



HORACE HOLLEY, c. 1953

SOME ASPECTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER IN AMERICA, 1922-1936.

by Loni Bramson-Lerche

In 1944, Horace Holley, then secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, wrote that the American Baha'i community had evolved from "a small local group to a national unit of a world society." Before the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith (1897-1957), that community had been basically an informal network of groups. Its members had been attracted by the broad social and spiritual teachings in the religion and remained together only through their attachment to the personalities of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and especially 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The development of the American Baha'i community from small pockets of ingrown and amorphous communities to a vastly enlarged and well-organized religion with a national consciousness occurred between 1922, when Shoghi Effendi effectively assumed his position as the head of the Faith, and 1936, when the American Baha'i community had achieved enough national unity to embark on an international missionary campaign.

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THE EMERGENCE OF BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATION

The first major phase in the evolution of the American Baha'i community in the period considered by this paper can be said to extend from 1922 to 1929. During this phase the American Baha'is adopted the basic principles of Baha'i Administration which are still utilized today. Before this time, the Baha'is were filled with enthusiasm and with love for their religion, but did not know how to use their energy to accomplish the basic goals of the Baha'i Faith as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. The purpose of the Administrative Order was to create an efficient means to channel and use this energy.

Encouraged and guided by Shoghi Effendi, the National Spiritual Assembly played a leading role in the development of the present structure of Bahá'í Administration and aided the Baha'is to accept and respect organization within their religion. This task was accomplished through various methods. The community was first developed through the use of itinerant teachers (some sent by Shoghi Effendi himself) and through regular correspondence. As important were the projects that the entire community undertook as collective actions. The most important and most difficult of these was the construction of the superstructure of the Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. The building of this temple "inspired and coordinated the whole community" for many years.² It provided a focal point for the Baha'is, giving form to the national community and providing the impulse for the initial creation of local community projects. Other collective actions were the formation and consolidation of Baha'i institutions, especially the Local Spiritual Assembly, but also the intermediate regional institutions and the National Spiritual Assembly itself. Beyond these was the attempt to propagate the Baha'i Faith in different regions through the development of an organized response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan which called on the American community to carry the Baha'i message around the world. It had become apparent that without some sort of organization, these Tablets would not be implemented.

Although the effort to develop the organization of the Baha'i community began essentially in 1922, it was not until 1924 that real progress was made. In its annual report to the National Convention of 1934, the National Spiritual Assembly stated that 1924 should be seen as the beginning of a conscientious and active following of Baha'i laws and teachings. The convention of 1924 stimulated a regular and frequent correspondence between the National Spiritual Assembly and the various Local Spiritual Assemblies. In December 1924, the *Baha'i News Letter* (later, *Baha'i News*) began circulation and provided a means of communication to all Baha'is. The convention of 1925 received the first written annual report by the National Spiritual Assembly, and a few months after the convention the Plan of Unified Action was adopted.

The second major phase in the evolution of the American Baha'i community was from 1929 to 1936. It was during this period that Shoghi Effendi wrote a series of letters now known as the "World Order Letters." Having established a basic understanding in the American community of the principles of the Baha'i Administrative Order, he began to explain the principles of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Before this, the Baha'is had functioned as individuals working in small groups. They had more contact with each other than with the public, as most of their efforts were directed toward the construction of the Baha'i Temple, rather than toward trying to propagate their religion. In its 1934-35 annual report, the National Assembly expressed its feeling that over the past year the community had been able to emerge from dealing with "those minor problems of our own Baha'i relationships which have engaged our attention and almost exhausted our powers in previous years."³

During the lifetime of 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), emphasis had been placed on teaching the Baha'is that their inner spiritual lives needed to change, and on helping them understand the broad principles of Baha'i belief, such as world unity and religious unity. Formal administrative bodies were in their embryonic stages. The personality of 'Abdu'l-Baha, who was ac-

cessible only through pilgrimage to Palestine, his tour of America, and Tablets to individuals, was enough to keep the Baha'is working together in relative harmony. What there was of an actual organization was more a reflection of American culture and practice than a result of Baha'i doctrine.

After the passing of 'Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, his designated successor, not wishing to replace his grandfather as the charismatic center toward which all Baha'is could turn, set about building an Administrative Order, which in fact had already been established, in theory, in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Baha. This Administrative Order was to serve principally to help the Baha'is propagate their religion and unify the community. Unification of the very diverse membership in America would come about through the experience of working together to form institutions such as the Local Spiritual Assembly and through service in these institutions, once formed.

Shoghi Effendi's task was not easy. It took some time for the concept of a hierarchy of authority and of working by administrative procedures and principles to take hold. However, there was never any doubt that the forces advocating organization would eventually gain ascendancy over those individuals who did not want organization introduced into the movement. Those favoring organization naturally had control of the organs of communication, such as *Star of the West* magazine, through which they were able to spread their views.⁴

The transition from a loosely connected movement to a fully organized one can be said to have ended in 1925,⁵ for on 10 April of that year Shoghi Effendi wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly instructing that the word "Assembly" was to be applied only to the elected body of nine in each locality. In general, after that letter was received, this practice was adopted: the Baha'is no longer referred to all the members in one area as the assembly.⁶

The difficulties encountered in establishing this new organization in the Baha'i community can be seen in the following ex-

ample of a disagreement between the members of the Publishing Committee and the Editorial and Business Staffs of *Star of the West*, on one hand, and four members of the National Spiritual Assembly (Dr. Zia Bagdadi, Mrs. Corinne True, Mr. Alfred E. Lunt, and Mr. Charles Mason Remey), on the other.

In the late summer of 1922, the Publishing Committee and the Editorial and Business Staffs decided jointly to change the name of *Star of the West* magazine (a name given it by 'Abdu'l-Bahá), replace its editors, and transfer its operations to another city. These decisions may have been approved during an extraordinary meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly which certain members of that body (who could not easily be present) were advised not to attend since nothing important would be discussed .⁷

This decision was naturally controversial. Only the National Spiritual Assembly had the authority to change the editors of the magazine or to make decisions of this kind. The four members of the National Assembly were dissatisfied with how things had been handled. One of them wrote that he felt the National Assembly had been betrayed by one of its committees. This same member reminded Mountfort Mills that he had voted for him and for Roy Wilhelm as members of the Publishing Committee (both were also members of the National Spiritual Assembly).

The joint committee felt that the four members of the National Assembly now distrusted the committee and wished its membership to be reconsidered. Therefore, all the members of the joint committee resigned in order to allow the National Spiritual Assembly complete liberty in its consultation on what action to take. In minutes of the meeting of 13 September, the joint committee expressed its regret and apprehension that the principle of full, uncritical acceptance by the minority of the majority's decision, whether right or wrong, had not been followed and that certain members of the National Spiritual Assembly were criticizing the actions of a national committee and were attempting to influence the opinions of others before the National Assembly had consulted on the controversial action.*

This episode illustrates the political maneuvering which was very much a part of the functioning of Baha'i institutions at that time. Later, such open lobbying efforts, mass resignations, and public criticism of majority decisions, committees, and individuals would be regarded almost universally as unacceptable within the Bahá'í administration.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY, 1922-26

The development of the National Spiritual Assembly during the period under consideration can be divided into two basic stages. Although no strict lines can be drawn, the first stage might be seen as extending from 1922 to 1926. This period saw the development of the functions of the National Spiritual Assembly, as well as the local and regional institutions and committees. The second stage can be seen to extend from 1927 to 1936. This was a period of learning in the relationship of the National Spiritual Assembly to other institutions, as well as growing respect for the authority of the national body. The transition between the two stages is reflected in the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly. After the National Convention of 1927, there was a greater stability of membership on the National Assembly. Five members of that body remained in office during the entire second stage, and several others were members for most of the period.

