

First Century of the Formative Age

A study guide to
Reflections on the First Century of the Formative Age
Universal House of Justice
To the Bahá'ís of the World
28 November 2023

Introduction

- This message is in the tradition of *The Dawnbreakers* and *God Passes By*, an overview of a step in the process of religious transformation in the world.
- It addresses how to apply Bahá'u'lláh's vision and teachings, intended for a millennium and with a potential far beyond what we can appreciate, to our present reality and immediate future.
- It describes a process of civilization-building step-by-step, first embryonic, now in a formative age, with much more still to come in an ever-advancing civilization towards a golden age in the far future.

Introduction

- It shows the important role of the Centre of the Covenant, maintaining unity and providing continuing Divine guidance, as expressed in practice by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice.
- Its central theme is the process of learning as the instrument for organic development, through consultation, action and reflection, laying the foundation for future steps as we progress.

Introduction

- It explains the constructive role of tests and difficulties, obstacles to be supported and overcome, as we go through crises and victories, while warning us of more to come.
- It allows each of us to situate our own efforts within the larger process of God's unfolding Divine Plan, maintaining hope despite the situation in the world today.
- One aim is to prepare us for what is to come, not to be surprised by the unexpected, the possibility of sudden changes, and what qualities we need to persevere.

Outline

(A century of achievement)

Translating what is written into reality and action

The perpetuation of the Covenant

The unfoldment of the Administrative Order

The worldwide spread and development of the Faith

Involvement in the life of society

The development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Prospect

The century of achievement

In the Bahá'í Faith in the century since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on 28 November 1923:

- one hundred thousand localities in 235 countries and territories
- emerged from obscurity to occupy its place on the world stage
- a network of thousands of institutions, from the grassroots to the international level
- its pattern of building vibrant local communities has embraced thousands—and in some, tens of thousands—of souls

The century of achievement

- the Sacred Writings have been translated into more than eight hundred languages
- raising of national and local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs heralds the appearance of thousands of future centres dedicated to worship and service
- world spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith has been established across the twin holy cities of 'Akká and Haifa

The century of achievement

A new way of life is taking shape, distinguished by its devotional character; the commitment of youth to education and service; purposeful conversation among families, friends, and acquaintances on themes of spiritual and social import; and collective endeavours for material and social progress.

The century of achievement

The Bahá'í community's resources, its institutional capacity, its ability to sustain systematic growth and development, its engagement with like-minded institutions, and its involvement in and constructive influence on society stand at an unprecedented height of historical achievement

'Abdu'l-Bahá's achievements

He was the precious gift bestowed by the Manifestation of God to guide and protect them, the Centre and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s achievements

He faithfully nurtured and protected the precious seed that had been planted.

He sheltered the Cause in the cradle of its birth and, guiding its spread in the West, established there the cradle of its administration.

He set firm the footsteps of the believers and raised up a cohort of champions and saints.

He interred the holy remains of the Báb in the mausoleum He raised on Mount Carmel, devotedly tended the twin Holy Shrines, and laid the foundations of the Faith’s world administrative centre.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s achievements

He safeguarded the Faith from its avowed enemies, internal and external.

He revealed the precious Charter for sharing Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings with all peoples across the globe, as well as the Charter that called into being and set in motion the processes of the Administrative Order.

His life spanned the entire period of the Heroic Age inaugurated by the declaration of the Báb.

His ascension ushered in a new Age whose features were as yet unknown to the believers.

The Guardian

Shoghi Effendi's appointment as the Guardian was received with relief, gratitude, and declarations of fealty by the body of the believers.

Shoghi Effendi began to mobilize the members of the widely scattered Bahá'í communities to begin the monumental task of laying the foundations of the Administrative Order.

The Guardian

“This generation stands too close to so colossal a Revelation to appreciate, in their full measure, the infinite possibilities of His Faith, the unprecedented character of His Cause, and the mysterious dispensations of His Providence.”

“The contents of the Will of the Master are far too much for the present generation to comprehend. It needs at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed.”

The Universal House of Justice

[We] pause to reflect with you on the wisdom enshrined in the provisions of the Will and Testament, to trace the course of the Faith's unfoldment and observe the coherence of the stages of its organic development, to discern the possibilities inherent in the processes driving its progress, and to appreciate its promise for the decades ahead as its power to reshape society is increasingly made manifest in the world through the growing impact of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation.

