

Teaching the Masses

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Extracts from Letters of the Universal House of Justice and the Guardian Regarding Teaching the Masses

1. When the masses of mankind are awakened and enter the Faith of God, a new process is set in motion and the growth of a new civilization begins. Witness the emergence of Christianity and of Islam. These masses are the rank and file, steeped in traditions of their own, but receptive to the new Word of God, by which, when they truly respond to it, they become so influenced as to transform those who come in contact with them. God's standards are different from those of men. According to men's standards, the acceptance of any cause by people of distinction, of recognized fame and status, determines the value and greatness of that cause. But, in the words of Baha'u'llah: "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it." Or again, "He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God. How could He, otherwise, have fulfilled His testimony unto men, if ye be of them that ponder His Cause in their hearts." In countries where teaching the masses has succeeded, the Baha'is have poured out their time and effort in village areas to the same extent as they had formerly done in cities and towns. The results indicate how unwise it is to solely concentrate on one section of the population. Each National Assembly therefore should so balance its resources and harmonize its efforts that the Faith of God is taught not only to those who are readily accessible but to all sections of society, however remote they may be. The unsophisticated people of the world—and they form the large majority of its population—have the same right to know of the Cause of God as others. When the friends are teaching the Word of God they should be careful to give the Message in the same simplicity as it is enunciated in our Teachings. In their contacts they must show genuine and divine love. The heart of an unlettered soul is extremely sensitive; any trace of prejudice on the part of the pioneer or teacher is immediately sensed.

When teaching among the masses, the friends should be careful not to emphasize the charitable and humanitarian aspects of the Faith as a means to win recruits. Experience has shown that when facilities such as schools, dispensaries, hospitals, or even clothes and food are offered to the people being taught, many complications arise. The prime motive should always be the response of man to God's message, and the recognition of His Messenger. Those who declare themselves as Baha'is should become enchanted with the beauty of the Teachings; and touched by the love of Baha'u'llah. The declarants need not know all the proofs, history, laws, and principles of the Faith, but in the process of declaring themselves they must, in addition to catching the spark of faith, become basically informed about the Central Figures of the Faith, as well as the existence of laws they must follow and an administration they must obey. After declaration, the new believers must not be left to their own devices. Through correspondence and dispatch of visitors, through conferences and training courses, these friends must be patiently strengthened and lovingly helped to develop into full Baha'i maturity. The beloved Guardian referring to the duties of Baha'i Assemblies in assisting the newly declared believer has written: "...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 Baha'i maturity, and win him over gradually to the unreserved acceptance of whatever has been ordained in the teachings."

(From a letter dated 13 July 1964 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

2. From reports and minutes we receive from various National Spiritual Assemblies, it is evident that your efforts to attract a greater number of receptive souls to the Cause of God, to open new areas for increased teaching activity and to consolidate the work so far accomplished are dependent upon more local travelling teachers and pioneers being assisted by the Fund to spend more of their time in Baha'i teaching services under your direction. There is a danger in this situation which must be avoided at all costs. Despite the pressing requirements of the Nine Year Plan, no Baha'i teacher anywhere should consider himself as permanently employed by the Faith. We do not have in the Cause of God any paid career open to Baha'i teachers.

The beloved Guardian elucidated this basic principle of Baha'i Administration through his repeated letters to National Assemblies from which we quote:

At present it would be quite impossible to spread the Cause if those who arise to serve it as teachers or pioneers were not given financial assistance. All must realize, however, that the monies they receive are only to enable them to fulfil their objectives, and that they cannot consider themselves permanently entitled to be supported by the Cause.

(From a letter dated 12 August 1944 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India and Burma)

3. Likewise travelling teachers should be assisted financially to carry out the "projects" assigned to them. The friends should not for a moment confuse this type of support with the creation of a paid clergy. Any Baha'i can, at the discretion of the NSA receive this necessary assistance and it is clearly understood it is temporary and only to carry out a specific plan.

(From a letter dated 29 May 1946 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles)

4. Each National Assembly, through its auxiliary Teaching Committees, should be able to so plan the time and efforts of its band of subsidized travelling teachers that no impression of permanency is given. As far as possible each "project" must be definite in objective and in duration.