In a letter written on 5 March 1922, Shoghi Effendi explained, often using quotations from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the responsibilities of the National Spiritual Assembly and the Local Spiritual Assemblies. These he characterized as the embryos of future local and national Houses of Justice (a term which implies their future establishment as institutions of government). These were to be the building blocks of a future world government. A Local Spiritual Assembly was to be elected in every city where there were nine or more adult Bahá'ís. The National Spiritual Assembly should be elected by a National Convention. He described the duties and functions of a Spiritual Assembly and the necessary elements for consultation, especially for the members in session: they must be detached from personal problems and desires while consulting on topics of particular interest



SHOGHI EFFENDI
Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, c. 1921.

to the Baha'i community. The Bahá'ís must obey and be submissive to the decisions made by the Spiritual Assembly and not engage in any activity relating to the Baha'i Faith without having consulted the Spiritual Assembly. Shoghi Effendi emphasized the fact that no individual was to do anything public concerning the Faith without the sanction of the Local Spiritual Assembly (if it were of local interest) or of the National Spiritual Assembly (if it were of national interest). In this letter, he also explained that national committees should be formed, and how they should be used.⁹

On 23 December 1922 Shoghi Effendi wrote to the National Assembly that he was pleased with the efforts that had been undertaken to implement the suggestions he had given nine months before.¹⁰ He especially approved of the way the work had been centralized by the National Assembly and distributed to various national committees. He reiterated the necessity of each individual cooperating with his National Spiritual Assembly and Local Spiritual Assembly, if the Baha'i Faith were to advance. He also informed the National Assembly that the Local Assemblies were to report directly to him, as well as to the national body:

I would be pleased and gratified if you could inform all the various local spiritual assemblies of my wish and desire to receive as soon as possible from every local assembly a detailed and official report on their spiritual activities, the character and organization of their respective assemblies, accounts of their public and private gatherings, of the actual position of the Cause in their province, and of their plans and arrangements for the future. Pray convey to all of them my best wishes and the assurance of my hearty assistance in their noble work of service to mankind."

In 1923 Shoghi Effendi wrote two major letters continuing this same process. On 12 March he reiterated to the Western Baha'ís much that he had written the previous year, but in greater detail. On 9 April Shoghi Effendi addressed the National Spiritual Assembly as the "supreme body" in the land. It was this institution which was to lead the national community. National interests were not to be the concern of Local Spiritual Assemblies.

We may, of course, assume that Shoghi Effendi wrote these letters in response to certain needs in the community. If he insisted on a point, it was certainly because the American Baha'is were having problems in this area. The Guardian also asked to receive copies of the minutes of the national committees' meetings—once these had been approved by the National Assembly. He asked the national body to send him more frequent reports and to describe "the inner and outward currents of the Movement, the relations of the Assemblies to one another, and the general standing and the various aspects of the progress of the Cause throughout the land."¹² He ended the letter reminding the National Spiritual Assembly that it, aided by its committees, had authority over regional and national meetings and that it was their decision as to how to best implement in the community the general instructions which he gave.

It was clearly the policy of the Guardian not to rescind decisions made by the National Spiritual Assembly, whenever possible, in order to maintain its dignity and authority. He did, however, often advise it what to do in the future.

In 1924, Shoghi Effendi reminded the Baha'is that form was not enough, that the original foundation of the Baha'í Faith was the spiritual relationship between the individual and the transforming, revealed words of Bahá'u'lláh.¹³ Most of Shoghi Effendi's important letters that year emphasized that the lives of the believers should reflect Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, especially in order to demonstrate the transforming potency of the Baha'í Faith and in order to successfully propagate its message. He continued to expound on the importance of the Baha'is' support of the Spiritual Assemblies. In his first major letter of the year (23 February 1924), he further detailed the duty of each individual Bahá'í toward the Spiritual Assemblies, and the duty of the members of the Assemblies toward their constituents. He always wrote in an encouraging tone, and he put what Baha'is were trying to do into perspective with what appeared to the Baha'is as the imminent collapse of the society.

Shoghi Effendi stated that until there were strong Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice could not be elected and the period of transition they were experiencing could not end. He continued on to say that if the Baha'is wanted their

religion to be recognized internationally, they would have to strengthen the Assemblies. Certain administrative practices which seemed to be unnecessarily restrictive, he said, were only provisional since the Bahá'í Faith was still in a "state of infancy." Unwitting actions of Baha'is, such as the publication of inaccurate or undignified articles on the Faith, could damage it. But despite this, the basic principle of consultation was still "the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views."¹⁴ The duty of the members of the Spiritual Assemblies to their constituents was as great as the duty of the Baha'is to their institutions. Shoghi Effendi counseled the Assemblies to consult more with their communities and to remember that the members of the Assemblies were neither the only instruments to implement the Baha'i teachings, nor superior in any way to anyone else. The Spiritual Assemblies needed to win the confidence, support, respect, esteem, and affection of the Baha'is under their jurisdiction. They were strictly to avoid exclusiveness, secrecy, domineering attitudes, prejudices, and passions during the sessions of consultation. Shoghi Effendi suggested that, whenever possible, Spiritual Assemblies be more open with the Baha'is as to their projects and problems. As for the Baha'is' attitude toward their institutions, Shoghi Effendi reiterated that once a decision was made, everyone was to abide by it.

In January 1925 Shoghi Effendi wrote two important letters to the National Spiritual Assembly. One included a statement that he was not going to expand on the administrative policies already established; what he had given was sufficient until the Universal House of Justice was elected. He reiterated that only the National Assembly was responsible for national affairs. By this time, however, it had become clear that the National Convention was infringing on the authority of the National Assembly.¹⁵ The second letter of that month insisted again that the National Assembly alone held responsibility for national affairs.

On 10 April **1925** the Guardian wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly to congratulate it on the increased support it was receiving. In this letter he finalized the instruction that the

term "Assembly" was to refer only to the elected body and not to the community at large. Already the administration of the American Bahá'í community was beginning to resemble the form it has today, although the National Assembly found it necessary to remind the local communities to form their Local Spiritual Assemblies on 21 April. On 9 April 1925, for example, the Spiritual Assembly of New York had informed the National Assembly that it was now holding the Nineteen-Day Feast once every nineteen days, rather than on the nineteenth of every month, as it had been doing.¹⁶

Shoghi Effendi continued to push the community in the direction of better organization and more unity in doctrinal matters. In a letter dated 12 May 1925, he asked the National Assembly to send him a list of all its members with the address of the secretary, as well as a list of the members of all Local Spiritual Assemblies, also with the addresses of their secretaries. This required that the Assemblies improve the quality of their functioning, just to be able to provide such a list. He recommended, in the same letter, that a complete list of all American Bahá'ís be compiled as soon as feasible.

On 3 June 1925 Shoghi Effendi wrote to the National Convention stressing the importance of the National Spiritual Assembly and the requisite qualities of its members.¹⁷ Probably because of the various letters of the Guardian concerning the importance of the National Assembly, and because it was not always easy for all nine Assembly members to attend meetings (sometimes they did not even achieve a quorum), the Assembly decided that nine alternate members would be elected. All eighteen would receive the minutes of the meetings, and if one of the members of the first National Assembly could not attend a meeting, an alternate would replace him.¹⁸ On 6 November 1925 Shoghi Effendi informed the Assembly that its alternate members could neither vote nor be counted toward a quorum. They could only have consultative capacity (which actually anyone could have).¹⁹ As usual, once Shoghi Effendi established the basic principle, the National Assembly was allowed to implement the principle as it saw fit. On 24 October 1925 the Guardian wrote the National Assembly that it would be best to hold the National Convention

during the Riḍván Festival, 21 April to 2 May, but the final decision was left up to the National Assembly. Before that time, the convention had often been held during the summer, when more people were free to come.²⁰

In the September 1925 issue of *Baha'i News*, the National Spiritual Assembly informed its community that it was no longer in debt from the Temple construction, and that it could begin to take on more responsibilities as a national institution. It also noted that the Baha'is should not consider the National Spiritual Assembly to be only a continuation of the Bahai Temple Unity.²¹

In 1926 Shoghi Effendi began to emphasize the transition from concentrating on developing the administrative institutions to using them to further propagation efforts, as he continued to refine certain administrative principles. In two letters (10 January 1926 and 11 May 1926) he reminded the Bahá'ís that they should not lose sight of the purpose of the Administrative Order, that is, the propagation of the Baha'i Faith, and that Baha'is should not become so specialized in administrative work that they could no longer participate in the propagation work, which was more important.²²