Translating what is written
into reality and action



Translating writings into action

Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is to usher in a new stage in human development—the organic and spiritual unity of the peoples and nations of the world—signaling thereby the coming of age of the human race and characterized, in the fullness of time, by the emergence of a world civilization and culture. “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”

Translating writings into action

The task of building a mature, peaceful, just, and united world is a vast undertaking in which every people and nation must be able to participate. The Bahá'í community welcomes all to join in this endeavour as protagonists in a spiritual enterprise that can overcome the forces of disintegration eroding the old social order and give tangible form to an integrative process that will lead to the unfoldment of a new order in its stead.

Translating writings into action

The Formative Age is that critical period in the Faith's development in which the friends increasingly come to appreciate the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them, deepen their understanding of the meaning and implications of His revealed Word, and systematically cultivate capacity—their own and that of others—in order to put into practice His teachings for the betterment of the world.

Translating writings into action

Shoghi Effendi guided the Bahá'ís in their efforts to gain a deeper understanding of their mission, which would define their identity and purpose.

- the meaning of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh
- the part the Bahá'ís must play in contributing to the advancement of humankind
- the nature of the development of the Bahá'í community
- its many transformations, often unexpected, over decades and centuries
- the dialectic of crisis and victory, preparing them for the tortuous path they must traverse

Translating writings into action

- to refine their characters and hone their minds to meet the challenges of building a new world
- not to despair when encountering the problems of a nascent and rapidly evolving community
- the privations and the deteriorating milieu of a tumultuous age
- the Bahá'ís are to be as a leaven that could inspire others to arise and overcome entrenched patterns of divisiveness, conflict, and contest for power

Translating writings into action

- to learn how to effectively establish the structural basis of the Administrative Order and systematically share Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with others
- a capacity for learning how to apply the Teachings was gradually cultivated within the community
- at the climax of his ministry, the Bahá'í world combined its forces for the unprecedented achievements of the Ten Year Spiritual Crusade.

The Three Charters

- *Tablet of Carmel* by Bahá'u'lláh: development of the institutions of the Faith at its World Centre
- *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Administrative Order
- *Tablets of the Divine Plan*: propagation of the Faith
- interdependent and mutually reinforcing

The Universal House of Justice

By the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, the essential aspects of a process of learning that was in a fledgling state at the beginning of that century were consciously grasped and systematically implemented by Bahá'ís worldwide across the full range of their endeavours.

The Universal House of Justice

Today the Bahá'í community is distinguished by a mode of operation characterized by study, consultation, action, and reflection. It is steadily increasing its capacity to apply the Teachings in a variety of social spaces and to collaborate with those in the wider society who share a yearning to revitalize the material and spiritual foundations of the social order.

The Universal House of Justice

- individuals and communities become protagonists of their own development
- an embrace of the oneness of humanity banishes prejudice and otherness
- the spiritual dimension of human life is fostered through adherence to principle and strengthening of the community's devotional character
- the capacity for learning is developed and directed towards personal and social transformation

The Universal House of Justice

The effort to understand the implications of what Bahá'u'lláh has revealed and to apply His healing remedy has now become more explicit, more deliberate, and an indelible part of Bahá'í culture.

The conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, is among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age.

Translating writings into action

This process will increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual in the years ahead, as the Bahá'í world takes on ever-greater challenges and releases in ever-greater measures the Faith's society-building power.

The Bahá'í world constantly evolves and develops organically as individuals, communities, and institutions strive to translate into reality the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

The perpetuation of the Covenant

To preserve the unity of His Faith, maintain the integrity and flexibility of His teachings, and guarantee the progress of all humanity, Bahá'u'lláh established a Covenant with His followers that is unique in the annals of religious history for its authority and its explicit and comprehensive nature.

In His Most Holy Book and in the Book of His Covenant, as well as in other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh instructed that after His passing the friends should turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of that Covenant, to guide the affairs of the Faith.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá perpetuated the Covenant by laying down the provisions for the Administrative Order ordained in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, thereby ensuring the continuation of authority and leadership through the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, as well as a sound relationship between individuals and institutions within the Faith.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

Foremost among the achievements of the past century is the victory of the Covenant, which both protected the Faith from division and propelled it to embrace and contribute to the empowerment of all peoples and nations.

