bahá'í System," attract "the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh," and "stimulate the release of pent-up spiritual energies" resulting in a campaign of teaching in which every institution, Bahá'í community, and individual believer is enthusiastically and wholeheartedly involved.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Your obedient servants,

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

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