

On How to Increase Universal Participation in the Work of Community Building: A Proposal for Mature Local Spiritual Assemblies

William Keith Bookwalter

December 16, 2022 (Updated: 6/21/23; 3/30/2026)

The following is a proposal for mature local spiritual assemblies, in collaboration with its committees and other institutions and agencies, for increasing the expansion of the Faith (hand in hand with its consolidation) by increasing universal participation in the work of community building. It points out two features that the two Nine Year Plans—1964-1973 and 2022-2031—have in common, reviews the concept of “universal participation,” examines the characteristics of a mature assembly in relation to this concept, and sets forth two basic questions for a consultative interaction between the assembly and each individual believer from the age of fifteen and up.

In addition to their same, extensive duration of nine years, two features that the first Nine Year Plan (1964-1973) and the current Nine Year Plan (2022-2031) have in common are their expansionist nature and their call for “universal participation” in key activities.

In 1964, in its announcement of the first Nine Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice announced that “expansion and universal participation are the twin objectives of this initial phase of the second epoch of the Divine Plan . . .”¹

In 2020, in its announcement of the second Nine Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice announced its expansionist nature in these words:

With a sense of joyful anticipation, we announce that the Bahá’í world will, at Ridván 2022, begin a Nine Year Plan. Its requirements and provisions will be set out at a later date, but its duration already gives an unmistakable indication of the expansive prospect it will present.”²

In 2021, in its 30 December message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors, The Universal House of Justice gave importance to “universal participation in the work of community building.”³

The guidance, both in 1964 and recently, answers a common question of many believers, “Of the numerous, possible Bahá’í activities and acts of service, which ones are so basic and essential that all of the friends are expected to engage in them?” In 1964 the House of Justice selected about twelve basic activities in which all of the believers can participate. In 2021 “community building” was added (with social action and participation in the discourses of society being components of community building within a common framework for action). The quotations from the messages of the House of Justice regarding “universal participation” appear below.

Based on the five passages from the messages of the Universal House of Justice regarding “universal participation,” all believers can:

1. Pray and be devoted to God
2. Deepen in (study) the Writings
3. Understand the significance of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh
4. Fight personal, spiritual battles
5. Live the Bahá'í life (inner life and outer life)
6. Teach the Faith
7. Contribute to the Fund
8. Administer the affairs of the community (e.g., participate in the administrative portion of the Nineteen Day Feast and Reflection Meetings)
9. With other friends:
 - a. Love each other
 - b. Constantly encourage each other
 - c. Work together
 - d. Be as one soul in one body
10. In communities that have passed the third milestone (and probably, also, in pre-third-milestone communities), participate in the work of community building by participating in at least one, more than one, or a combination of the following:
 - a. Devotional meetings
 - b. The institute process with its three-month cycles composed of expansion (including direct teaching when appropriate) and consolidation activities which promote three educational imperatives:
 - i. Children's classes
 - ii. Junior youth groups
 - iii. Study circles
 - c. Social action
 - d. Discourses of society
 - e. Needs / talents / skills-based, support services for the above: prayers, secretarial work, transportation, food services, maintenance of Bahá'í properties, materials preparation and distribution, integration of the arts, bibliographic research on social discourse topics, action research and formal research projects, etc.

Note: The reader should keep in mind that not all of the activities listed above are obligatory. Obligatory activities such as daily prayer, reciting the Word of God twice a day, fasting, etc. are set forth in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

The following are quotations from the Universal House of Justice regarding universal participation (year and emphases added):

1964: In that same message we indicated the meaning of **universal participation**: "the dedicated effort of every believer in teaching, in living the Bahá'í life, in contributing to the Fund, and particularly in the persistent effort to understand more and more the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In the words of our beloved Guardian, 'One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.'" [Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community*, 28]⁴

1964: Not all believers can give public talks, not all are called upon to serve on administrative institutions. But all can pray, fight their own spiritual battles, and contribute to the Fund. If every believer will carry out these sacred duties, we shall be astonished at the accession of power which will result to the whole body, and which in its turn will give rise to further growth and the showering of greater blessings on all of us.⁵

The real secret of **universal participation** lies in the Master's oft expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.⁶