In recognizing Bahá'u'lláh, a believer enters voluntarily into His Covenant as an act of free conscience and, out of love for Him, remains steadfast in adherence to its requirements.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

The existence of the Covenant does not mean that no one will ever attempt to divide the Faith, cause damage to it, or retard its progress. But it does guarantee that every such attempt is foredoomed to fail.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

Every generation of Bahá'ís, however great their spiritual perception, will inevitably have a circumscribed comprehension of the full implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, owing to the limitations of their own historical circumstances and the particular stage of the Faith's organic development.

The hard-won understanding of the nature of the Covenant and the firmness that such insight engenders and sustains will continue to be essential for unity and progress over the course of the Dispensation.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

It is now evident and firmly established that Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant provides for two authoritative centres. The first is the Book: the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, along with the body of works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that constitute authoritative interpretation and explication of the Creative Word. ...the existence of the Book ensures that the Revelation is available to every believer, indeed to all humanity, unadulterated by human misinterpretations or accretions.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

The second authoritative centre is the Universal House of Justice, which, as the Sacred Writings affirm, is under the care and unerring guidance of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb.

The powers and duties with which the House of Justice has been invested encompass all that is necessary to ensure the fulfilment of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

The House of Justice will provide guidance throughout the Dispensation according to the exigencies of the time, thus ensuring that the Cause, even as a living organism, is able to adapt to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society. And it guarantees that no one can alter the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's message or change the essential characteristics of the Cause.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

A world largely oblivious to the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation finds itself increasingly divided and disoriented on matters of truth, morality, identity, and purpose, and bewildered by the accelerating and corrosive effect of the forces of disintegration. For the Bahá'í community, however, the Covenant offers a source of clarity and refuge, of freedom and strength.

The perpetuation of the Covenant

Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and reassured by His explicit instructions, individuals, communities, and institutions find in the two authoritative centres of the Covenant the necessary guidance for the unfoldment of the Faith and the preservation of the integrity of the Teachings.

The unfoldment of the Administrative Order

The Administrative Order

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament laid the foundation for another of the most significant achievements of the first century of the Formative Age: the emergence and development of the Administrative Order, the child of the Covenant. In a single century, the administration, which began with a focus on the establishment of elected institutions, grew in breadth and complexity, unfolding throughout the world until it linked all peoples, countries, and regions.

The Administrative Order

Through the Administrative Order of His Faith, Bahá'u'lláh has associated individuals, communities, and institutions as protagonists in a system without precedent.

In order to prevent the contest of competing ideologies, He set out the means for cooperation in the search for truth and the pursuit of human well-being.

The Administrative Order

He introduced arrangements that would cultivate the individual's latent powers and their expression in service to the common good. Trustworthiness, truthfulness, rectitude of conduct, forbearance, love, and unity are among the spiritual qualities that form the basis of association between the three protagonists of a new way of life, while efforts for social advancement are all shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity.

The Administrative Order

At the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, the institutions of the Faith consisted of a small number of local Assemblies functioning in disparate ways. Bahá’u’lláh had appointed four Hands of the Cause in Iran, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed their activities for the progress and protection of the Faith, but He did not add to their number.

The Administrative Order

Shoghi Effendi... encouraged the Bahá'ís everywhere to concentrate their energies on raising Local and National Spiritual Assemblies.

Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the Administrative Order was not an end in itself, but an instrument to canalize the spirit of the Faith.

The Administrative Order

- its organic character
- only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living
- the “nucleus and pattern” of what would eventually become a new order for organizing the affairs of humanity
- the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions being established would evolve in complexity

The Administrative Order

He assisted them in developing the process of Bahá'í elections, establishing and administering the Bahá'í Fund, arranging the National Convention, building the relationship between the National and Local Assemblies, and a host of other matters.

National Assemblies were initially formed in the British Isles, Germany and Austria, India and Burma, Egypt and the Sudan, the Caucasus, Turkistán, and the United States and Canada.

The Administrative Order

In the final years of his life Shoghi Effendi inaugurated a new stage in the development of the Administrative Order by bringing into being institutions at the international and continental levels.

- establishment of the World Administrative Centre of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in Holy Land
- the formation of the International Bahá'í Council preparatory to its transformation into the Universal House of Justice (1951)

The Administrative Order

- appointment of twelve Hands of the Cause of God, equally represented on three continents and in the Holy Land, to advance the work of the propagation and protection
- an institution that has no legislative, executive, or judicial authority or the right to make authoritative interpretations
- appointment, in 1952, of a second contingent of Hands raised their number to nineteen

The Administrative Order

- Auxiliary Boards, deputies to the Hands in each continent, were established in 1954
- a final contingent of Hands (1957) to raise their number to twenty-seven
- establishing an Auxiliary Board for Protection to complement the Board for Propagation.