In the November 1926 issue of *Baha'i News*, the National Assembly wrote an open letter to the community explaining the necessity and importance of supporting the Spiritual Assemblies. It urged that the Baha'is refrain from criticizing the individuals who were members of the Assemblies. The institutions were weakened if the community felt that the members it had elected to them were unworthy.²³ In September of that year, the National Assembly also published instructions from Shoghi Effendi that the Nineteen-Day Feast was only for Baha'is: non-Bahá'ís could no longer attend.²⁴

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY, 1927-36

In response to a letter of Shoghi Effendi dated 20 February 1927,²⁵ the National Spiritual Assembly decided to strengthen communications between itself and the Local Spiritual Assemblies and groups in America. This was in an effort to create a

closer bond of understanding and a spirit of cooperation between these institutions.²⁶

The National Assembly also reduced the number of national committees in an effort to make them more efficient. Committees were used extensively to concentrate on three special problems: the incorporation of the National Assembly, the establishment of effective administration of the Green Acre Baha'i School in Maine, and the development of methods and politics for the propagation of the Bahá'í Faith. It also began establishing a set of internal procedures so that efforts could eventually be concentrated on firmly establishing the religion in America.²⁷

On 18 October 1927 Shoghi Effendi warned the National Spiritual Assembly of the danger of placing too much of its work in the hands of committees. He explained in depth the relationship that should exist between the National Assembly and its committees. The role of a national committee was to study a problem and make a report of its conclusions. Such a committee might also help the National Assembly with the execution of its decisions, but not if the subject in question involved "vital matters." The National Assembly was to maintain a balance between overcentralization and excessive decentralization. It was also recommended that in its efforts to be respected and recognized, the National Assembly should not stress the fact that it held authority over the community, or emphasize its rights, privileges, and prerogatives. Rather, the National Assembly should place emphasis on the fact that it had a sacred responsibility toward its constituents. Shoghi Effendi reminded the members of the Assembly that they should do everything possible to gain

the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve. Theirs is the duty to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments, the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote. Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short, from every word

and deed that might savor of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant members of the Bahá'í family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.²⁸

As planned, the National Spiritual Assembly increased its correspondence with Local Spiritual Assemblies. One point it especially emphasized was the formation of the Nineteen-Day Feast. On 17 May 1928 the National Assembly asked the Local Assemblies to hold the Feasts regularly and to implement their three parts (devotional, administrative, and social) as Shoghi Effendi had instructed.²⁹ Further letters encouraged the Local Assemblies to utilize the Nineteen-Day Feast for consultation with the local community, and to use the devotional period as a means of inspiring the Bahh'is to continue their work with enthusiasm. Letters were also written to the Local Assemblies asking them to encourage their constituents to attend and support the Nineteen-Day Feast.

The National Spiritual Assembly also began to address the problem of creating an atmosphere of confidence between itself, the Local Assemblies, and the community in general. By mid-1928, the National Assembly had decided to make a special effort in this area of development. Such confidence was critical to the effective leadership of the national body, especially as the New History Society became important.³⁰ However, an aura of secrecy had come to surround the National Spiritual Assembly's consultations, which was not conducive to good relations with the community. To resolve this, the National Assembly, after considering different communications from Shoghi Effendi, agreed to publish a summary of the topics discussed at its monthly meetings. This was a positive step, but it did not solve the problem.

On 27 February 1929 Shoghi Effendi wrote the first of his major letters describing the evolution of the World Order of Baha'u'llah. This first World Order Letter emphasized the indissoluble link between the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith and its spiritual and humanitarian teachings. The letter explained that the machinery of Baha'i organization was only a means to an end: the end he would later describe as the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.³¹

The National Spiritual Assembly understood that confidence in any institution is built by the actions of the institution itself. Whereas, in 1926, at the beginning of the Plan of Unified Action, it realized that the administrative institutions had been weak, by mid-1929 it felt that the national institutions at least understood how they should act and react in various situations and under various pressures.³² One manifestation of this new-found strength was that all national committees were instructed to submit their annual reports to the National Spiritual Assembly, which would decide what was appropriate to present to the National Convention. This was an important step which helped to establish a new relationship between these two institutions. Previously, the procedure had been for each national committee to present its annual report to the convention without having first consulted with the National Assembly.

The National Assembly asked that Shoghi Effendi establish this same procedure for national committees when they had questions to direct to him. Whereas before national committees had written directly to Shoghi Effendi, now the National Assembly asked that these questions first be presented to itself. The assembly would then consider the question and refer it, if necessary, to the Guardian.

Shoghi Effendi wrote the second of his World Order letters on 21 March 1930. He noted that some Baha'is had apprehensions concerning the validity of the administrative institutions that were developing. He discussed the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh as the goal toward which these administrative institutions were aiming. He counseled the Bahá'ís not to be drawn toward "the prevailing notions and the fleeting fashions of the day."³³ They would be able to maintain a balanced view only if they kept

their eyes on the institutions of the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, which was being built to replace the present institutions of government and society when they collapsed.³⁴

Just as Shoghi Effendi rarely conterminded a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly, so this body was beginning to realize the need to do the same with Local Spiritual Assemblies if they were ever to develop into independent, self-sufficient institutions. The concept of the authority of the National Assembly and the power of the Local Spiritual Assembly to have its decisions enforced was often emphasized in the early 1930s.

Individual Bahá'ís and Local Assemblies were often reluctant to assume a subordinate relationship to the National Spiritual Assembly, a difficulty which was partially the fault of the national institution. Authority in the Baha'i Faith is to be tempered with love and compassion. Often, in the early years, the National Assembly was heavyhanded in the exercise of its authority. By the early 1930s, however, steps had been taken to alleviate this problem.

In 1932 the National Assembly turned its attention to the process of deliberation on Bahá'í institutions. For example, it had for some time followed the practice of recording the minority opinion after a vote on any point. **Some** of the members did **not** feel that this practice was in accordance with the doctrine of consultation as outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the point was presented to Shoghi Effendi for his ruling. In a letter written on his behalf by his secretary, he replied that he "would prefer to leave the question of recording the minority vote in the Minutes of the Assembly, to the discretion of the Assembly itself. Such matters of minor importance have to evolve through experience and therefore should be dealt with by that body, rather than have the sanction that a pronouncement by Shoghi Effendi generally possesses."³⁵ The National Assembly, unable to decide, asked the same question again in 1933 and received the same reply.³⁶ Eventually, the Assembly decided that recording minority votes was not in accordance with the principle of consultation and abandoned the practice.

In its continuing effort to eliminate all feelings of secrecy from its deliberations, the National Assembly went on publishing a general list of matters on which it consulted. From Riḍván 1931 to Riḍván 1932, it had consulted on 550 different matters.

The National Assembly requested monthly reports from all Local Spiritual Assemblies and national committees in an effort to force these institutions to study more closely their activities and plan more efficiently. The reports would also provide better information to the national body. Stimulating Local Assemblies was not easy, however, for the National Assembly had already accustomed them to a highly centralized organization. The National Assembly wrote to Shoghi Effendi on 11 July 1932:

The Cause in America appears at present to be passing through a transitional period. The National Assembly believes that activities should as far as possible be carried on through the Local Assemblies. This attitude implies a degree of unity, spiritual power and initiative which few Local Assemblies yet give evidence of possessing. A certain amount of time will apparently be required before the Local Assemblies can function according to the standards laid down in one of your earliest letters. However, the National Assembly is convinced that the permanent welfare of the Faith demands a steady development of Local Bahá'í Community life, to the point where each community is fully active as a body charged with certain inalienable powers and responsibilities. We trust that this conviction is correct and that the policy adopted this year has your approval. We deplore and regret the tendency on the part of Local Assemblies, established in past years, to expect continuous reinforcement from the National Assembly and its committees for teaching and other activities which are primarily local and personal in nature, and at the same time to feel unable to assume their measure of responsibility for aims and activities advanced by the National Assembly and truly national in scope.

The National Assembly will make every effort to assist the Local Assemblies to progress toward that degree of independence and effective authority indicated in your general instructions.³⁷

The key to this progress was in learning how to use the Bahá'í method of consultation. The National Assembly published

another article on this subject in the August 1932 issue of *Bahá'í News*.³⁸

By 1933 the National Assembly was doing its utmost to accelerate the maturation of the Local Spiritual Assemblies and national committees. It pursued this goal along the lines of explaining the importance of the Nineteen-Day Feast, emphasizing the functions of each of the three parts; outlining the importance of the Local Spiritual Assembly; and insisting on the necessity of consultation in institutions, rather than informal chats in smaller groups. (In general, the institution of the Nineteen-Day Feast was well established by 1933.)