1970: The **universal participation** of the believers in every aspect of the Faith -- in contributing to the Fund, in teaching, deepening, living the Bahá'í life, administering the affairs of the community, and, above all, in the life of prayer and devotion to God -- will endow the Bahá'í community with such strength that it can overcome the forces of spiritual disintegration which are engulfing the non-Bahá'í world, and can become an ocean of oneness that will cover the face of the planet.⁷

1973: Expansion and **universal participation** are the twin objectives of this initial phase of the second epoch of the Divine Plan . . .⁸

2010: Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive programme of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of **universal**

participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

2022: Six years ago we described for you the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone along the continuum of growth. To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of **universal participation** in the work of community building. In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are, creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action^a to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live.⁹

Regarding the signs of maturity of a spiritual assembly (probably both local and national), the beloved Guardian and the Universal House of Justice point out that, in addition to having regular meetings, functioning efficiently, and increasing Bahá'í membership, a mature assembly is able to interact efficiently with and mobilize members of the community, which, in turn, serve as means for increasing universal participation in the activities of the Faith. The following are pertinent quotations from the beloved Guardian and the Universal House of Justice.

The best Assembly is the one that capitalizes the talents of all the members of the group and keeps them busy in some form of active participation in serving the Cause and spreading the Message.¹⁰ –Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary

The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers. Otherwise the more competent members of the group will go at a tangent and try to find elsewhere a field of work and where they could use their energy.¹¹ –Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary

In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í membership, *the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community*, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.¹²

–Universal House of Justice (emphasis added)

^a Regarding the four “efforts” that compose the framework for action, the House of Justice states: “In reflecting on such situations it becomes evident that, within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society. All these efforts are pursued according to a common framework for action, and this above all else brings coherence to the overall pattern of activity.” (The Universal House of Justice, “To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors,” 30 December 2021, 6.)

In relation to universal participation, a question that needs to be asked by Bahá'í institutions in relation to the goals of the current Nine Year Plan is, "How can the participation of individual believers in community building be increased?" The following is a proposal for the more mature local spiritual assemblies (and possibly other institutions, their committees, and their agencies) to achieve this end.

One way that an assembly could promote universal participation through effective interaction with community members in order to capitalize on their talents, would be to ask each believer the following two questions, the responses to which would be voluntary: (1) How can you support the collective goals of the Nine Year Plan? We need help with the following: praying for the success of the Plan; sponsoring or participating in devotional meetings, teaching children's classes; animating junior youth groups; participating in and/or tutoring study circles; teaching the Faith to others during the expansion phase of the three-month cycle of activities; making home visits to other Bahá'ís or those interested in the Faith; participating in or initiating social action projects; engaging in our public discourses with society; and/or providing support services for the above in areas such as secretarial work, transportation, food services, news bulletins, materials preparation and distribution, etc. (2) How can we support you with your personal teaching plan, that is, your plan for teaching yourself and your plan for teaching others? We can offer, for example, deepening materials for individual study; pamphlets and prayer booklets for your elevated conversations; personal mentoring^b by an experienced, deepened Bahá'í; and guest speakers for your firesides.

The justification for these two questions can be found in the following two paragraphs from the writings of the beloved Guardian on the importance of the individual believer and in three paragraphs quoted from the 1998 Ridván Message of the Universal House of Justice.

This challenge, so severe and insistent, and yet so glorious, faces no doubt primarily the individual believer on whom, in the last resort, depends the fate of the entire community. He it is who constitutes the warp and woof on which the quality and pattern of the whole fabric must depend. He it is who acts as one of the countless links in the mighty chain that now girdles the globe. He it is who serves as one of the multitude of bricks which support the structure and insure the stability of the administrative edifice now being raised in every part of the world. Without his support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the national representative of the community to which he belongs, is foredoomed to failure. The World Centre of the Faith itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the

^b The history of the Faith, from its very inception, is replete with examples of personal, one-on-one mentoring of newly enrolled or "less knowledgeable and experienced" believers by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh Themselves, the Center of the Covenant, the Guardian, Hands of the Cause and other veteran, "more knowledgeable and experienced" believers. This proposal includes the option of offering this service, where human resources are available, either in person or online, to individuals. (See my commentary titled "On the Need for One-on-One Mentoring.")