Much of what was instituted under his guidance was temporary and it was the function of the Universal House of Justice “to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration” of the Faith.

The Administrative Order

Following the unexpected passing of Shoghi Effendi in November 1957, responsibility for the affairs of the Cause fell for a brief time to the Hands of the Cause of God, “the Chief Stewards of Bahá’u’lláh’s embryonic World Commonwealth”

- the number of National Assemblies was raised from twenty-six to fifty-six,
- the transition of the International Bahá’í Council from an appointed to an elected body (1961)
- the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963

The Administrative Order

The organic unfoldment of the administration... was systematically cultivated and further extended under the direction of the House of Justice.

- the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice was adopted in 1972
- the creation of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in 1968 and the International Teaching Centre in 1973
- Auxiliary Board members were authorized to appoint assistants

The Administrative Order

- Regional Bahá'í Councils were introduced in 1997
- teaching committees gave way to structures that could take responsibility for planning and decision making at more decentralized levels

The Administrative Order

- More than three hundred training institutes, over two hundred Regional Councils, and administrative arrangements in more than five thousand clusters were established
- the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh was applied universally across the Bahá'í world (1992)
- the appointment of an International Board of Trustees (2005)

The Administrative Order

- the construction of Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs in Uganda, Australia, Germany, Panama, Samoa, India, and Chile
- establishing Houses of Worship was extended to the national and local levels

The Administrative Order

Over the century, through a series of developmental stages, the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions have progressively evolved into ever more complex forms, and the foundations of the administration have been extended, its methods continually adapted, and arrangements for collaboration clarified and continually refined.

The Administrative Order

Becoming by the end of that century a vast constellation of institutions and agencies stretching from the grassroots to the international level, uniting the Bahá'í world in thought and action within a common enterprise across a diversity of cultural contexts and social settings.

The Administrative Order

Today, although the administration has not yet reached its full maturity, the system inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh evinces a new pattern of interactions and a marked dynamism in the relationships among the three protagonists as they engage in the common purpose of working for the organic development of the Faith and the betterment of the world.

The Administrative Order

The institutions facilitate creative and collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community and strive to build consensus, to overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience the most efficacious ways to pursue the community's aims and purposes.

The Administrative Order

As a result of these new relationships and capacities of the three protagonists, the circle of those with the ability to think and act strategically has widened, while assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance are extended wherever needed. Experience and insight are shared throughout the world, from the grassroots to the international level. The pattern of life created by this dynamic engagement encompasses millions of souls from all walks of life, animated by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a united world.

The Administrative Order

In the epochs and centuries ahead, the Administrative Order will continue its organic evolution in response to the growth of the Faith and the exigencies of a changing society.

Thus, as Bahá'u'lláh's system crystallizes, it will present humanity with new and more productive ways of organizing its affairs.

The Administrative Order

In the course of this organic evolution, relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions will inevitably unfold in new directions and sometimes unexpected ways.

Yet, the unfailing divine protection that encompasses the House of Justice will ensure that, as the Bahá'í world navigates the turmoil of a most perilous period in humanity's social evolution, it will follow undeviatingly the course set by Providence.

The worldwide spread and development of the Faith

Spread and development of the Faith

Bahá'í communities emerged around the globe, in far-flung cities and villages, to encompass the diversity of the human race.

- Dispensation of the Báb, 2 countries
- Bahá'u'lláh: 15 countries
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 35 countries

Spread and development of the Faith

Tablets of the Divine Plan, a call for collective and methodical endeavour

- execution held in abeyance for twenty years
- United States and Canada, first Seven Year Plan 1937, to Latin America
- second Seven Year Plan 1946, to Europe
- plans for India and Burma in 1938; the British Isles in 1944; Persia in 1946; Australia and New Zealand in 1947; Iraq in 1947; Canada, Egypt and Sudan, and Germany and Austria in 1948; and Central America in 1952

Spread and development of the Faith

- African Campaign to extend the spread of the Faith across that continent 1951

- Ten Year Crusade under all twelve existing National Assemblies 1953

Methods such as pioneering, travelling teaching, fireside gatherings, summer schools, and participation in the activities of like-minded organizations

Gradually, the Faith emerged as a world religion, taking its place among its sister religions.