During this year, the National Assembly decided that its members would visit as many local communities as possible.³⁹ This important step demonstrated the willingness of those members to sacrifice a great deal of their time. The visits were deemed necessary since a number of Baha'is held the opinion that the administrative institutions of the Faith in America had become "a hard and inflexible machine"⁴⁰ which stifled individual initiative and effort. The National Assembly was convinced that this attitude was simply due to a lack of adjustment by these Baha'is to a new and more evolved period in Baha'i history and that they did not understand that administrative efficiency could be coupled with characteristics such as love and mercy. Indeed, certain Baha'is generally avoided functioning within the Bahá'í organization. The topics which the members of the National Assembly were to discuss with the local communities were: the distribution and use of *Bahá'í News* in the community, the Nineteen-Day Feast, the regular functioning of the Local Assembly, levels of local activity, support for national projects and activities, local propagation efforts, and contributions to the Bahá'í fund.

However, again at the end of 1933, Shoghi Effendi found it necessary to remind the National Assembly, in a letter written on his behalf, that:

Administrative efficiency and order should always be accompanied by an equal degree of love, of devotion and of spiritual development. both of them are essential and to attempt to dissociate one

from the other is to deaden the body of the Cause. In these days, when the Faith is still in its infancy, great care must be taken lest mere administrative routine stifles the spirit which must feed the body of the Administration itself. That spirit is its propelling force and the motivating power of its very life.

But as already emphasized, both the spirit and the form, are essential to the safe and speedy development of the Administration. To maintain full balance between them is the main and unique responsibility of the administrators of the Cause.⁴¹

Throughout this period, the National Assembly came into conflict with certain individuals and Local Spiritual Assemblies, generally the older and larger Assemblies, such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. One such episode with the Chicago Assembly concerned a series of Bahá'í meetings to be held at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933. A national committee had inspected the fairgrounds and decided that the atmosphere was not conducive to dignified meetings; therefore the National Spiritual Assembly had decided not to hold any meetings there.

However, before the National Assembly had made its decision, the Chicago Assembly stated its wish to hold a series of meetings. The National Assembly replied that the Local Assembly should not hold any meetings as the National Assembly had not yet made a decision. However, the letter of reply was very strong and its tone shocked the members of the Chicago Assembly. The secretary of the National Assembly had written that "the attitude of a local Assembly to the National Assembly sets the example for the attitude of individual believers to their local Assemblies."⁴² He continued on to say that separating teaching activities from the Administrative Order was the reason that Ahmad Sohrab had been declared a 'Covenant-breaker. The letter was not intended to compare the Chicago Bahá'ís to Ahmad Sohrab, but it was understandably interpreted as such.

The Chicago Assembly sent an appeal, which also disagreed with the report of the national committee, directly to Shoghi Effendi. It stressed that all meetings had been prohibited. (This was not true. The National Assembly had said that the Chicago

Assembly could not hold any meetings until the body had made a decision.) The Guardian, as usual, referred the appeal back to the National Assembly with a request that it be carefully considered.⁴³ The situation was resolved by holding an exhibit away from the fairgrounds.

In 1934 the National Assembly decided to institute a series of conferences between itself and representatives of Local Spiritual Assemblies in different parts of the country. The purpose of these conferences was to study in depth with the local institutions the opportunities and problems which faced them. The meetings would also allow the National Assembly to obtain a clearer picture of local conditions. The first one was held in Wilmette, Illinois, in October 1934.

By the end of 1934, it was generally accepted in the Baha'i community that the Administrative Order and the more obviously spiritual teachings of the Baha'i Faith were inseparably linked. This new attitude signaled a complete acceptance of the concept of Baha'i organization. The National Assembly wrote to Shoghi Effendi:

This new spirit of oneness between the religious and social teachings of Bahá'u'lláh cannot but serve to benefit us all. It has been most difficult at times to uphold the administrative order when by many believers and even by some influential teachers that order was considered to be something quite apart from "spiritual" realities. The more that the concept "spiritual" was divorced from the concept of World Order, the more the efforts of the Assembly to promote that order were made to appear an example of "rigidity" and lack of "spiritual" outlook or capacity.⁴⁴

With the techniques of administration more or less in hand, the Guardian encouraged the National Assembly not to concentrate so much on the administrative principles themselves, but on the development of the spirit with which the Administration should be conducted.

Of course, there was not universal acceptance of the functioning of the Administrative Order. Problems continued: individuals refusing to cooperate with local and national institutions,

Baha'is having articles published on the Faith without review by an Assembly, certain persons willing to listen to and obey only Shoghi Effendi. For example, a member of the National Teaching Committee insisted on appealing to Shoghi Effendi because the National Assembly had instructed the committee to send its annual report to the national body, rather than directly to the Guardian.⁴⁵ But by 1936 the National Assembly had become stronger and understood the spiritual essence of the Administrative Order; and the national committees and Local Spiritual Assemblies were sufficiently strong to come together for the execution of an international missionary program.

THE NATIONAL CONVENTION, 1922-26

The institution which the National Spiritual Assembly found most difficult to subordinate to its authority was the National Baha'i Convention. From 1922 to 1925, the first period in its development, the convention was used to elect the National Spiritual Assembly and to hold a teaching congress. Speeches were given on such topics as impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the progress of the Temple construction. Meetings were also held for the public. It is true that consultation was held on messages from the Guardian and on such topics as the reorganization of Local Assemblies, the Baha'i Temple, children's education, publications, the Baha'i funds, the women's movement in Persia, the organization of national committees, and nonparticipation in politics. But these consultative periods were secondary to the election of the National Spiritual Assembly and to the teaching congress.

The National Assembly continually encouraged all Bahá'í communities to send delegates to the convention, often without success. The gathering lasted several days, and most Bahá'ís did not have the means to leave their employment and travel for this length of time. In 1925, for example, the Baha'i community of Los Angeles did not send a delegate to the National Convention, which was held at Green Acre, Maine, because of the expenses of maintaining Jinab-i Fáḍil-i Mázandarání while he

spent time in the community helping them with their propagation work.⁴⁶ However, another factor was simple lack of interest in the convention.⁴⁷

The National Spiritual Assembly tried various means to increase the interest of the Bahá'ís in the National Convention and to facilitate attendance. One plan was to hold the convention during the summer months, rather than during the Riḍván period, so that more people could attend. Another was to allow Bahá'í communities to vote for the National Assembly by correspondence. For the National Convention of 1925, some communities had requested to be allowed to send votes in by correspondence. The National Assembly refused since it felt that if this practice developed, Local Assemblies would no longer try their utmost to send delegates to the convention. However, when Mountfort Mills, a member of the National Assembly, returned from a pilgrimage to the World Center of the Faith, he stated that Shoghi Effendi had informed him that voting could be done by correspondence.

The National Assembly asked the Guardian whether this meant at any time or only if the convention could not be held in a particular year. They also asked whether an election could be held by mail during Riḍván, with the convention being held in the summer.⁴⁸ Shoghi Effendi responded on 24 October 1925, saying that although a convention did not need to be convened annually, it would be "highly desirable, in view of the unique functions it fulfills in promoting harmony and good-will, in removing misunderstandings and in enhancing the prestige of the Cause."⁴⁹ He continued that it would also be "eminently desirable," but not obligatory, to hold the convention and election of the National Assembly simultaneously, but even if they were not, both events should be held during the period of Riḍván, "the foremost Bahá'í Festival." Should the National Assembly deem, after serious consideration, that conditions were such that an annual convention should not be held, an election could take place by mail, "provided it can be conducted with sufficient thoroughness, efficiency and dispatch."⁵⁰ Shoghi Effendi recognized the reasoning behind the National Assembly's decision not to allow delegates to vote by absentee ballot, but indicated that it was preferable that they be allowed

to vote in any case, and that they should, in fact, be encouraged to vote by absentee ballot if it were impossible for them to attend the convention in person. Attendance in person was, nevertheless, a "sacred responsibility," and all delegates should strive to participate actively in the proceedings of the convention and report back to their home communities.