Divine Plan Himself is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His design are lacking. The sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Founder of the Faith, will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part.

The administrative agencies of a divinely conceived Administrative Order at long last erected and relatively perfected stand in dire need of the individual believer to come forward and utilize them with undeviating purpose, serene confidence and exemplary dedication. The heart of the Guardian cannot but leap with joy, and his mind derive fresh inspiration, at every evidence testifying to the response of the individual to his allotted task. The unseen legions, standing rank upon rank, and eager to pour forth from the Kingdom on high the full measure of their celestial strength on the individual participants of this incomparably glorious Crusade, are powerless unless and until each potential crusader decides for himself, and perseveres in his determination, to rush into the arena of service ready to sacrifice his all for the Cause he is called upon to champion.¹³

In their 1998 Ridván Message the Universal House of Justice emphasizes the close relationship between the systematic approach of institutions to global Plans and the individual.

The facts at hand confirm that the Four Year Plan works where a systematic approach is understood and applied. These same facts show that the institutions of the Faith, in their collaborative efforts at national, regional, and local levels, have clearly been adhering to this understanding. However, with individuals, on whom rests the ultimate success of the Plan, this understanding is less clear. For this reason, we must emphasize to our fellow-believers the importance to their individual effort of this prerequisite of success in teaching and in other undertakings.¹⁴

In relation to the first question of this proposal, “How can you, as an individual, support our collective goals?” the House of Justice states (emphasis added by this author):

As translated into programmes and projects by national and local institutions, the Plan, among other things, gives direction, identifies goals, stimulates effort, provides a variety of needed facilities and materials to benefit the work of teachers and administrators. This is of course necessary for the proper functioning of the community, but is of no consequence unless its *individual members respond through active participation*. In so responding, each individual, too, must make a conscious decision as to what he or she will do *to serve the Plan*, and as to how, where and when to do it. This determination enables the individual to check the progress of his actions and, if necessary, to modify the steps being taken. Becoming accustomed to such a procedure of systematic striving lends meaning and fulfilment to the life of any Bahá'í.¹⁵

Concerning the second question, “How can the assembly support the individual with his/her individual plan for teaching him/herself and others?”; the question itself, is one

way for the institution to provide encouragement to the individual. In the following paragraph, the House of Justice states:

But beyond the necessity of responding to the call of the institutions, *the individual is charged by Bahá'u'lláh Himself with the sacred duty of teaching His Cause*, described by Him as the "most meritorious of all deeds." So long as there are souls in need of enlightenment, this duty must surely remain the constant occupation of every believer. In its fulfilment, the individual is directly responsible to Bahá'u'lláh. "*Let him not wait for any directions,*" Shoghi Effendi urgently advises, "*or expect any special encouragement, from the elected representatives of his community*, nor be deterred by any obstacles which his relatives, or fellow-citizens may be inclined to place in his path, nor mind the censure of his critics or enemies." The writings of the Central Figures and of our Guardian are replete with advice and exhortations concerning the individual's irreplaceable role in the advancement of the Cause. So it is inevitable that we should feel impelled, at this particular time in the life of humanity as a whole, to appeal directly to each member of our community to ponder the urgent situation facing us all as the helpers of the Abhá Beauty (emphasis added).¹⁶

This two-question interaction—"How can you support the collective Plan?" and "How can we support you with your personal teaching plan?"—can take place in a variety of different yet systematic ways. For smaller communities, the LSA or an appointed committee could meet with each Bahá'í that is fifteen years of age or older,^c in person during brief, 15-minute sessions. (For large communities, this interaction could be carried out via Internet or physical correspondence.) At the beginning of each consultation, a prayer could be recited and then the two questions could be discussed. After an initial, face-to-face meeting, the same two questions could be asked each year, via Internet or physical correspondence or at a Nineteen Day Feast using forms to be filled out, collected, and processed by the assembly or one of its committees.