Spread and development of the Faith

As the believers travelled far and wide to share their precious Faith, they found among diverse peoples a great receptivity to its principles and teachings. These populations discovered within the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh a deeper meaning and purpose for their lives, as well as fresh insights that would enable their communities to overcome challenges and advance spiritually, socially, and materially.

Spread and development of the Faith

Entry by troops in Uganda, the Gambia, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, and later, in Indonesia and Cameroon

In the Ten Year Crusade, the Faith spread to 131 new countries and territories, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided surpassed eleven thousand, with a total of fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies and more than 3,500 Local Assemblies.

The enterprise culminated in the election of the Universal House of Justice by the members of those National Assemblies

Spread and development of the Faith

The House of Justice continued the systematic prosecution of the Divine Plan, inaugurating its second epoch

- the universal participation of individuals in service to the Cause and the deepening of individuals' understanding of the laws and teachings
- strengthening the institutions through collaboration between the newly constituted Boards of Counsellors and the National Assemblies, as well as between the Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies

Spread and development of the Faith

- Community life enhanced through children's classes, the introduction of activities for youth and women, and the regular holding of Assembly meetings
- the extensive proclamation of the Faith and its promotion through the media
- the development of centres of learning, including summer schools and teaching institutes
- greater involvement in the life of society
- the fostering of Bahá'í scholarship

Spread and development of the Faith

By the 1990s the Faith had spread to tens of thousands of localities and the number of National Assemblies more than tripled to some 180

The development of national communities followed two broad patterns which were largely contingent upon the response of the wider population

Spread and development of the Faith

In the first, local communities tended to be small in size, and only some grew to number a hundred believers or more, with:

- a strong process of consolidation, broad range of activities, a strong sense of Bahá'í identity
- united in shared beliefs, characterized by high ideals, and proficient in managing its affairs
- such a small community could never hope to serve as a model for restructuring the whole of society

Spread and development of the Faith

The second, in those countries where the process of entry by troops began:

- an exponential increase in membership, new localities, and new institutions.
- several countries grew to more than one hundred thousand believers, India two million.
- a single two-year period in the late 1980s, more than one million souls embraced the Faith
- yet the process of consolidation could not keep pace with expansion

Spread and development of the Faith

- these new believers could not be sufficiently deepened for vibrant communities to develop
- classes for Bahá'í education could not serve an ever-increasing number of children and youth
- thirty thousand Local Assemblies were formed, but few began to function
- occasional educational courses and informal community activities could not provide for the needs of thousands of new believers

Spread and development of the Faith

At the Four Year Plan, the friends were encouraged to identify the approaches and methods that applied to their specific conditions and start a systematic process of community development, reviewing their successes and difficulties, adjusting and improving their methods accordingly, learning, and moving forward

Spread and development of the Faith

This process of learning about growth gave rise to a range of concepts, instruments, and approaches which continually enhanced the community's evolving framework for action:

- the creation of a network of training institutes—offering educational programmes for children, junior youth, and youth and adults—for empowering the friends in large numbers and enabling them to enhance their capabilities for service

Spread and development of the Faith

- the construct of clusters, for the systematization of the teaching work in manageable geographic areas through the initiation and gradual strengthening of programmes of growth
- a new pattern of community life emerged
- the multiplication of four core activities that served as portals for the entry of large numbers
 - individual and collective teaching
 - visiting homes
 - hosting social gatherings

Spread and development of the Faith

- observing Feast and Holy Days
- administering community affairs
- promoting activities for social and economic development
- changing the spiritual character of the community
- strengthening social ties among individuals and families

Spread and development of the Faith

Over a century of efforts, the Bahá'í world has experienced a significant advance at the level of culture

Ever greater numbers have become engaged in a process of consciously learning to apply the Teachings pertaining to growth and development

Spread and development of the Faith

- maintaining a humble posture of learning
- whether celebrating successes or persevering in the face of obstacles and setbacks
- strengthening Bahá'í identity while preserving an orientation welcoming to all
- acting in ever-wider spheres of endeavour while continuing to foster an approach that is systematic and coherent

Spread and development of the Faith

In thousands of clusters, growing numbers of people

- view themselves as protagonists in the acquisition, generation, and application of knowledge for their own development and progress

- are engaging in discussions on elevated spiritual themes and matters of social import

