

23 April 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly  
of the Bahá'ís of ...

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter of 6 November 2009, in which you state that some of the friends in your community and in other Scandinavian countries experience difficulties in adhering to the Bahá'í principle of chastity, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been directed to convey to you the following and regret that the pressure of work at the Bahá'í World Centre has prevented us from writing to you sooner.

The challenge you face in helping the friends in your community to understand the Bahá'í teachings and to apply them in their lives, as the forces of materialism continue to grow in strength, is appreciated by the Universal House of Justice. Enclosed for your reference is a letter recently written on its behalf to three believers in a neighbouring country who shared similar concerns about the struggles experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in their efforts to uphold the standards of the Faith, particularly those related to chastity and marriage. It is hoped that the points set out in the letter will assist you in your deliberations on the subject. As the letter makes clear, the issues involved can best be considered in light of the relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavours, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them.

One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with "the feet of detachment". The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through "active, whole-hearted and continued participation" in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: "Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe from the Teachings." "By becoming a real part of that living organism", the letter went on, "you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá'í Teachings." Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet, when the desire to uphold the Bahá'í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unflinching love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.

Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá'ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring to achieve the Bahá'í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá'í community; nor do judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness.

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: "A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society." The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.

Apart from the measures noted above, which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá'í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behaviour contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

Should the conduct of a believer become so blatant as to attract the attention of the Assembly, it would want, after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues, to offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved. In most cases it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards. Dispassionate counselling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law is generally required. So, too, is patience needed, and he or she should be given sufficient time to bring about a change. The Assembly, often aided by the Counsellors or the members of the Auxiliary Boards, may have to help the individual reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options. In deciding on what approach to take, the Assembly should be guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá'í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards. When a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation, continued patience and loving guidance are in order. All throughout, of course, care is taken to ensure that an individual's struggles do not become a source of backbiting or disunity in the community. In this the members of the community need to remember that they should each focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.

Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection. What is at stake is the participation of the individual in those aspects of community life internal to the body of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, not his or her civil rights. In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community. Restricting the believer from other forms of service—for instance, acting as a tutor of a study circle or as a children's class teacher—may also be considered. Full removal of administrative rights should be

reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, “although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline,” this prerogative of the National Assembly “should be used only in extreme cases.” If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, “it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá'ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Bahá'u'lláh,” which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, “create an impossible and ridiculous situation.”

One final point deserves mention: There may be times when an individual who shows complete indifference to the counsels of the institutions and firm resolution in his or her desire to maintain the status quo has no apparent interest in engaging in the life of the Bahá'í community. In such a case, provided that his or her conduct has no significant bearing on the good name of the Faith, the Assembly may decide to leave the individual to go his or her own way, neither insisting on continued contact nor feeling obliged to impose sanctions. Equally, however, the Assembly need not be anxious about quickly removing the name of the individual from its rolls, given that circumstances change and a person may, over time, decide to mend his or her ways and return to participate in the life of the community.

In considering matters such as those outlined above, both in handling particular cases and in addressing the broader question of cultivating an attitude of love and respect towards Bahá'í laws and standards, you will no doubt find ongoing consultation with the Counsellors both essential and illuminating.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat