

# On Community Building and the Nine Year Plan: A Balancing Point?

William Keith Bookwalter

November 4, 2024 (updated: 11/12/2025; 3/21/2026)

My current, evolving, personal understanding of community building during the current Nine Year Plan (2022-2031) and during the future series of five-year plans that are anticipated to continue through the year 2046,<sup>i</sup> is that we are developing one, single community composed of two, nested, spheres—an inner, narrower Bahá'í community and, beyond its borders, an outer, wider community of interest—the development of which needs to be balanced. It is also my understanding that the challenge we are facing is a twofold process:

1. To be simultaneously “outward-looking”<sup>i 2</sup> and “inward-looking”; that is, having a balanced approach to both expanding and consolidating activities in the outer, wider community and expanding and consolidating activities within the Bahá'í community. In the words of the beloved Guardian:

Every outward thrust into new fields, every multiplication of Bahá'í institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development. . . . That this community . . . may maintain a proper balance between these two essential aspects of its development . . . is the ardent hope of my heart.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, both “new fields” in the wider community and the “roots” of the inner Bahá'í community need to be “thrust” forward, both outwardly and inwardly, via processes of expansion and consolidation in both spheres.

2. To give special attention to the border between these two community spheres; that is, to learn how to enable souls to transition from being participants in the Bahá'í-sponsored activities in the wider community to becoming mature, long-standing, dedicated members of the Bahá'í community.<sup>ii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> The term “outward-looking” is used five times in the Nine Year Plan (see End Notes for source). In my opinion, it is unfortunate that the term “inward-looking” is not used because by facing outward and turning our backs on inward expansion and consolidation, the result is imbalance, i.e., lopsided, unwholesome development that neglects the resources that are produced by the inner, Bahá'í community, e.g., financial resources, pioneers, administrators, and Bahá'í scholars capable of participating in the discourses of society and defending the Faith from its opponents.

<sup>ii</sup> The importance of enhancing this transition process—named variously as conversion, enrollment, declaration of faith, registration, “on becoming Bahá'í,” etc.—is due to the need to increase the number of dedicated Bahá'ís capable of leading the building of a new society. In a 2025 study of studies regarding the tipping point of social networks and the critical masses needed to do so, a team of researchers concluded that:

We show evidence supporting a tipping point near 25 % of the total population within our compiled dataset. Near this critical mass, we observe a high likelihood for a social tipping event, where a large majority quickly adopts new norms. . . . Additionally, we show a range of critical masses where social tipping is possible; these values lie between 10 % and 43 %. These results indicate the potential, but not the inevitability, of rapid social change in certain

This concept of a transition from one community sphere to another is based on a metaphor using the image of a “garden” with a “gate” or “door” which has a “threshold” that defines the “border” between those who are outside and those who are inside the Faith of God. The image of a gate is attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which the Faith is compared to an enclosed garden:

At the gate of the garden some stand and look within, but do not care to enter. Others step inside, behold its beauty, but do not penetrate far. Still others encircle this garden inhaling the fragrance of the flowers, having enjoyed its full beauty, pass out again by the same gate. But there are always some who enter and, becoming intoxicated with the splendor of what they behold, remain for life to tend the garden.<sup>4</sup>

In its Ridvan Message of 1996, the Universal House of Justice set forth a description of a single community with a border dividing its two spheres—the inner and the outer—both composed of individuals, families, and institutions (bold-face emphasis by this author):

A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both **within and beyond its own borders**; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress. Since Bahá’ís everywhere are at the very beginning of the process of community building, enormous effort must be devoted to the tasks at hand.

In 2021, the “door” metaphor was used by the Universal House of Justice in the current Nine Year Plan. It views the Faith as having multiple doors (perhaps like the

---

susceptible populations and contexts. (Everall, J. P., Tschopenig, F., Donges, J. F., and Otto, I. M.: The Pareto effect in tipping social networks: from minority to majority, *Earth Syst. Dynam.*, 16, 189–214, <https://doi.org/10.5194/esd-16-189-2025>, 2025.)

Based on the lower, critical-mass-percentage of a population of 10% and the current world population of 8.3 billion people, our numbers need to be 803 million. According to the most recent edition of *The Bahá’í World* published in 2024 our numbers stand around 8 million (p429). Our growth, therefore, needs to be a hundredfold. In His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls for a “thousandfold” increase in effort that will result in greater enrollments:

Let your exertions henceforth increase a thousandfold. Summon the people in these countries, capitals, islands, assemblies and churches to enter the Abhá Kingdom. The scope of your exertions must needs be extended. The wider its range, the more striking will be the evidence of divine assistance. (Bahá’í Reference Library, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, [www.bahai.org/r/736640944](http://www.bahai.org/r/736640944))

Perhaps a thousandfold increase in exertions will result in at least a hundredfold increase in declarations of faith. I have not carried out a detailed calculation, but my estimates indicate that the rate of growth of the world population is greater than the rate of growth in the membership of the Bahá’í community. That is, our percentage of the world population is shrinking year by year. The rate of growth of participation in the core activities that are open to the wider community appear to be greater than the rate of growth of Bahá’í enrollments; hence, the need to give a wise degree of greater attention to the transition process, that is, to conversions.

Bahá'í Houses of Worship) each of which has a threshold to be crossed in order to enter the Faith:

Wherever these endeavours [community building] are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold.<sup>5 iii</sup>

Four years later, in 2025, this same “door” metaphor was repeated by the House of Justice to express the need to learn more about how to help people who are close to the Faith become members of the Bahá'í community:

And the believers increasingly appreciate the privilege of being able to acquaint a soul with the mission of Bahá'u'lláh—and, beyond this, to lovingly help a soul who stands at the doors of the Faith to step within. In 2021 we drew attention to this infinitely precious moment in a spiritual journey. We have noted with interest that, since then, the friends in many places have focused attention on how to recognize when the city of the heart is open, and on the conversations that lead to this moment and that follow it. Much remains to be learned in this regard, both about how to discern receptivity in different settings and how to acknowledge when it has already matured into faith.<sup>iv 6</sup>

The House of Justice's giving special “attention to this infinitely precious moment in a spiritual journey” reminded me of a statement attributed to Bahá'u'lláh that deeply impacted my understanding of how the Christ-promised Kingdom of God on earth would be built. It was related to me as a fledgling Bahá'í in 1971. At the time, I was being mentored by Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Olivia Kelsey who recorded the following in her 1954 pilgrim notes taken during the evening dinners with beloved Guardian:

Rúhíyyih Khanum said even in the day of Bahá'u'lláh when a new believer was found Bahá'u'lláh would say, “The Kingdom is being built.” There was great rejoicing over the *one*.<sup>7</sup>

It is my understanding that the outer sphere of the one community is the “wider community” which is outside or “beyond” the “threshold”<sup>v</sup> of the Faith, i.e., the community whose members are becoming aware of the existence of the Faith, being attracted to and drawing close to its “gate” or “doors,” and then finally crossing the “threshold” and making their enrolled “entry into the fellowship of Baha'u'llah”<sup>8</sup> via activities planned by and/or carried out by Bahá'í institutions and agencies, communities, and/or individuals or families and their collaborators from the wider

---

<sup>iii</sup> The “gate,” “border,” “doors,” and “threshold” images are similar to the metaphor of “the cellular nature” of created entities used to illumine the principle of “prehension” found in the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, e.g., cell walls with entry and exit points for filtering what is absorbed or rejected and what is expelled, with inner and outer aspects, and with inner cellular components such as nuclei acting as a control center and housing DNA for reproduction, mitochondria for energy production, etc.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1948 Shoghi Effendi called upon the North American teachers, in relation to several deepening themes one of which was to “to familiarize the Latin American believers with its [the Faith's] problems.” (Citadel of Faith, p35) At this mid-point of the Nine Year Plan, by referring yet again to the need to identify and encourage those souls who are ready to enter the Bahá'í community and by stating that “much still needs to be learned,” I believe that the House of Justice is helping us to understand that this process continues to be one of the chronic “problems” of the Faith.