Spread and development of the Faith

- initiate activities that shape a pattern of life distinguished by its devotional character
- provide education for young people and increasing their capacity for service
- contribute to the material and social progress of their communities and to the world as a whole
- gain a deeper appreciation of the purpose of religion itself

Involvement in
the life of society

Involvement in the life of society

Yet another dimension of the unfoldment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan is a greater involvement of the Bahá'í community in the life of society

- the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to effect an organic change in society, resulting in the emergence of a spiritual civilization

- learning to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for material and social change, within communities and in the wider society

Involvement in the life of society

'Abdu'l-Bahá worked with the friends in Iran and nearby countries for social and economic development

- establish schools for girls as well as boys, to offer training in good character as well as in the arts and sciences

- believers from the West assisted with this development work

- Bahá'í villages of 'Adasíyyih (Palestine) and Daidanaw (Burma)

- dependencies for education and other social services around the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád

- schools were founded in Egypt and the Caucasus

Involvement in the life of society

Shoghi Effendi provided guidance to expand these efforts

- promoting health, literacy, and the education of women and girls throughout the Iranian community

- schools continued to be opened in cities and villages across Iran until closed by the government in 1934

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi advised to concentrate on teaching and on raising the Administrative Order

This continued in the early years following the election of the House of Justice

Social and economic development

In 1983, the work of social and economic development had to be started

- Baha'is urged to strive, through their application of spiritual principles, rectitude of conduct, and practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and take responsibility as agents of their own development
- Office of Social and Economic Development established at the World Centre
- individual believers initiated activities embracing not only Bahá'ís but also the wider community

Social and economic development

Within a decade, hundreds of development activities had been initiated around the world, addressing a range of concerns such as the advancement of women, education, health, mass communication, agriculture, economic activity, and the environment

- simple activities of short duration in villages and towns
- schools and clinics were established to meet social needs
- with organizational structures to ensure their viability and effectiveness

Social and economic development

- by 1996, a few Bahá'í-inspired organizations with complex programmatic structures were founded by individuals to systematically pursue a coherent approach to development within a population
- the impact of their efforts within the community and the wider society manifested a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life

Social and economic development

A set of fundamental concepts:

- the world is not divided into developed and underdeveloped
- all are in need of transformation and an environment that provides the spiritual, social, and material conditions necessary to their security and flourishing
- development is not a process carried out by one people on behalf of another
- people themselves, wherever they reside, are the protagonists of their own development

Social and economic development

- access to knowledge and participation in its generation, application, and diffusion is at the heart of the endeavour
- efforts start small and grow in complexity as experience accumulates.
- programmes whose effectiveness has been demonstrated in one region can be systematically introduced into others

Social and economic development

As these principles and concepts are applied within a particular setting, the friends analyse their social conditions, draw insights from the Writings and from various relevant fields of knowledge, and initiate activities that are fully integrated with the work of community building.

Social and economic development

The establishment in 2018 of the Bahá'í International Development Organization in the Holy Land

- to facilitate the global process of learning about development that is unfolding in the Bahá'í world
- fostering and supporting action and reflection
- gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training
- fostering a distinctly Bahá'í approach to development

Participation in public discourse

Another major area of action emerged: greater participation in the prevalent discourses of society

Bahá'u'lláh Himself initially proclaimed His healing remedy directly to the world's leaders

'Abdu'l-Bahá unceasingly proclaimed His Father's teachings to the powerful and the masses grappling with the myriad difficulties facing humanity

Participation in public discourse

Shoghi Effendi fostered initiatives for this purpose

- Bahá'í information bureau in Geneva in 1925
- publication of the volumes of *The Bahá'í World*
- call for knowledgeable Bahá'ís to correlate the Teachings with contemporary thought in relation to the manifold pressing problems of the world

Participation in public discourse

At the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community was established in 1948 as a nongovernmental organization representing Bahá'í communities throughout the world

- an attempt should be made to establish closer contact with the leaders of public thought

- engage with kindred organizations concerned with social issues and to acquaint them with the aims and purposes of the Faith and the nature of its teachings on such matters as the establishment of world peace

Participation in public discourse

The House of Justice itself arranged for widespread dissemination of the principles of the Faith

- “*The Promise of World Peace*” addressed to the peoples of the world

Participation in public discourse

- Bahá'í International Community secured a more formal association with various UN agencies in the 1970s
- it published statements on world affairs
 - it played a constructive role at the Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, and the Millennium Forum in New York.
 - national offices of external affairs established

Participation in public discourse

As the twenty-first century began, a more systematic engagement in the discourses of society:

- International and national Bahá'í websites
- Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity for research into the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for pressing social issues
- a series of seminars to promote understanding and develop capacity among Bahá'í university students
- Bahá'í International Community regional centres in Addis Ababa, Brussels, and Jakarta

Participation in public discourse

National offices of external affairs participated in specific national discourses on the advancement of women, the role of religion in society, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, the promotion of justice, and the strengthening of social cohesion

- Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre
- individual efforts at the grassroots, in their professions and other social spaces, to offer concepts from the Bahá'í Writings as a contribution to the evolution of thought and action necessary to bring about constructive change

Participation in public discourse

Involvement at all these levels of society becomes more pressing as the process of the disintegration of the old world order intensifies and discourse becomes increasingly coarsened and polarized, leading to the recrudescence of conflict among the competing factions and ideologies that divide humanity.

Participation in public discourse

Bahá'ís seek to work with the many sympathetic individuals and organizations who pursue common objectives. In such collaborative efforts, the friends share insights from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as practical lessons gained in their own community-building efforts, while at the same time learning from the experience of their collaborating partners.

Participation in public discourse

In all settings where Bahá'ís become more deeply engaged with the wider society, they seek to foster consensus and unity of thought, and to promote collaboration and a common search for solutions to humanity's pressing problems. To them, the means by which the end is attained is as important as the end itself

Involvement in the life of society

In recent decades, the efforts for social action and involvement in the discourses of society have achieved marked coherence with those related to expansion and consolidation

Involvement in the life of society

Community life is increasingly characterized by its contribution to material, social, and spiritual progress as the friends cultivate their capability to understand the conditions of society around them, create spaces in which to explore concepts from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and from relevant fields of human knowledge, bring insights to bear upon practical problems, and build capacity among the believers and within the wider community.

Involvement in the life of society

As a result of this coherence across the various areas of endeavour, the most basic grassroots activities for social and economic development grew from a few hundred in 1990 to several thousand by 2000, and to tens of thousands by 2021.

Involvement in the life of society

Bahá'í engagement in social discourse has been met with an affirmative response in countless settings, from neighbourhoods to nations, as a humanity baffled and divided by the manifold problems resulting from the operation of the forces of disintegration eagerly seeks new insights.

At all levels of society, leaders of thought increasingly associate the Bahá'í community with fresh conceptions and approaches sorely needed by an ever more disunited and dysfunctional world.

Involvement in the life of society

The society-building power of the Faith, mostly latent at the start of the first century of the Formative Age, is now increasingly discernible in country after country.

The release of this society-building power resulting from a new consciousness and a new capacity for learning among individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide is destined to be the hallmark of the current and next several stages in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

The development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Parallel with the growth of the Faith and the unfoldment of the administration, equally significant developments occurred at the Bahá'í World Centre during the first century of the Formative Age

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The spiritual potency of the Holy Land was immeasurably enhanced by Bahá'u'lláh's presence and the interment of His sacred remains and, soon after, those of His Herald, Himself a Manifestation of God. It is now the point to which every Bahá'í heart is drawn, the focal centre of their devotions, the goal of every aspiring pilgrim.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The perilous and insecure condition of the World Centre persisted into the ministry of the Guardian. Thus, among the first and most vital duties of Shoghi Effendi, pursued throughout his ministry, were the protection and preservation, the extension and beautification of the twin Holy Shrines and other Holy Places. In his final days, the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh was finally recognized as a Bahá'í Holy Place by the civil authorities, and the Bahá'í world was at last free to preserve and beautify its most sacred site.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

The Guardian significantly expanded the properties surrounding the Holy Shrine and the Mansion at Bahjí and initiated what would eventually become extensive formal gardens. On the Mountain of God, he brought to its long-delayed completion the Shrine of the Báb, begun by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, adding three additional rooms, creating its arcade, raising its golden dome, and surrounding it with verdure. He traced “the far-flung arc around which the edifices of the World Bahá'í Administrative Order” were to be built; raised at one end of that arc its first structure, the International Archives Building.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, additional land and Holy Places were acquired and beautified, the buildings on the Arc raised, and terraces extended from the bottom to the top of Mount Carmel, as originally envisioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and begun by the Guardian.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Before the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the property in the vicinity of the Shrine of the Báb was increased to over 170,000 square metres, while a series of land exchanges and acquisitions extended the property immediately surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh from some 4,000 to over 450,000 square metres. And in 2019 construction began in 'Akká, near the Ridván Garden, on a fitting Shrine to serve as the final resting place of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Over the course of the century, the pace of the development of the Bahá'í administrative centre also accelerated.