Likewise, when pioneer projects are envisaged, it must be made clear to the pioneer that he must make every effort to establish himself in some position in his pioneering post and thus become freed from the necessity of drawing further on Baha'i funds. Experience has shown that the observance of these principles is essential for the rearing of healthy communities; wherever they have been ignored difficulties and complications have arisen. In the application of these principles, if you have any difficulty, you should feel free to consult with us. Also, if you have found any particular scheme proving to be successful without violating the above principles, you are welcome to send the details to us so that we may share your methods with other National Assemblies and enable them to benefit from your experience.

Another problem closely linked with the above and which directly affects areas where mass teaching work is being carried out is the extent to which the local believers contribute to the Fund. As you note, one of the objectives of the Nine Year Plan is universal participation in Baha'i community life. This can be possible when each believer understands that his personal spiritual life will be enriched and universal blessings will descend only if each Baha'i participates in contributing, however poor he may be, however small the contribution, and in whatever form it is offered. Your Assembly must devote enough time at each meeting to consider carefully this basic process. We must be confident that the principles laid down in our Writings are not only workable, but are the only solution to the ills of mankind. With such confidence in their hearts, the members of each National Assembly faced with this stupendous problem must deliberate, and within the framework of the social and economic conditions of the communities they are serving, they must find ways and means that would gradually, yet positively, help in realising this purpose.

(From a letter dated 25 June 1964 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies engaged in teaching work among the masses)

5. It has been due to the splendid victories in large-scale conversion that the Faith of Baha'u'llah has entered a new phase in its development and establishment throughout the world. It is imperative,

therefore, that the process of teaching the masses be not only maintained but accelerated. The teaching committee structure that each National Assembly may adopt to ensure best results in the extension of its teaching work is a matter left entirely to its discretion, but an efficient teaching structure there must be, so that the tasks are carried out with dispatch and in accordance with the administrative principles of our Faith. From among the believers native to each country, competent travelling teachers must be selected and teaching projects worked out. In the words of our beloved Guardian, commenting upon the teaching work in Latin America: "Strong and sustained support should be given to the vitally needed and highly meritorious activities started by the native ... travelling teachers, ... who, as the mighty task progresses, must increasingly bear the brunt of responsibility for the propagation of the Faith in their homelands."

While this vital teaching work is progressing each National Assembly must ever bear in mind that expansion and consolidation are inseparable processes that must go hand in hand. The interdependence of these processes is best elucidated in the following passage from the writings of the beloved Guardian: "Every outward thrust into new fields, every multiplication of Baha'i institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development. From this vital, this ever-present need attention must, at no time, be diverted; nor must it be, under any circumstances neglected, or subordinated to the no less vital and urgent task of ensuring the outer expansion of Baha'i administrative institutions. That this community ... may maintain a proper balance between these two essential aspects of its development ... is the ardent hope of my heart..." To ensure that the spiritual life of the individual believer is continuously enriched, that local communities are becoming increasingly conscious of their collective duties, and that the institutions of an evolving administration are operating efficiently, is, therefore, as important as expanding into new fields and bringing in the multitudes under the shadow of the Cause. These objectives can only be attained when each National Spiritual Assembly makes proper arrangements for all the friends to be deepened in the knowledge of the Faith. The National Spiritual Assemblies in consultation with the Hands of the Cause, who are the Standard-Bearers of the Nine Year Plan, should avail themselves of the assistance of Auxiliary Board members, who, together with the travelling teachers selected by the Assembly or its Teaching Committees, should be continuously encouraged to conduct deepening courses at Teaching Institutes and to make regular visits to Local Spiritual Assemblies. The visitors, whether Board members or travelling teachers should meet on such occasions not only with the Local Assembly but, of course, with the local community members, collectively at general meetings and even, if necessary, individually in their homes. The subjects to be discussed at such meetings with the Local Assembly and the friends should include among others the following points:

- 1). the extent of the spread and stature of the Faith today;
- 2). the importance of the daily obligatory prayers (at least the short prayer);
- 3). the need to educate Baha'i children in the Teachings of the Faith and encourage them to memorize some of the prayers;
- 4). the stimulation of youth to participate in community life by giving talks, etc. and having their own activities, if possible;
- 5). the necessity to abide by the laws of marriage, namely, the need to have a Baha'i ceremony, to obtain the consent of parents, to observe monogamy; faithfulness after marriage; likewise the importance of abstinence from all intoxicating drinks and drugs;
- 6). the local Fund and the need for the friends to understand that the voluntary act of contributing to the Fund is both a privilege and a spiritual obligation. There should also be discussion of various methods that could be followed by the friends to facilitate their contributions and the ways open to the Local Assembly to utilize its local Fund to serve the interests of its community and the Cause;
- 7). the importance of the Nineteen Day Feast and the fact that it should be a joyful occasion and rallying point of the entire community;
- 8). the manner of election with as many workshops as required, including teaching of

simple methods of balloting for illiterates, such as having one central home as the place for balloting and arranging for one literate person, if only a child, to be present at that home during the whole day, if necessary;