This explanation effectively meant that a convention would be held annually. Whenever the National Spiritual Assembly requested permission of Shoghi Effendi not to hold a particular convention, he encouraged the Assembly to hold one. He did distinguish between the convention and the election of the National Assembly, but his close identification of the two welded them into one institution called the National Convention.

On 12 March 1923 Shoghi Effendi instructed the National Assembly that the delegates to the National Convention were to be only from communities where the number of adult believers exceeded nine, and that a system of proportional representation should be used.⁵¹ He later allowed the implementation of this plan to be deferred for a couple of years, as the American community was not financially capable of beginning such a program.⁵² The National Assembly continued to allow communities of less than nine to send delegates so they would feel a part of the national community. But since these smaller communities had fewer financial resources, they were often unable to send anyone. They then appointed someone who could afford to attend (or, in some cases, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed someone) as a proxy. As a result, individuals who were not elected as delegates from their home communities, but who wished to be delegates and to vote for the National Spiritual Assembly, actively sought to serve as proxies. In addition, certain individuals accumulated proxies, so that they were able to cast several votes. This led to the creation of power bases and allowed individuals to gain enough influence to tip elections and sway votes on resolutions.

This situation led the National Spiritual Assembly to inquire of Shoghi Effendi whether communities with less than nine adults should be represented in any way at the National Convention. The Assembly had already arranged a system whereby Bahá'ís not attached to either a Local Spiritual Assembly or a

group could be represented by the chairman of the Regional Teaching Committee for their area, who was appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly as a delegate-at-large. The National Assembly therefore suggested to the Guardian that these chairmen might also represent the groups which had not yet reached Local Assembly status (i.e., nine adults). It suggested that this arrangement could "inspire the smaller groups to increase their numbers so as to enjoy the privilege of direct representation at the National Convention"⁵³ and in addition would "serve to set a higher standard of dignity and responsibility for all Baha'i Assemblies."⁵⁴ The Assembly added that such a system would not necessarily mean that isolated Baha'is and groups would no longer feel an active part of the national community as all Baha'is now received copies of *Baha'i News* and other general communications,

The National Spiritual Assembly was, at this point, trying to increase its power and authority, while other individuals were trying to maintain theirs. On 4 April 1925 the National Assembly wrote Shoghi Effendi that it was also interested in knowing whether Local Spiritual Assemblies could continue to appoint their own proxies, or whether the National Assembly should appoint them.⁵⁵ The National Assembly noted that the conventions tended to be unrepresentative, since Local Assemblies which could not send delegates would usually appoint someone who lived near the convention site. The National Assembly wished to limit the appointment of proxies to people from the region where the Local Assembly was located. Such a decision would have weakened certain individuals who were trying to maintain their influence through the accumulation of proxies.

Shoghi Effendi cabled the National Assembly on 1 April 1925 that groups which had not yet reached Assembly status could not send representatives to the National Convention; the proxy question was left entirely to the decision of the National Assembly.⁵⁶ On 10 April he reiterated his decision by letter, but added that when the Baha'i community had increased in size, the whole system of choosing delegates would have to be revised.⁵⁷

As a result, the National Assembly appointed the chairman of each Regional Teaching Committee to act as delegate-at-large for all groups and individuals. Sometimes, honorary delegates were also appointed: in 1925, Jináb-i Fáḍil-i Mázandarání, who was visiting from Iran; Dr. Susan Moody, also visiting from Iran; and Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney, visiting from France.

Although the National Assembly instructed Local Spiritual Assemblies to send one delegate for every nine Bahá'ís, it was not able to arrive at purely proportional representation. Local Assemblies did not use the same criteria in drawing up their lists of members. This was the beginning of the realization by the National Assembly that it needed to adopt a uniform policy concerning the qualifications of membership and the drawing up of voting lists. Previously, a great deal of liberty had been allowed to the Local Assembly. This had led to communities of the same size sending widely disparate numbers of delegates. One year, the Chicago community sent seventeen delegates and the New York community sent ten. Chicago wanted to please as many people as possible; New York did not want to have to pay for the travel expenses of too many delegates.⁵⁹

On 29 January 1925 Shoghi Effendi wrote that whereas previously the National Convention had been assembled primarily to deal with matters related to the election of the National Assembly, now because the Administrative Order had expanded and had grown in importance, because of the desires of the general Bahá'í community, the growing interdependence among National Spiritual Assemblies around the world, and in order to help and support the National Assembly, the National Convention was to become a consultative body.⁵⁹

This was interpreted to mean that the National Convention was to become a standing institution with which the National Spiritual Assembly was to consult throughout the year—either as a body, or as individual delegates. However, in 1933, Shoghi Effendi wrote to clarify that the delegates could act as a consultative body only during the annual convention.⁶⁰

Before the firm establishment of Local Spiritual Assemblies, the delegates to the National Convention had been the primary point of contact between the National Spiritual Assembly and

local Bahá'í communities. As Local Assemblies began to function, the primary link became the Assembly secretaries. Again, in order to maintain control over the National Convention, the National Spiritual Assembly asked Shoghi Effendi if delegates should not be appointed by the Local Assemblies, rather than elected by the local communities.⁶¹ Shoghi Effendi did not approve of this, or of other similar suggestions, preferring to let the Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í institutions learn through experience, and through trial-and-error.

THE NATIONAL CONVENTION, 1926-33

By 1926 the National Convention had become an accepted part of Bahá'í administrative life. From 1926 to 1936, the second period of administrative development, the convention completed its evolution to the form it has today. The major development of this period was the resolution of most procedural problems, for example, preelection nominations, election methods, the role of nondelegates, and the relationship between the National Spiritual Assembly and the delegates.

Up until the 1928 election, the members of the National Spiritual Assembly had been elected by majority vote, rather than by plurality. The National Assembly had questioned Shoghi Effendi several times on the correct procedure to follow for the election, asking how the majority should be determined, whether a plurality system would not be better, and so on.⁶² But, as always, Shoghi Effendi wished the National Assembly to work out a solution itself. But as a result of continuing to use the majority system, a cumbersome electoral process developed. Since only about fifty percent of the delegates ever attended the convention, the National Assembly was obliged to telegraph the absent delegates for their votes until a new National Assembly was elected. Often four or five ballots were required. The National Assembly held to this system because it felt that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had expressed a preference for it in his Will and Testament.⁶³ However, the system was impractical and inefficient. Shoghi Effendi wrote to the National Assembly that, although the Universal House of Justice would have to make a

final decision about electoral procedure sometime in the future, a plurality system could be used for the time being.⁶⁴ The convention held in 1928 was the first to use the new plurality system. This allowed more time for consultation.

Another source of controversy was the practice of nominations. In the practice which had been used in one form or another since the first convention of the Bahai Temple Unity during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, every delegate nominated whomever he wished (and as many names as he wished) before the election began. These names were written on a blackboard, and the members of the National Spiritual Assembly were elected from among them. The delegates could choose from as many as seventy names.

Some Bahá'ís believed that this system was unfair because the absent delegates could not make any nominations. Others felt that nominations did not accord with the prayerful and spiritual atmosphere that should reign at a Baha'i election.⁶⁵ Although the question was discussed for many years, Shoghi Effendi refrained from establishing a firm rule, following his policy of keeping the Administrative Order as flexible as possible, and adding rules and regulations only when necessary. On 27 May 1927, in the same letter in which he wrote about the plurality election system, the Guardian recommended against the system of nominations since it was "so detrimental to the atmosphere of a silent and prayerful election" and unfairly "gives the right to the majority of a body that, in itself under the present circumstances, often constitutes a minority of all the elected delegates, to deny that God-given right of every elector to vote only in favor of those who he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates."⁶⁶ However, the final decision was left to the National Spiritual Assembly.

