



GREEN LAKE BAHÁ'Í SCHOOL

Achieving Race Unity and Advancing the Process of Entry by Troops: Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States

The Universal House of Justice has received and read with interest your letter dated 10 December 1995 seeking its guidance in regard to the work of achieving race unity in the United States. We have been instructed to send the following reply.

Since the Writings contain so much material on this subject, already brilliantly summarized and expounded by the beloved Guardian, the House of Justice does not feel it would be feasible or useful to rehearse that with which you are already very well familiar. The friends, generally, need to digest this material, to study and internalize it, until they have a profound grasp of the Bahá'í perspective on the matters which you have identified as ones on which there is no true unity of thought. For this—mastery of the Teachings—there is no effective substitute.

In essence, the House of Justice feels that methods should be subordinated to purposes and goals, and are to be selected, adapted or discarded, as they show themselves to be effective or not. In this regard, it has often been observed that attempts which set out, self-consciously, to arrive at unity often lose momentum, unless they lead beyond discussion to some form of action. With respect to principles, it will assist the friends greatly if the issue of addressing race unity can be formulated within the broad context of the social development of the community. The distinctiveness of the Bahá'í approach to many issues needs to be sharpened. In our public outreach, we need to correlate the Teachings with current thought, and be very clear about the bases and assumptions upon which various conceptions rest, and not swallow uncritically whatever ideas happen to be in vogue. Likewise, as a community we need to be future oriented, to have a clear vision and to think through the steps necessary to bring it to fruition. This is where consultation with the Bahá'í institutions will provide a critical impulse to your own efforts. (From a letter dated 25 February 1996)

With regard to the question of what public role might be played by the Bahá'í Faith in America to ameliorate in the immediately foreseeable future the plight of African-American males, the size and influence of the Bahá'í community are, alas, too limited for it to have a determining impact on conditions which have, after all, been hundreds of years in the making. As is well known, since at least the middle of the last century significant numbers of Americans, both black and white, have long labored, often with immense resourcefulness, to counteract the baleful legacy of racism in their country, in all its complex dimensions, structural and otherwise. Indeed, when one meditates on the sweep of United States history, one can see how unlikely it is that the bitter predicament of black males will be quickly or easily resolved. The obstacles are not of such character that, for example, legal reforms could dissolve them. This is not a counsel of despair. Nor is it an equivocation or a suggestion that the requirements of divine justice ought to be deferred. Nor is it to say that Bahá'ís have no critical role to play.

On the contrary, the concern is with Bahá'í fundamentals, with looking deeply into underlying causes and identifying strategic lines of action which make the wisest use of our limited resources at this point in the development of the Bahá'í community.

If we are to avoid becoming entrapped in the enervating coils of cynicism which are a characteristic of this age of transition, we must, as the "custodians of ... the forces of love", ground our efforts in indomitable faith. In the future the Cause of God will spread throughout America; millions will be enlisted under its banner and race prejudice will finally be exorcised from the body politic. Of this have no doubt. It is inexorable, because it is the Will of Almighty God. However, as the House of Justice has been trying to get the friends to understand for some time, the necessary precondition to translation of our community's social vision into reality is a massive expansion in the number of committed, deepened believers who are well-grounded in the essentials of the Cause. Those who fail to comprehend the urgency assigned to the objective of achieving a large expansion have obviously failed to appreciate the moral imperative behind this aim.

Parallel to the process of large-scale enrollment, the institutions of the Faith, including those at the grassroots of the community, will gradually come to function with greater efficiency and increasing harmony, thereby enhancing their potential in stimulating the processes of social development. (From a letter dated 1 April 1996)

The Universal House of Justice has received your email message of 24 March 1998 in which you raise a number of questions concerning race unity in the United States, and we have been instructed to reply as follows.

The continuing problem of racism remains, as the President of your country has himself indicated in recent months, an issue of fundamental importance for the American people. Given that the problem has been created and reinforced over a period of several hundred years, it is reasonable to suppose that its remediation will occupy the Bahá'í community and the nation of which it is a part for some generations to come.