<sup>v</sup> It is my understanding that members of the “wider community,” i.e., those standing outside the “door” or “threshold” of the Faith are referred to by Bahá'u'lláh as those who are “not of the people of Bahá,” as those “who” are “outside the Faith of God.” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, [Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1992] 117).

“community of interest.”<sup>9</sup> These occur outside the door or gate of the Faith and include proclamation activities, activities of Bahá’í offices of public affairs, society-building activities, participation in the discourses of society, direct teaching campaigns, public meetings, firesides, elevated conversations, friendships, mentoring contacts, the four core activities of the institute process—devotional meetings, children’s classes, junior youth groups, and study circles—and reflection meetings; the target audience of which consists principally of those who have not yet crossed “the threshold.” This is the community that is not yet concerned with learning about and implementing the provisions of the four charters: *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *The Tablet of Carmel*, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, and *The Divine Plan* (and its current expression via the Nine Year Plan). It is this community that needs to understand the Bahá’í vision of the nature and purpose of the Lesser Peace as set forth in the writings and the imperativeness of persuading leaders to advocate for the establishment of a global order based on its requisites.

The other sphere, the inner sphere of the one community is the Bahá’í community<sup>vi</sup> nested within the wider community and inside the threshold of the “garden” of the Faith; the one that should attract others via community members’ love for Bahá’u’lláh, for one another, for all of humanity, and for all other created things. It is the community sphere that the Universal House of Justice, in its Ridvan Message of 2023, described as a haven:

Some well-wishers of humanity might first be drawn to the Bahá’í community as a place of refuge, a shelter from a world polarized and paralysed. Yet beyond a shelter, what they find are kindred souls labouring together to build the world anew.”<sup>10</sup>

It is the inner sphere, the Bahá’í community that is concerned with learning about and implementing the provisions of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *The Tablet of Carmel*, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, and *The Divine Plan*<sup>vii</sup> (and the Nine Year Plan); all of which contribute to its exclusive, God-given mission of establishing the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh (beginning with the building of the Bahá’í Administrative Order) and the Most Great Peace via activities designed by individuals that are enrolled Bahá’ís, by Bahá’í institutions and agencies, and/or by Bahá’í communities for either Bahá’ís primarily or for Bahá’ís and their guests that are interested in learning more about the Faith. These activities occur inside the gate of the garden of the Faith and include Holy Day observances, summer and winter schools, mentoring of new Bahá’ís, the Nineteen Day Feasts; institute courses (that is, especially the courses that contain Bahá’í religious content), deepening classes, and online courses with content for enrolled Bahá’ís; and curriculum-based classes with Bahá’í, religious

---

<sup>vi</sup> Also referred to as “the community of the Greatest Name” in the Ridvan Messages of the Universal House of Justice of 2017 and 2024.

<sup>vii</sup> In my personal view, I see the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, revealed in 1873 as the “Mother Charter” which gave birth to the other three: “The Tablet of Carmel” revealed in 1891 which provided for a physical location for the House of Justice that had been ordained in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*; *The Tablets of the Divine Plan* revealed between 1916 and 1917 as a means for carrying forward the teaching work called for in the *Aqdas*; and the “Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” which was written in three parts in the years 1901, 1908 and 1910 and put into effect upon His passing in 1921, and that can be considered as a supplement of the *Aqdas* due to its creation of two institutions that are considered to be divinely-ordained and permanent features of the Bahá’í administrative order—the Guardianship and the national spiritual assemblies, i.e., the future national houses of justice.

content for Bahá'í children, Bahá'í junior youth,<sup>viii</sup> Bahá'í youth, and young Bahá'í adults established by Bahá'í parents, by local spiritual assemblies (as stipulated in the *Declaration of Trust & By-laws*), and by other Bahá'í institutions, especially, the courses of The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity designed for Bahá'í university students and young professionals.