A form for individuals to offer support for the collective activities, could be organized as a chart in the following way. Along the left-hand column: list the core and other activities. At the top of the next columns write the following headings: (1) I don't know about this activity but I would like to learn; (2) I have studied the Ruhi Institute course corresponding to this activity but I need experience with the its application; (3) I have studied the Ruhi Institute course corresponding to this core activity, have experience with the application activity and would like to become a children's class teacher, a junior youth animator, a study circle tutor, and/or a devotional meeting host (indicate which in the space provided), (4) I am currently serving as a children's class teacher, a junior youth animator, a study circle tutor, and/or devotional meeting host (indicate which and the address where the core activity takes place), (5) I am an experienced children's

^c Another way to encourage new members of the community, to promote universal participation, and to effectively interact with individuals, would be for the local spiritual assembly to meet with every newly enrolled believer, both those who have been raised in a Bahá'í family and have reached the age of spiritual maturity at fifteen, and any other newly enrolled believers of any age in order to welcome her or him into the Faith and the community, to pray with them, and, perhaps, to gift him or her a Bahá'í book.

class teacher, junior youth animator, study circle tutor, and/or devotional meeting host and am willing to train others in this service, or (6) I am not able to or interested in carrying out one of the four core activities by I am interested in serving the community in another manner as indicated below. (Perhaps the LSA could publish periodically a list of service needs similar with the lists published by the World Centre, for example, secretarial work, accounting, maintenance, literature distribution, newsletters, and archives organization.)

A form for the institutions to support individuals with their personal deepening and teaching plan, could be organized as follows.

I need the support of the local spiritual assembly, its committees, or other institutions or agencies with the following (check and add numbered notes below):

1. ____ Prayers (in general or specifically for ____)
2. ____ How and where to join a Study Circle and/or Ruhi Institute books.
3. ____ Deepening materials (for example, for purchase, on loan, or as a gift: a particular Bahá'í book such as *Bahá'í Prayers*, *The New Garden*, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, *The Dawn Breakers*, *The Hidden Words*, *Some Answered Questions*, *The Kitáb-Íqán*, *God Passes By*, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, or another title.)
4. ____ A personal mentor to guide my study of the above and/or other deepening materials.
5. ____ Teaching materials such as pamphlets, small prayer books, and/or introductory booklets.
6. ____ Guest speakers for my firesides.
7. ____ Consultation with the Local Spiritual Assembly in order to receive guidance regarding a personal concern.^d

Notes:

^d ...he feels that you should turn to your Local Assembly, in the strictest confidence, and seek their aid and advice. These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect, and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to—indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and unity and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers. You should go to them as a child would to its parents... --Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, 28 September 1941, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, August 1970, Revised September 2017, quotation 21, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/compilations/local-spiritual-assembly/local-spiritual-assembly.pdf?98ec32a6>.

End Notes

-
- ¹ Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, Geoffrey W. Marks, comp. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), 33.
- ² The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World on the Day of the Covenant, 25 November 2020, Bahá'í Reference Library, https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20201125_001/1#300076430, 2-3.
- ³ The Universal House of Justice, *The Nine Year Plan: 2022-2031*, (Palabra Publications: West Palm Beach, FL, 2022), 48, Bahá'í Reference Library, https://bahai-library.com/uhj_nine-year_plan_2022.
- ⁴ Ibid., 42.
- ⁵ Ibid., 43.
- ⁶ Ibid., 43.
- ⁷ Ibid., 179.
- ⁸ Universal House of Justice, “Ridván Message 1973” in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, IL, 1996), 33.
- ⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *The Nine Year Plan 2022-2031: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications: West Palm Beach, FL: 2022), 48.
- ¹⁰ Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, “Bahá'í News,” #68, November 1932.
- ¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, August, 1930 to an individual believer, Holy Writings, <https://www.holy-writings.com/?a=SHOWTEXT&d=%2Fen%2FBahai+Faith%2F4+->.
- ¹² Universal House of Justice, “Ridván Message of 1996,” in *Turning Point: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice and Supplementary Material 1996-2006*, (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 2006), ¶4.24, 29-30.
- ¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947–1957* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, IL, 1965), 130-131.
- ¹⁴ The Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message 155*, to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1998, ¶12, Bahá'í Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/search#q=Ridván%20messages>.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., ¶13.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., ¶14.