As to the question of nondelegates participating in the consultation of the convention, before 1928 the Baha'i community and the National Assembly were both split on this issue, but nondelegates were allowed to participate. In 1929 the National Assembly ruled that they should not participate, but provided a final session of open consultation at the convention. Nevertheless, nondelegates insisted on being allowed a direct voice,⁶⁷

a situation which continued into 1930. The interventions by nondelegates were generally extraneous to the topics of consultation. For example, at the 1929 convention a nondelegate insisted on taking the floor to raise a topic that should have been handled through direct consultation with the National Assembly, and an entire morning was spent with the intervention. Because she was displeased with how she was treated, she wrote to Shoghi Effendi. He replied on 19 June 1929: "Non-delegates are welcome to express their views and make inquiries on doubtful points at the annual Convention but cannot participate in voting."⁶⁸ This seemed to be in direct contradiction to what Shoghi Effendi had implied in earlier letters to the National Assembly. Later he clarified that nondelegates could participate in the consultation at the convention only through delegates. The delegates were to be their "mouthpieces."⁶⁹

Nonetheless, it took several years for this pattern to become accepted. The convention was the last stronghold for individuals who could not quite accept the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly over them. This movement peaked briefly when the convention was virtually considered an institution completely independent of the National Spiritual Assembly.

A sign of this attempt for greater independence became apparent at the convention in 1927. Whereas the consultation at the National Convention normally centered around the agenda presented by the National Spiritual Assembly, at this convention the delegates adopted a new agenda. They discussed at length the procedure which should be used to elect the National Spiritual Assembly, spending more time on this than on anything else. After this convention, the National Assembly began working on a general procedure for the functioning of the convention.⁷⁰

At the same time, the National Assembly continued efforts to make the delegates "more of a continuous consultative body throughout the year."⁷¹ The general letters of the National Assembly in 1928 were sent to delegates, as well as to Local Spiritual Assemblies, and delegates were asked to send their advice and suggestions throughout the year. In January 1928 the

National Assembly organized a mid-year consultation with the delegates to the 1927 convention. The consultation was to center around the actions taken on the recommendations made during the convention and on other issues that had come up since the last convention. The National Spiritual Assembly stated that "although this mid-year consultation is not an institution established in the letters of the Guardian, nevertheless it corresponds to the nature of the spiritual relationship he desires to obtain between the secondary electors and the National Assembly."⁷² This attitude by the national body helped those "few believers of influence"⁷³ to further their attempts to make the National Convention an institution equal to the National Assembly itself.

The Secretary of the National Assembly explained:⁷⁴

They seem to feel that the body of delegates represents an element in Baha'i administration distinct from the functions of the National Assembly, in the sense that the delegates should, for example, appoint their own permanent committee to take full charge of the Convention Minutes and maintain a set of records apart from those in the possession and under the control of the National Assembly.

I refer to this matter because to me the existence of such a duality in Bahá'í administration is unthinkable. I have always felt that the formal organization of the Movement proceeded from the principle of oneness newly revealed in this age, from which I have derived the conviction that such a body as the National Assembly should not only be considered in any way separate from any other Bahá'í body, but in fact should be considered primarily responsible for maintaining and cherishing the distinct privileges and responsibilities which accrue to the delegates, the local Assemblies and the individual believers. The system of checks and balances characteristic of existing governments, which so clearly contain the elements of duality, undoubtedly developed from conditions when the very thought of unity was impossible, but it is the analogy of existing governments which has been taken in certain quarters to interpret the functions of Baha'i administration.⁷⁵

This letter refers to the proposal by at least one member of the National Assembly that the minutes of the National Convention

be placed in the archives of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Chicago, rather than become a part of the National Assembly's archives, and that a committee be appointed to be responsible for them, a committee which would be responsible to the delegates to the convention, rather than to the National Spiritual Assembly.⁷⁶

In 1930 the National Assembly changed its policies. It noted that "experience, moreover, has indicated the fact that consultation with delegates throughout the year is not only difficult but has the tendency to give the local delegates a standing in their community separate from and in a way superior to that of the local Spiritual Assembly."⁷⁷

From 1930 to 1934, efforts continued in certain quarters to evolve the National Convention into a kind of independent parliament with its own executive committee. Although Shoghi Effendi had fully established the principle of the authority of the National Assembly over the convention in 1933,⁷⁸ some continued to attempt to increase the power of the convention possibly in order to play one institution against the other to the advantage of the individual.

THE LUNT AFFAIR, 1933-34

The relationship which developed between the National Assembly and the National Convention as institutions was further shaped by a series of events in 1933 and 1934, which centered around Alfred Lunt, a longtime member of the National Assembly. At the 1933 convention, "a relatively small group of delegates and nondelegates who had apparently made up their minds to accomplish certain specific results"⁷⁹ made a move to gain control of the convention proceedings and influence the election of the National Spiritual Assembly.

The agenda was either put aside or made the vehicle for carrying out these plans for a period of two days. During that time the majority of delegates, remained silent, and appeared uneasy and disturbed by the existence of many cross currents of personal emotion



ALFRED LUNT'

and will. The time of the election was changed, clearly to allow more opportunity for influencing the result. Delegates were approached and urged to voice certain complaints, and the inability of Assembly members residing in the West to attend every meeting was expounded at length.⁸⁰

The National Spiritual Assembly met and decided that it would be best not to try to control the situation, but to allow the delegates to handle the problem themselves, which they finally did.

By Saturday, the delegates had become tired of the insistence of the few, and plainly disclosed their feelings that the Convention should attend to its essential business. They even voted that no one should speak more than once to the same motion. Judging only from the surface, the result of the election was a distinct surprise. At least it surprised those who had worked so hard to bring about a different result.⁸¹

According to the report which the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly made to Shoghi Effendi, this was a "pre-determined and deliberate political influence." The report continued:

It was also the view of the majority [of the members of the National Spiritual Assembly] that the present scheme of Convention arrangements has carried over from past custom and not derived directly from the spirit and principles of your plan of administration. For example, it developed very clearly that a large number of delegates believe that the National Spiritual Assembly is the responsible body until the Convention opens, when the Convention has all responsibility and authority until the new Assembly is elected. This was previously the actual fact, but it now makes a spiritual chasm in our affairs which invites disorder, injustice and the exploitation of personality. After attending ten consecutive Conventions, I can state without reservation that all Bahá'í matters in America have been brought into the circle of unity except the Convention, which remains psychologically almost where it was in the days of the Baha'i Temple Unity.⁸²

After this convention, the National Assembly decided to prevent future incidents of this type by amending its by-laws (which included the By-Laws of the National Convention) to provide that the chairman and secretary of the National Assembly would preside, rather than allowing the convention to elect its own officers. Along with the establishment of a general procedure for the conduct of the convention, the National Assembly felt that this change in officers would be sufficient to resolve the situation.

The election of Convention officers has always been the opportunity for the expression of minority views, and the general condition is such that a small, determined minority can exercise undue influence at that time.

It will also be necessary to make it clear that non-delegates should not seek to intervene, and that the agenda should not be radically changed or set aside.⁸³

These decisions were made by a vote of eight to one. The dissenter was almost certainly Alfred Lunt.⁸⁴

Shoghi Effendi replied to this letter on 18 August 1933. He once again stated that the "supreme body" in America was the National Spiritual Assembly, not the National Convention. But he directed that the National Assembly should not in any way restrict the freedom of the delegates to consult and make any recommendations they wished. He explained that the delegates should elect the chairman and secretary of the convention, but that the National Assembly "must at all times vigilantly uphold, defend, justify and enforce the provisions of the Declaration of Trust and By-laws which are binding on the Convention no less than on themselves."⁸⁵ The letter reiterated that nondelegates could participate in the convention only through the accredited delegates. The letter concluded: "Shoghi Effendi has not departed from any established administrative principle. He feels he has neither curtailed the legitimate authority of the N.S.A., nor invested the Convention with undue powers enabling it to rival or supersede those whom it has to elect."⁸⁶



NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, 1933-34. Standing
(1. to r.): Carl Scheffler, George Latimer, Sigfried Schopflocker,
Horace Holley, Allen McDaniel, Roy Wilhelm, Alfred Lunt. Seated:
Nellie French, Leroy Ioas.