In the message of the Universal of House of Justice of 30 December 2021 “To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors” regarding the current Nine Year Plan,<sup>11</sup> the distinction between the members of the wider community who have approached the “gate” of the Bahá'í “garden” and the enrolled members of the Bahá'í community was clarified.

“Those who stand at the threshold”; those that have not yet taken the “step” of “joining the community” have these characteristics:

- They have “interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh.”
- They “identify themselves with the Bahá'í community.”
- They have a “degree of association” with the Bahá'í community but are not yet affiliated with it.
- They “participate in community life through service.”
- They have “regular involvement in Bahá'í activities.”
- They are “voicing support of Bahá'í principles.”

Those who have taken the “step,” crossed the “threshold,” entered the garden, and joined the “Bahá'í community” have these characteristics:

- They “recognize Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God.”
- They “accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community”<sup>ix</sup> x

---

<sup>viii</sup>In my opinion, Bahá'í children who have been raised as Bahá'ís, by the age of 15, the age of spiritual maturity, via a spiraled, Bahá'í curriculum, should be prepared to live by and pursue the ends set forth in the four charters listed above. Other Bahá'ís who “cross the threshold” at different ages and with varying degrees of education need to be provided with other spiraled, curricular materials at the appropriate levels of vocabulary and complexity. “Spiraled curricula” refers to basic themes set forth in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, described by the beloved Guardian as “the standard introduction to the Bahá'í Faith,” being learned and then expanded upon with each widening spiral of the curriculum. Each “spiral” is often one year in duration.

<sup>ix</sup>These two characteristics are the twin duties set forth by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

<sup>x</sup> This process of guiding a member of the wider community across the threshold was described by the beloved Guardian in the following words.

Let him remember the example set by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and His constant admonition to shower such kindness upon the seeker, and exemplify to such a degree the spirit of the teachings he hopes to instill into him, that the recipient will be spontaneously impelled to identify himself with the Cause embodying such teachings. Let him refrain, at the outset, from insisting on such laws and observances as might impose too severe a strain on the seeker’s newly awakened faith, and endeavor to nurse him, patiently, tactfully, and yet determinedly, into full maturity, and aid him to proclaim his unqualified acceptance of whatever has been ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. Let him, as soon as that stage has been attained, introduce him to the body of his fellow-believers, and seek, through constant fellowship and active participation in the local activities of his community, to enable him to contribute his share to the enrichment of its life, the furtherance of its tasks, the consolidations of its interests, and the coordination of its activities with those of its sister communities. Let him not be content until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and

The relationship between these two spheres of the community is reciprocal, complementary, and interdependent. The ever-expanding Bahá'í community supplies the material and leadership resources (with input from the wider community) for the building of both spheres--the wider community and the Bahá'í community. The building and strengthening of one, betters and fortifies the other. The stronger they become, the greater will be their capacity to solve the technological, biological, social, psychological, and spiritual problems of the community.

Between these two spheres is the "border," with its "gate," or "door." In order for souls to cross the "threshold," transitional processes also need to be expanded and consolidated. The spiritual children referred to by the beloved Guardian (see the quotation in the footnote above), need "spiritual parenting" by mentors, local assemblies, and communities; for example, mentors who know when their contacts are ready to be invited to enter the door of the Faith and continue supporting them until they are able to teach the Faith on their own, local assemblies who warmly welcome and orient new believers, and communities that open-heartedly welcome newcomers to their first Nineteen Day Feast and help them to feel part of the Bahá'í family.

And so, I stand, straddling the threshold of the Faith, one foot of action outside the gate, the other inside; one eye and one ear directed outward searching for ways to attract souls to the gate of the Faith through which they can behold the inner, beautiful garden; the other eye and ear directed within the "garden" of the Cause, God's refuge for humanity, seeking to strengthen and beautify the activities that will so enchant visitors and seekers that they will want to become steadfast, long-suffering "gardeners."