Many of your questions relate to the relative seriousness of the race issue as compared to other issues. You ask, for example, whether the building of harmony between the races is still "the most vital and challenging issue' facing the American Bahá'í community". What is more important to understand is that the achievement of race unity is far from complete. There is little to be gained by trying to invent a precise way of ranking various complex problems such as racism or by attempting to resolve these problems on a piecemeal basis. The piecemeal efforts of those outside of the Bahá'í community who are concerned with the many grievous ills facing humanity have had little lasting success. Their well-meaning endeavors have suffered from a lack of appreciation of the spiritual origin of these illnesses and a lack of understanding that the only lasting solution lies in acceptance of the remedies of the Divine Physician. (From a message dated 20 July 1998)

Your letter touches upon a subject of critical importance to the ultimate success of the Faith and the future of civilization, since it has a direct relevance to the fundamental principle of our Faith: the oneness of humankind. As you know, our beloved Guardian wrote extensively about the need to overcome racial prejudice, which he described as "the most vital and challenging issue" in *The Advent of Divine Justice*. The answers to the questions you have raised can be found in this very book. However, the frustration that you feel over the painfully slow progress of efforts in this regard can be allayed only if you are convinced that adherence

to the teachings of our Faith, though only gradually taking effect at first, will ultimately bring about the change you wish for, and if from that conviction you will exercise patience as you continue in your own efforts to assist in remedying the situation. Patience is as important as persistence in the pursuit of these efforts.

This is not a matter in which any amount of institutional action, however appropriate, can alone produce the desired outcome. Success depends primarily and ultimately on the private and public attitude of individuals, and change in attitude, unfortunately, is often painfully slow. As you are no doubt aware, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States has, for a number of years, been promoting activities to eliminate racial prejudice both within and without the Bahá'í community, but it will require the genuine response of individuals over time to guarantee the attainment of this goal. (From a letter dated 2 September 2001)

Your moderate and reasoned comments on the social defects posed by racial discrimination in urban United States and their baleful effects on the Bahá'í community set a good tone for discussion of an important subject that is almost always highly charged emotionally. Racial prejudice has been so intractable a problem in your country that achieving the ultimate solution prescribed so clearly in the literature of our Faith is hardly possible in the short run. The principle of the oneness of humankind, which Bahá'u'lláh pronounced as the major theme of His Faith, leaves no doubt that the responsibility devolving on the friends to eliminate this blight from their midst is inescapable and necessary, too, for setting an example that society as a whole can follow.

During His epic visit to America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá openly expressed His views on the need to eradicate racial prejudice and took bold actions to demonstrate the importance of this principle as it applies to relations between black and white people. Shoghi Effendi, in "The Advent of Divine Justice", wrote in unequivocal language on this theme, addressing specifically the nature of the actions required on the part of the members of each race to remove this scourge from social relations within the Bahá'í community. He repeatedly appealed in other messages for urgent attention to be given to the matter, warning of the severe consequences that neglecting it would entail. You are no doubt familiar with the instructions contained in such messages, which are referred to here simply as a reminder, particularly to emphasize that there is nothing that can be said more explicitly than that which exists in substantial volume in published Bahá'í material on this crucial subject.

What remains is for the friends, white and black, individually and collectively, to act with courage in the spirit of our Divine teachings on an issue, the resolution of which is as vital to the advancement of the Cause of God as it is to the rise of the new world order delineated by Bahá'u'lláh. It is for them to do so with unflagging determination, making use, as necessary, of the benefits in understanding that can come from loving and frank consultation. As the Guardian so poignantly advised in directly addressing the members of both races, "Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved... Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country." It is clear, then, that without the resolute initiative and sustained endeavor of the friends, an outpouring from Bahá'í institutions of more words on this problem can have no remedial effect. (From a letter dated 10 March 2004)

There can be no objection in principle ... for a Bahá'í to participate in activities that advocate social change in ways that are in keeping with the Bahá'í Teachings. A greater involvement in the life of society, individually and collectively, will be an inevitable outcome as the process of growth gathers momentum in advanced clusters. In Bahá'í communities with limited resources too much involvement in such efforts at an early stage may dissipate their energies and detract from the coherence of activities necessary for growth. Yet, in areas where the Faith has sufficiently consolidated itself, it is natural to expect that Bahá'ís would engage in social action, initially by finding ways to apply the Teachings to the problems afflicting their families, neighbors and the communities in which they live. The recent Riḍván message points to such possibilities. (From a letter dated 11 September 2008)

The Universal House of Justice appreciates your thoughtful inquiry concerning the relationship between eliminating racial prejudice and participating in activities of the Five Year Plan

In your letter, you observe that the many activities carried out in the past by the American Bahá'í community to address racial concerns, despite their obvious merit and the results achieved to date, have been limited in their effect and have not been systematic in nature. Your review of such efforts suggests a cyclical pattern, with fits and starts, in which a certain course of action is presented with fanfare by the institutions, many believers take part although others remain on the sidelines, activities reach a peak, and then, after months or perhaps years, attention wanes, and the community is drawn to other areas until some incident occurs or a new heartfelt appeal is uttered, thus beginning the cycle anew. Simply to repeat the approaches implemented in the past, then, will surely not produce a satisfactory result. The House of Justice notes that the pattern you describe was a characteristic common to many facets of community life, leading it, in 1996, to set the Bahá'í world on a new course. During the Four Year Plan, it wrote:

Our hopes, our goals, our possibilities of moving forward can all be realized through concentrating our endeavors on the major aim of the Divine Plan at its current stage—that is, to effect a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This challenge can be met through persistent effort patiently pursued... But also of vital importance to bringing about entry by troops is a realistic approach, systematic action. There are no shortcuts. Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.

After a decade and a half of systematic effort, a coherent pattern of activity that advances the growth and development of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society has emerged. The current stage of progress and the challenges that lie immediately ahead are summarized in the Riḍván 2010 and 28 December 2010 messages. From this perspective, it is possible to see how the challenge of addressing racial prejudice is an integral part of three broad areas of activity in which the Bahá'í world is currently engaged: expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society.

The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other

gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action. Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods. There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá'í community. For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh. In an environment of love and trust born of common belief, practice, and mission, individuals of different races will have the intimate connection of heart and mind upon which mutual understanding and change depend. As a result of their training and deepening, a growing number of believers will draw insights from the Writings to sensitively and effectively address issues of racial prejudice that arise within their personal lives and families, among community members, and in social settings and the workplace. As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grassroots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly. And, at the national level, the National Assembly will guide, through its Office of External Affairs, the engagement of the Faith with other agencies and individuals in the discourse pertaining to race unity.

You indicate that some friends wonder whether the Guardian's statement characterizing racial prejudice as "the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution" still applies to the racial situation in the United States, since it was written so long ago. The House of Justice has determined that it is not productive to approach the issue in this manner, as it gives rise to an implicit and false dichotomy that, either what the Guardian said is no longer important, or it is so important that it must be addressed before or apart from all other concerns. Yet, the situation is infinitely more complex. The American nation is much more diverse than in 1938, and the friends cannot be concerned only with relations between black and white, essential as they are. The expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus more intractable. So too, the American Bahá'í community has evolved significantly and is no longer at the same stage of its development; it faces a wider range of challenges but also possesses greater capabilities. The House of Justice stated that the principles Shoghi Effendi brought to the attention of the American believers more than seventy years ago are relevant today, and they will continue to be relevant to future generations. It is obvious, however, that the "long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls" upon which the friends must tread, will take them through an ever-changing landscape that requires that they adapt their approaches to varying circumstances.

In the 28 December message, the House of Justice explained that "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." Even if such a community were to focus the entirety of its resources on the problem of racial prejudice, even if it were able to heal itself to some extent of that cancerous affliction, in the face of such a monumental social challenge the impact would be inconsequential. Therefore, the friends must effectively assess the forces at work in their society and, beginning in neighborhoods and clusters, contribute their share to

the process of learning and systematization which, as their numbers, knowledge, and influence grow, will transform their lives, families, and communities. Only if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community's affairs, only if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Bahá'ís by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.

It is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice that the believers will appreciate the potentialities that exist within the current pattern of their organic activities for the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's highest aims for humanity and that they will seize their chance and commit their time, their resources, their energies—indeed their very lives—to these critical efforts for the betterment of the world. (From a letter dated 10 April 2011)

Surely, racial prejudice has for too long stained the fabric of life in the United States, and although the Bahá'í community has made enormous strides in the past century, like in so many other aspects of the Teachings, the response of the believers to this challenge has not yet reached the expectations 'Abdu'l-Bahá held for them. While Shoghi Effendi clearly expressed that the solution to this problem rests with both races, it cannot be denied that any failure or lessening of effort in redressing the problem within the framework for the social and administrative affairs of the community has its most immediate and negative consequences on the minority, as the majority can lapse into the unconscious state the Guardian warned them against. The House of Justice well appreciates that, for a Bahá'í, the injuries arising from one's interactions with a fellow believer can be especially painful.

The guidance provided to the friends by the beloved Guardian and the Universal House of Justice offers a clear way forward. As you know, Shoghi Effendi, in his masterful discourse in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, gives African American and white Bahá'ís detailed instructions as to their respective responsibilities in combating racial prejudice. "A tremendous effort", he emphasized, "is required by both races if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh." "Let neither think", he added, "that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved." Each person, of whatever race or background, was called upon to take the initiative and not allow what he perceives to be the shortcomings of his fellow believers to be the cause of his becoming apathetic or vindictive. By responding to the situation within the spiritual framework the Guardian has devised, one's actions may be imbued with the spirit of the Faith, thus making them potent instruments for effecting a change in the hearts of those who have inherited attitudes tainted by racial prejudice.

Beyond this spiritual orientation to combating racial prejudice with which the friends in the United States are well familiar, the House of Justice has in recent years attempted to bring to the attention of those who long to eradicate the blight of racism—and especially the African American believers—the potentialities for transformation inherent in the systematic implementation of the instruments and methods of the current series of Plans... As the friends pursue their efforts to promote growth and community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society, they will over time work increasingly with other well-meaning people to eliminate these and other problems that have so bedeviled the world. A profound illustration of the possibilities this approach holds is found in the video *Frontiers of Learning*, commissioned by the House of Justice and available on the website www.bahai.org/frontiers. It describes how the translation of the teachings into processes of community building in some of the most advanced clusters is beginning to address deep-

seated social ills. An example cited is the Bihar Sharif cluster of India, where the centuries-old oppressive caste system is gradually being dismantled at the grassroots. As the video shows, communities are learning to mix without regard to caste, and a mother states with profound conviction that she will never tell her child into which caste he was born so that he will feel neither inferior nor superior to another soul. The House of Justice longs to hear of bold action being taken by the friends in the United States, who, by implementing the essential activities of the Five Year Plan and utilizing the spiritually transformative power of the training institute, begin to uproot racial prejudice in their neighborhoods.

'Abdu'l-Bahá made it clear that those who steadfastly strive to promote the oneness of humanity will endure hardship and injustice, and He taught that to be wronged and oppressed in the path of God is a divine gift, for it is a characteristic of the Manifestations of God. "And since the Ancient Beauty was exposed by day and night on the field of martyrdom," He counseled, "let us in our turn labor hard, and hear and ponder the counsels of God; let us fling away our lives, and renounce our brief and numbered days. Let us turn our eyes away from empty fantasies of this world's divergent forms, and serve instead this preeminent purpose, this grand design." You are encouraged to take heart from the Master's assurance that racial prejudice will one day be eliminated from the face of the earth, although as the Guardian explained, the road to be travelled will be "long and thorny" and "beset with pitfalls". In summoning us to the great work of creating anew the world, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to adhere to a standard of conduct which He, Himself, so nobly exemplified:

Adorn thyself with My virtues, in such wise that should anyone stretch forth the hand of oppression against thee, thou wouldst neither take notice nor contend with him. Leave him to the judgment of thy Lord, the All-Powerful, the Almighty, the Self-Subsisting, and be thou long-suffering under all conditions. By God! This is one of Mine attributes, though none but the sincere are apprised of it. Know thou then that the patient sighs of the oppressed are dearer to God than all deeds, could ye but comprehend it. Be patient in whatsoever may befall thee, and put thy trust in God, thy Lord, in all thine affairs. He, verily, doth suffice thee against the harm inflicted by all that have been and shall be, and doth protect thee within the shelter of His Cause and the stronghold of His custody.

(From a letter dated 27 March 2014)

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 2 October 2017 in which you share your experiences and concerns regarding the American Bahá'í community and the issue of racism

The House of Justice appreciates your thoughtful comments and admires your unflagging efforts over many years to address the challenge of racism in your nation, particularly at a time of its overt resurgence in a manner that would justifiably give rise to despair even in the stoutest heart. However discouraging the present events, however outrageous the injustices laid bare, however intractable the problem appears, such fresh evidences of this pernicious blight on American society can come as no surprise to those friends well informed of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's dire warnings as well as Shoghi Effendi's trenchant analysis anticipating the ultimate eradication of this evil tendency from the lives and the hearts of their fellow citizens. How much more must people endure in the years ahead? The current polarization in American society makes constructive dialogue and action ever more elusive. Even those fair-minded individuals who long to free themselves and their society from this problem—surely a vast portion of the nation—are paralyzed and divided by their divergent views, unable to create the unity necessary to advance along the path of constructive change.

It is in this context that the friends must understand their sacred obligation and the possibilities that lie before them. As you have observed, since the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States Bahá'ís have, whether individually or collectively, by themselves or in collaboration with others, been continually involved in diverse efforts to address prejudice and racism and build bonds and practices of racial accord. Such efforts, though sincere and even sacrificial, have yet to be raised to a level of systematic endeavor necessary for profound and lasting social change....

Among the important lessons garnered over the past two decades is that, by focusing on insights derived from the most advanced and successful activities rather than by focusing on shortcomings and weaknesses, the community can come to understand what constitutes effective action and learn to disseminate the knowledge gained. Another lesson is how to approach the development of human resources in a manner that can efficiently multiply efforts and empower those who were previously left on the margins, or were otherwise unengaged, to become protagonists of a process of community building and social change. Therefore, it is not necessary at this time to propagate in the community a separate program centered on addressing racial prejudice before progress is possible, nor is there a need to remove one by one all the obstacles you describe before dynamic efforts can be established in a single community or neighborhood that can, once proven to be effective, be widely replicated. Consider, for example, the development of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. Years ago, it was a mere concept; today it reaches hundreds of thousands and is having a profound impact on the villages, neighborhoods, islands, and schools where it is being vigorously implemented. This capacity for social transformation, increasingly being realized in the most advanced clusters, encompasses not just the work of community building but also the engagement of the believers, both in the discourses of society in all accessible social spaces as well as in projects of social and economic development.

The 25 February 2017 letter of your National Assembly written following consultations held at the Bahá'í World Centre is not intended simply to express a renewed concern with the challenges of race in your society and certainly not to introduce a new set of activities. It is a commitment to a path of systematic action and learning, involving community building, social action, and participation in the discourses of society, from which the community will never withdraw until the problems of race are completely resolved, no matter how long and difficult the path may be. Already your National Assembly is aware of the strivings of thousands of friends who, like yourself, are engaged in initiatives of varying scope and effectiveness along these lines; through systematization and learning there is every confidence that, as each year goes by, we will understand the issues involved more deeply, act more effectively, and enlarge the circle of those with whom we are engaged.

The House of Justice hopes that those friends in the United States who resolve to renew their commitment to uprooting racism and laying the basis for a society that reflects interracial harmony can draw insight and inspiration from the unwavering resolve of the Bahá'ís in Iran. The messages written to the friends there in recent years, most of which have been translated into English and are publicly available, are instructive in this regard. For almost two centuries, and particularly the last four decades of relentless oppression, the Bahá'ís in Iran have remained forward-looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serving Iranian society. They have refused to allow apprehension and anxiety to take hold or let any calamity perturb their hearts. They have drawn on the highest reservoirs of solidarity and collaboration and responded to oppression with constructive resilience, eschewing despair, surrender, resentment, and hate and transcending mere survival, to transform conditions of ignorance and prejudice and win the respect and collaboration of their fair-minded countrymen. Those believers in the United States who have labored so persistently to

promote race unity, especially the African American friends, should appreciate in their own efforts over the years the same expression of constructive resilience, born of their great love for Bahá'u'lláh, and see in the recent turmoil opportunity rather than obstacle. They cannot, as you know, respond to the current reality in the manner consuming most of their fellow citizens; they must, by word and by deed, elevate the existing conversation and set in motion constructive approaches that will prove ever more effective over time. Shoghi Effendi has explained that such problems as are now being witnessed are inevitable as the process of disintegration advances. "All humanity", a letter written on his behalf observes, "is disturbed and suffering and confused; we cannot expect to not be disturbed and not to suffer—but we don't have to be confused." The way forward has never been clearer, particularly with the new initiative of your National Assembly to organize these matters within the proven framework for action guiding the Bahá'í world's systematic endeavors. (From a letter dated 4 February 2018)