This question of the relationship between the National Assembly and the National Convention was the cause for the split between Lunt and the other members of the Assembly (Allen McDaniel, Horace Holley, Roy Wilhelm, Siegfried Schopflocher, Leroy Ioas, Nellie French, Carl Scheffler, and George Latimer). An effort was made to resolve the problem through correspondence between McDaniel, the chairman of the Assembly, and Lunt. In a letter to Shoghi Effendi, Horace Holley gave his personal opinion of the source of the difficulty, that is, the personality of Lunt, a lawyer:

My personal opinion is that the root of this difficulty lies in the subjective nature of the personality of one of our members. This type of personality arrives at conclusions frequently based upon a personal impression which fails to consider all facts. This type moreover once having arrived at a conclusion tends to retain it against all proof and argument. It is a type more frequently encountered among philosophers and artists than among people of affairs. While it might appear that the statement on responsibility of members adopted at the July meeting was intended to create a rather vigorous weapon of authority, its real purpose was far more to remind each one of us of our responsibility to the institution of the National Spiritual Assembly. I cannot imagine in actual practice any National Assembly being compelled to declare a vacancy. On the other hand, the National Assembly does require a discipline sufficient to assure unity, and the existence of the power described in the statement should suffice to meet almost any **emergency**.⁸⁷

Besides corresponding with McDaniel, Lunt also wrote to the Guardian with questions concerning the relationship between the National Spiritual Assembly and the convention, the possibility of amending the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, the right of nondelegates to address the convention, and the principle that the Bahá'í Faith should never be centered around a personality. Shoghi Effendi replied in exactly the same terms in which he had written to the National Assembly. Concerning the status of well-known people within the Bahá'í community, Shoghi Effendi explained that "well-qualified individual

teachers" should receive every assistance, both moral and material, from the responsible Local Spiritual Assembly, but the popularity and personality of the teacher

should never be allowed to eclipse the authority, or detract from the influence of, the body of the elected representatives in every local community. Such an individual should not only seek the approval, advice and assistance of the body that represents the Cause in his locality, but should strive to attribute any credit he may obtain to the collective wisdom and capacity of the assembly under whose jurisdiction he performs his services. Assemblies and not individuals constitute the bedrock on which the Administration is built. Everything else must be subordinated to, and be made to serve and advance the best interests of those elected custodians and promoters of the Law of Bahá'u'lláh.⁸⁸

To this letter was added the postscript: "I trust that the answers to your questions regarding these fundamental administrative issues will resolve the difficulties and problems which have caused you so much pain and anxiety, and will serve to re-establish the relationships existing between the two leading Baha'i administrative institutions in that land on a sound and enduring basis."⁸⁹

In February 1934, *Baha'i News* carried an article entitled "The Character of Baha'i Elections."⁹⁰ It emphasized that electioneering was not conducive to a proper Baha'i election and should be avoided at all costs. Although the article was ostensibly concerned with local elections, one may assume that it was also intended to avoid a repeat of the events of the National Convention of 1933.

At the 1934 convention, the National Spiritual Assembly presented a procedure for the convention which had been approved by Shoghi Effendi. It also saw that a compilation of the letters of Shoghi Effendi on this subject was presented to the chairman of the convention. However, this did not avert a crisis.

Before the convention gathered, there were signs that the difficulties between Lunt and the other members of the National Assembly would come to a head. The National Assembly had

decided not to publish Shoghi Effendi's letter to Lunt. Lunt was unhappy with this decision and convinced the Local Spiritual Assembly of Boston (the area where he lived) that the National Assembly was withholding important information. The Boston Assembly sent out a circular letter which was critical of the members of the National Assembly.

At the convention itself, Lunt made an effort to convert the delegates to his view of how the Administrative Order should function. The secretary of the National Assembly reported the events to Shoghi Effendi:

There is no doubt but that the Annual Convention still stirs up a great deal of self-consciousness among the friends. Year after year it serves as the stage for egoistic performance, directed in some cases toward the end of electing certain believers and in others toward the end of preventing certain believers from being reelected. The National Spiritual Assembly itself must bear the chief responsibility, in that collectively it has failed to rise above the clamor and stand firmly united for the true principles underlying the various personal issues which are raised. This year the situation appears to have come to a climax, and I am convinced that the National Spiritual Assembly by an overwhelming majority will assert and insist upon correct procedure without the slightest regard for any personal considerations. In the days of Baha'i Temple Unity the Conventions were largely dominated by human politics operated behind the screen of false piety. That is the element which still lingers among some of the old believers, and the jurisdiction advanced is that the Convention, in some mysterious way, is a separate and superior Baha'i body, as it was perhaps at the time the Master instructed the Convention, rather than Baha'i Temple Unity, to select the Temple design.⁹¹

Lunt informed the delegates that the Convention was worse than any boss-ridden Convention ever held, praised them as a court of pure and perfect justice which could remedy the injustice of the National Assembly, and proceeded for one hour and a half to indulge in a speech of a type only too familiar to Americans who have long been accustomed to political demagogues. He concluded by describing to the delegates exactly what kind of National Assembly they should elect.⁹²



NATIONAL BAHÁ'Í CONVENTION, 1934

After the convention, although he was elected to the National Assembly, Lunt continued to maintain personal contact with the delegates. His views on administrative procedure were generally the minority view in the National Assembly, and other members of the Assembly felt his intent was to have his positions carried out by the delegates.⁹³

The secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly reported to Shoghi Effendi that the majority felt that Lunt had never acted as an integral part of the national institution. He had always followed his own course of action, which was usually opposed to decisions of the national body. Previously, this had only caused confusion. At the 1934 convention, the problem had been much more serious. As a result, the National Assembly voted to expell Lunt from membership on that body. In a letter to Shoghi Effendi, the secretary wrote:

The difficulty faced by the National Assembly is that any recital of facts based upon our experience over a period of eight or ten years would fail to describe the real reasons why the N.S.A. felt it imperative to terminate his membership. The specific reasons would be incomplete without an analysis of what appears to be an abnormal mentality which makes it impossible for him to deal with facts and general principles in any responsible way. The NSA feels that in view of the unusual nature of the case it is impossible to issue to the friends any specific catalog of grievances but must stand upon the general principle that he has failed in his loyalty to the Assembly as an institution.

... when re-elected to the National Assembly he took the attitude that the mere fact of election had given him a complete vindication and proved that the National Assembly was wrong; the members of the National Assembly accepted the fact of his reelection, but when we found that the agitation and rebellion was being continued, the Assembly assumed full responsibility for his expulsion.

His letter to the delegates can only be taken as evidence of the fact that even in appealing to you he is still unsatisfied and has felt obliged to renew and continue his mis-representations to delegates who cannot be in possession of the facts. His letter to delegates is one more appeal to the believers against [*sic*] the National Assembly.⁹⁴

In his letter to the delegates after the convention, Lunt had attempted to convince them that the National Assembly was purposely ignoring the will of the convention as expressed in the election. The National Assembly concluded:

It is the view of the NSA that the real point at issue is a deep-seated and prolonged attitude on the part of Mr. Lunt that he has a special relationship to the believers which transcends his relationship to the National Assembly, and the result of this attitude has been that for many years he has constituted the focal point of all the forces working against [sic] the development of the institutions established in the Master's Will and Testament and prompted in your general letters. It is the conviction of the NSA that the case is utterly hopeless. We do not regard his lack of truthfulness as lies or deceit in the usual meaning of the word but as a deviation from normal reality with which we are unable to deal as members of the N.A.⁹⁵

On 7 August 1934 Shoghi Effendi's secretary replied to the National Spiritual Assembly on his behalf:

Concerning Mr. Lunt and the action taken by the National Assembly in depriving him of his membership in that body, Shoghi Effendi wishes to express once more his deep regret at the developments that have led your Assembly to take such a drastic measure, and to renew his appeal that the N.S.A. should carefully reconsider the whole situation and with the view of enabling Mr. Lunt to regain his membership in that body. He feels that at the present juncture in the development of the Administration such an action on the part of the N.S.A. would not only create misunderstandings and misapprehensions as to its real nature and purpose, but would in addition greatly depress and cause much spiritual harm to one of its members who has already attained such a distinction both in the teaching and administrative fields of service. An act of magnanimity on the part of the N.S.A., particularly in these days when the Administration is still in its infancy would not detract from the prestige of that body, but would considerably add to its power and influence by demonstrating the true spirit which animates its deliberations and decisions. Mr. Lunt himself, the Guardian fervently hopes, will also do his utmost to henceforth bring his ideas and his activities as well within the full scope of

jurisdiction of the N.S.A., restoring thereby his relations with that body upon firmer and more stable foundation.⁹⁶

The National Assembly had not made its action publicly known. Upon receiving Shoghi Effendi's letter, it consulted again but upheld its former decision. The Assembly received a telegram from Shoghi Effendi dated 20 August 1934, which was later printed in *Baha'i News* along with an essay on the Spiritual Assembly:

PRESENT CONTROVERSY AGITATING AMERICAN BELIEVERS IF UNCHECKED WILL THROUGH ITS INEVITABLE WORLD-WIDE REPERCUSSIONS INFLICT IRREPARABLE INJURY (UPON) CAUSE (OF) BAHÁ'U'LLAH. NOTHING SHORT (OF THE) FOLLOWING MEASURES CAN AVERT THREATENED DANGER: RETENTION (OF) LUNT'S MEMBERSHIP, AND INFLEXIBLE RESOLVE BY WHOMSOEVER DIRECTLY OR REMOTELY CONCERNED (TO) REFRAIN FROM SLIGHTEST CRITICISM, EXPRESSED OR IMPLIED, THAT MUST NECESSARILY IMPAIR (THE) UNDIVIDED AUTHORITY (OF THE) INSTITUTION (OF THE) NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. EVEN BAREST REFERENCE TO ISSUES INVOLVED SHOULD BE INSTANTLY DROPPED (AND) FORGOTTEN. CONCENTRATE PRECIOUS ENERGIES (UPON) UNINTERRUPTED PROSECUTION (OF) DIVINELY APPOINTED ENTERPRISE [building the Temple]. APPEAL ENTIRE COMMUNITY (TO) HEED (MY) PASSIONATE ENTREATY (AND) GRAVE WARNING.⁹⁷

This crisis seems to have served as a purging. After 1935, at least it could be said that the National Convention recognized, if only on an academic level, the proper procedures for its functioning.

By 1936, all aspects of the American Baha'i community, especially the development of the National Spiritual Assembly and the National Convention, had evolved to the point where Shoghi Effendi could feel confident to turn the energies of the community toward the worldwide expansion of the Baha'i Faith, rather than on its internal consolidation. With Shoghi Effendi's encouragement and guidance, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada adopted the first Seven Year Plan and, in 1937, embarked on its first organized international missionary campaign.

NOTES

1. *Bahá'í Centenary*, p. 100. "American," in this paper, is intended to refer to the United States and Canada.
2. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 4 December 1944, National Baha'i Archives, Ill.
3. *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 6, p. 80.
4. See, for example, the editorial in *Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 8, p. 219; and the article in *Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 12, pp. 323-28, prepared by Louis Gregory, Agnes Parsons, and Mariam Haney on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly.
5. This division is used with reference to the evolution of the Administrative Order as a whole. The various institutions of that organization and their evolution will be discussed below, and appropriate divisions made.
6. See, for example, *Baha'i News*, no. 10, p. 5.
7. Until more documents are available to researchers, it will not be possible to determine exactly what happened.
8. Minutes, meeting of the Publishing Committee and the editorial staffs of *Star of the West*, 13 September 1922, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.; Shoghi Effendi (by H. Rabbani) to the National Spiritual Assembly, 29 July 1935. National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.; Bagdadi to Mills, 26 August 1922, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
9. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahh'i Administration*, pp. 17-25.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-30.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
13. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 22 December 1924, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
14. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 63.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.
16. Cora Oliver to Loni Bramson, 28 October 1979.
17. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 86-89.
18. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 14 October 1925, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.; *Bahá'í News*, no. 5, p. 6.
19. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 94-97. Later, the National Assembly decided to abandon this system and instead fill the vacancies created by absent Assembly members by calling on delegates to fill the empty seats.

20. Ibid., pp. 89-94.
21. **Baha'i News**, no. 7, p. 3.
22. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 98-103, 106-10.
23. **Baha'i News**, no. 14, pp. 1-2.
24. Ibid., no. 13, p. 8.
25. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 123-28.
26. **Baha'i News**, no. 17, p. 8.
27. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 6 May 1927, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
28. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 143-44.
29. National Spiritual Assembly to Local Spiritual Assemblies and delegates, 17 May 1928, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
30. The New History Society was an organization of internal opposition to the Baha'i Administration founded by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab.
31. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* of *Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 3-12.
32. **Baha'i News**, no. 33, p. 7.
33. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* of *Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 16.
34. Ibid., pp. 15-26.
35. Shoghi Effendi (by Ruhi Afnan) to National Spiritual Assembly, c/o Alfred Lunt, 20 July 1931, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
36. Shoghi Effendi (postscript) to National Spiritual Assembly, 12 March 1933, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
37. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 11 July 1932, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
38. **Baha'i News**, no. 65, p. 3.
39. There were about sixty Local Spiritual Assemblies in America at the time.
40. **Baha'i News**, no. 77, p. 3.
41. Shoghi Effendi (by H. Rabbani) to Alfred Lunt, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
42. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 11 August 1933, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
43. Ibid.
44. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 5 November 1934 (a), National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
45. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 10 December 1935, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
46. National Spiritual Assembly to Ahmad Sohrab, 29 July 1925, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

47. Spiritual Assembly of New York to National Spiritual Assembly, 9 April 1925, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
48. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 2 September 1925, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
49. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 91.
50. Ibid.
51. Shoghi Effendi (by Ruhi Afnan) to National Spiritual Assembly, c/o Alfred Lunt, 14 March 1932, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
52. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 17 March 1925, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 4 April 1925, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
56. *Baha'i News*, no. 5, p. 3.
57. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 83.
58. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 2 September 1925, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
59. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 78-81.
60. *National Spiritual Assembly*, pp. 25-26.
61. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 18 April 1925, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
62. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 6 May 1927, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
63. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 21 June 1927, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
64. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 135-36.
65. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 9 May 1927, National BahP'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
66. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 136.
67. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 24 June 1929, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
68. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 25 March 1930, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
69. Shoghi Effendi (by his secy.) to National Spiritual Assembly, 18 April 1930, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
70. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 6 May 1927, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.
71. Ibid.

72. Baha'i News, no. 20, p. 7.

73. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 14 July 1927, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

74. For many years the letters Mr. Holley wrote as secretary for the National Spiritual Assembly often included his personal ideas.

75. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 14 July 1927, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

76. Ibid.

77. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 25 March 1930, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

78. National Spiritual Assembly, pp. 25-27.

79. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 10 June 1933. National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 19 July 1933, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

85. National Spiritual Assembly, p. 24.

86. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

87. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 11 August 1933, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill. Lunt's papers (which would give his version of these events) are not yet available to researchers. Therefore, it is impossible to come to final conclusions. It should be noted that on Lunt's death in 1937, Shoghi Effendi cabled the National Spiritual Assembly: "SHOCKED DISTRESSED PREMATURE PASSING ESTEEMED BELOVED LUNT. FUTURE GENERATIONS WILL APPRAISE HIS MANIFOLD OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTIONS TO RISE AND ESTABLISHMENT FAITH BAHÁ'U'LLAH AMERICAN CONTINENT. COMMUNITY HIS BEREAVED CO-WORKERS COULD ILL AFFORD LOSE SUCH CRITICAL PERIOD SO FEARLESS CHAMPION THEIR CAUSE. REQUEST ENTIRE BODY THEIR NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES ASSEMBLE HIS GRAVE PAY TRIBUTE MY BEHALF TO HIM WHO SO LONG AND SINCE INCEPTION ACTED AS PILLAR INSTITUTION THEY REPRESENT." *Bahá'í World, vol. 7.*, p. 531.

88. Shoghi Effendi (by his secy.) to National Spiritual Assembly, c/o Horace Holley, 16 March 1933, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

89. Ibid.

90. Baha'i News, no. 81, pp. 3-4.

91. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 2 May 1934, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

92. National Spiritual Assembly to Shoghi Effendi, 9 July 1934, National Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Shoghi Effendi to District of Columbia Baha'i Community, c/o the Spiritual Assembly of the District of Columbia, 7 August 1934, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

97. *Bahá'í News*, no. 87, p. 3.

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