- 9). last but not least, the all-important teaching work, both in the locality and its neighbouring centres, as well as the need to continuously deepen the friends in the essentials of the Faith. The friends should be made to realize that in teaching the Faith to others they should not only aim at assisting the seeking soul to join the Faith, but also at making him a teacher of the Faith and its active supporter.

All the above points should, of course, be stressed within the framework of the importance of the Local Spiritual Assembly, which should be encouraged to vigorously direct its attention to these vital functions and become the very heart of the community life of its own locality, even if its meetings should become burdened with the problems of the community. The local friends should understand the importance of the law of consultation and realize that it is to the Local Spiritual Assembly that they should turn, abide by its decisions, support its projects, co-operate wholeheartedly with it in its task to promote the interests of the Cause, and seek its advice and guidance in the solution of personal problems and the adjudication of disputes, should any arise amongst the members of the community.

(From a letter dated 2 February 1966 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies engaged in mass teaching work)

6. As it has already been pointed out, in various communications to you, it is important for the National Spiritual Assemblies to work out ways and means of creating a sense of belonging in the hearts of the believers.

One of the ways this can be done is to bring to their attention the needs of the Fund. The National Assembly should neither feel embarrassed nor ashamed in turning to the friends, continuously appealing to them to exemplify their faith and devotion to the Cause by sacrificing for it, and pointing out to them that they will grow spiritually through their acts of self-abnegation, that the fear of poverty should not deter them from sacrificing for the Fund, and that the assistance and bounty of the Source of all good and of all wealth are unfailing and assured.... It might be useful to share with the friends extracts from the writings of the beloved Guardian, such as the two passages we quote below:

Every Baha'i, no matter how poor, must realize what a grave responsibility he has to shoulder in this connection, and should have confidence that his spiritual progress as a believer in the World Order of Baha'u'llah will largely depend upon the measure in which he proves, in deeds, his readiness to support materially the divine institutions of His Faith.

(From a letter dated 17 July 1937 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India and Burma)

7. The institution of the National Fund, so vital and essential for the uninterrupted progress of these activities must, in particular, be assured of the whole-hearted, the ever-increasing and universal support of the mass of believers, for whose welfare, and in whose name, these beneficent activities have been initiated and have been conducted. All, no matter how modest their resources, must participate.

(From a letter dated 8 August 1957 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Central and East Africa)

8. We feel that each National Assembly should carefully and regularly consult on this vital aspect of the education of the friends, spare no effort and lose no opportunity in bringing to their attention the needs of the hour. For example, where land is difficult to obtain, or where funds for the purchase of endowments are not available, the friends should be appealed to in a dignified and effective manner to donate from their own land for the use of Baha'i institutions. In the construction of local Baha'i centres, the National Assembly should carefully devise methods of appealing to the friends to contribute manpower or local materials for the construction of such buildings. If ready cash is not available for contributions to the Fund, the National Assembly should guide the friends in ways they could raise funds by a collective effort to cultivate a piece of land, by contributing cash crops, livestock or home-made dishes, sweetmeats, or handicrafts. Special meetings could also

be arranged for the sale of such contributions in kind. In the matter of attendance of delegates at Conventions, the desirability of the friends themselves being self-supporting should be pointed out by the National Assembly. If a delegate cannot his own expenses in attending the Convention, the Local Assembly or the believers in the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged by the National Assembly to defray such expenses, so that only when funds are unavailable from those sources, the National Assembly is approached to consider offering financial assistance. The same principle holds true about other activities, such as attendance at Institutes, Conferences and Summer Schools.

(From a letter dated 9 February 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to various National Spiritual Assemblies)

9. Many National Spiritual Assemblies in carrying out their plans for expansion and consolidation have found it necessary to select a number of believers for service as travelling teachers. While we appreciate the valuable services these travelling teachers have already rendered we are nevertheless deeply conscious of the problems facing your National Assemblies in your desire to carry out your teaching programmes with as much dispatch as possible. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the fact that these problems could well be minimized if the selection of such teachers were done with great care and discretion.