---

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Universal House of Justice, "Message to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors," 30 December 2021, 1, Bahá'í Reference Library, [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230\\_001/20211230\\_001.pdf](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/20211230_001.pdf).

---

devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly adopted Faith. —Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 43.

My personal interpretation of this guidance has been to become a one-on-one-mentor for persons who have become interested in the Faith, converted to it, and then need to learn more about the corresponding "privileges and responsibilities." What I have observed amongst the current, younger generations of Bahá'ís (and written about in more detail elsewhere) is the lack of sufficient knowledge about the teachings of the Faith that is needed to help members in the wider community to cross the threshold to membership in the Bahá'í community. This problem, according to various sources (see my written, relevant commentaries at [www.williamkeithbookwalter.info](http://www.williamkeithbookwalter.info) [currently being revamped]), has led, in many parts of the world, to a lack of growth of the Bahá'í community.

Mr. 'Ali Nakhjavini, towards the end of a talk he gave in 2011 (at the age of 92!) gave an explanation that helped me greatly to relate the above quotation to the institute process. He explained the relationship between what could be termed a "teacher/mentor" and her/his spiritual child who may be participating in one of the core activities but who has still not crossed the threshold of the Faith and/or is still in need of regular mentoring until reaching a level of maturity in which she/he is teaching the Faith all on her or his own. ("The American Bahá'í Community," YouTube, [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20251231\\_001/1#400657090](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20251231_001/1#400657090), timecode: 34:46.)

---

<sup>2</sup> The Universal House of Justice, *The Nine Year Plan 2022-2031: Messages of the Universal House of Justice*, (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications), par. 1.2, 2.6, 6.2, 6.12, 6.17.

<sup>3</sup> Shoghi Effendi cited in Shoghi Effendi and The Universal House of Justice, *A Special Measure of Love: The Importance and Nature of the Teaching Work among the Masses*, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 5.

<sup>4</sup> A statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Inez Greeven during her 1921 Pilgrimage. Found in *The Garden of the Heart* by Francis Esty.

<sup>5</sup> The Universal House of Justice, "Message to the Continental Boards of Counselors," 30 December 2021, 3, Bahá'í Reference Library, [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230\\_001/20211230\\_001.pdf?4ed26aca](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/20211230_001.pdf?4ed26aca).

<sup>6</sup> The Universal House of Justice, "Message to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors," 31 December, 2025, 5, [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20251231\\_001/1#400657090](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20251231_001/1#400657090).

<sup>7</sup> Olivia Kelsey, "The Recollections of My Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Meeting the Beloved Guardian" 1954/1979, 16, Bahá'í Library Online: [https://bahai-library.com/kelsey\\_recollections\\_pilgrimage\\_guardian](https://bahai-library.com/kelsey_recollections_pilgrimage_guardian).

<sup>8</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís, 1932-1946* (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002) 27.

<sup>9</sup> Prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 2005) 19, Bahá'í Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/documents/bwc/one-common-faith>.

<sup>10</sup> The Universal House of Justice, "Ridvan Message 2023," 2, Bahá'í Reference Library: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#20230430\\_001](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#20230430_001).

<sup>11</sup> The Universal House of Justice, *Nine Year Plan: 2022-2031, Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (West Palm Beach, FL, Palabra Publications, January 2022) 46-47.

The italicized emphases in the following quotation were added by this author.

The accomplishments of the previous series of Plans—particularly the last Five Year Plan—could not have occurred without a tremendous advance in the teaching work. An important dimension of this work is the capacity to engage in conversations on spiritual themes, a capacity which was explored in our message to your 2015 conference, where we described how it is developed through participation in institute courses and by gaining practical experience. It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken *interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh*. Over time, many such souls begin to *identify themselves with the Bahá'í community*, especially as they gain the confidence to *participate in community life through service*. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to *recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community* is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from *regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles*. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to *those who stand at the threshold*. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to *enter the Cause*. For in spaces where the possibility of *joining the community* can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take *this step* together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed. (§6.9)