It must be realized that people who are mostly illiterate cannot have the benefit of reading for themselves the written word and of deriving directly from it the spiritual sustenance they need for the enrichment of their Baha'i lives. They become dependent, therefore, to a large extent on their contacts with visiting teachers. The spiritual calibre or moral quality of these teachers assumes, therefore, great importance.

The National Spiritual Assembly or the Teaching Committees responsible for the selection of these teachers should bear in mind that their choice must depend, not only on the knowledge or grasp of the teachings on the part of the teachers, but primarily upon their pure spirit and their true love for the Cause, and their capacity to convey that spirit and love to others. ...What wonderful results will soon be witnessed in the areas under your jurisdiction if you devise ways and means to ensure, as far as circumstances permit, that the travelling teachers you are encouraging to circulate among the friends will all be of the standard called for in these quotations—pure and sanctified souls, with nothing but true devotion and self-sacrifice motivating them in their services to God's Holy Cause....

(From a letter dated 26 October 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies engaged in mass teaching)

10. The paramount goal of the teaching work at the present time is to carry the message of Baha'u'llah to every stratum of human society and every walk of life. An eager response to the teachings will often be found in the most unexpected quarters, and any such response should be quickly followed up, for success in a fertile area awakens a response in those who were at first uninterested. The same presentation of the teachings will not appeal to everybody; the method of expression and the approach must be varied in accordance with the outlook and interests of the hearer. An approach which is designed to appeal to everybody will usually result in attracting the middle section, leaving both extremes untouched. No effort must be spared to ensure that the healing Word of God reaches the rich and the poor, the learned and the illiterate, the old and the young, the devout and the atheist, the dweller in the remote hills and islands, the inhabitant of the teeming cities, the suburban businessman, the labourer in the slums, the nomadic tribesman, the farmer, the university student; all must be brought consciously within the teaching plans of the Baha'i Community.

Whereas plans must be carefully made, and every useful means adopted in the furtherance of this work, your Assemblies must never let such plans eclipse the shining truth expounded in the enclosed quotations: that it is the purity of heart, detachment, uprightness, devotion and love of the teacher that attracts the divine confirmations and enables him, however ignorant he be in this world's learning, to win the hearts of his fellowmen to the Cause of God.

(From a letter dated 31 October 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

11. The growth of the Cause in India during the past several years has been vast and awe inspiring, and it is quite natural that this growth should have been accompanied by problems and responsibilities

that taxed the administrative experience and capacities of your National Assembly to the utmost. ...Travelling teachers and foreign pioneers could doubtless stimulate the friends and assist them in the teaching work, but essentially, the progress and growth of the Cause in India depend upon the services of your own people, and, to this end, a concerted effort should be made to integrate the friends in India into the work of the Cause in all its aspects, to assure universal participation that will result in winning even greater victories for the Cause. In this connection, your idea of engaging a number of well trained travelling teachers in India is, in principle, correct. You have various Teaching Institutes and a number of devoted, well-informed teachers at your disposal for this service. One of the most important duties of such travelling teachers should be to develop nuclei of devoted and active believers in the many centres who would inspire and assist the friends in active participation in the work to be done in their villages and towns. A plan should be developed to enable such travelling teachers to spend more time in fewer places instead of making brief visits in numerous centres. This would enable them to, in turn, train resident teachers in the various localities to spearhead the work of expansion and consolidation in their areas. The names of the believers thus trained should be given to the administrative bodies in charge of teaching. Teaching Institutes, Summer Schools, Conferences, etc. should be utilized to provide further encouragement and training for those believers whenever such opportunities arise.

In all your training programmes, the Baha'i Administration should have special attention. The believers should know that our administration is part of our religion. For this reason, not only should you patiently and lovingly train the believers, but should also strive to attract to the Faith individuals who possess qualities and capacities that will add to the administrative strength of the Community as a whole. The beloved Guardian has stated: "There is no doubt that the poorer classes should be taught the Cause and given every opportunity to embrace it. More especially in order to demonstrate to people our cardinal lack of prejudice... However, he feels that the great point is to confirm people of true capacity and ability—from whatever social stratum they may be—because the Cause needs now, and will ever-increasingly need, souls of great ability who can bring it before the public at large, administer its ever-growing affairs, and contribute to its advancement in every field." We note with deep satisfaction that the Message of God is being given to a cross section of all the people of India, as evidenced by your success in attracting a large number of college students to the Faith, as well as others representing various classes of people.

(From a letter dated 15 February 1968 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India)