House of Justice was increasingly able to benefit from a continuous stream of volunteers to establish the departments and agencies vital to a rapidly developing Faith, serving the needs at the World Centre as well as of the communities multiplying worldwide.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

Civil authorities in Israel formally recognised the status of the Bahá'í World Centre as the spiritual and administrative centre of the worldwide Bahá'í community, operating under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice.

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the Cause we serve.”

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal institutions of a unique and unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community's life.”

Development of the Bahá'í World Centre

“In the transformation that has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá'í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God's good time, bring about the reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it.” (24 May 2001)



Prospect

Prospect

At the close of the first century of the Formative Age, the Bahá'í world finds itself endowed with capacity and resources only dimly imagined at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing.

This brief review of the past hundred years has illustrated how the Bahá'í community, in striving to systematically execute the three Divine Charters, has become a new creation.

Prospect

Just as the human being passes through various stages of physical and intellectual growth and development until it reaches maturity, so too the Bahá'í community develops organically, in size and structure, as well as in understanding and vision, embracing responsibilities and strengthening relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions.

Prospect

It is this growing capacity to resolve complex questions and then to take on still more complex questions that characterizes the process of learning that is propelling the progress of the Faith. Thus, it is evident that with every step forward in its organic unfoldment, the Bahá'í world develops new powers and new capacities that enable it to take on greater challenges as it strives to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humanity.

Prospect

And so it shall continue to be, despite the changes and chances of the world, through crisis and victory, with many an unexpected turn, through countless stages of the Formative and Golden Ages to the end of the Dispensation.

Prospect

By the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, a common framework for action had emerged that has become central to the work of the community and which informs thought and gives shape to ever more complex and effective activities. This framework continually evolves through the accumulation of experience and the guidance of the House of Justice.

Prospect

The pivotal elements of this framework are the spiritual truths and cardinal principles of the Revelation. Other elements that also contribute to thought and action involve values, attitudes, concepts, and methods. Still others include the understanding of the physical and social world through insights from various branches of knowledge.

Prospect

Within this continually evolving framework, Bahá'ís are learning how to systematically translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action to realize His high aims for the betterment of the world. The significance of this increased capacity for learning, and its implications for the advancement of humanity at the current stage of its social development, cannot be overestimated.

The Nine Year Plan

The Nine Year Plan outlines the tasks that lie immediately ahead.

- the multiplication and intensification of programmes of growth in clusters worldwide
- increased coherence in the work of community building, social action, and participation in prevalent discourses
- the training institute will be further strengthened and will continue to evolve as an educational organization that develops capabilities for service

The Nine Year Plan

- other educational opportunities will empower young people to contribute to social progress and well-being.
- the unprecedented advancement of women as full partners in community affairs
- the capacity of Bahá'í institutions will be fostered at all levels
- the establishment and development of Local Assemblies enhancing their engagement with the wider society and its leaders

The Nine Year Plan

- the intellectual life of the community will be cultivated to provide the rigour and clarity of thought required to vindicate to a sceptical humanity the applicability of the healing remedy of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings

All these efforts will continue through a series of Plans spanning no less than a generation, that will carry the Bahá'í world across the threshold of its third century.

Prospect

The determined efforts to gain a fuller understanding of, and to live in accordance with, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings take place within the larger context of the twofold process of disintegration and integration. Attaining the objective of the current series of Plans—the release of ever-increasing measures of the society-building power of the Faith—calls for an ability to read the reality of society as it responds to, and is shaped by, these twin processes.

Prospect

A plethora of destructive forces and events, including environmental degradation, climate change, pandemics, the decline of religion and morals, the loss of meaning and identity, the erosion of the concepts of truth and reason, unbridled technology, the exacerbation of prejudices and ideological contention, pervasive corruption, political and economic upheaval, war and genocide, have left their traces in blood and anguish on the pages of history and the lives of billions.

Prospect

At the same time, hopeful constructive trends can also be discerned... the diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity, a greater consciousness of global interdependence, the embrace of collaborative action among individuals and institutions, and a heightened longing for justice and peace are profoundly transforming human relationships.

Prospect

And thus, the movement of the world towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision advances in countless halting steps, in occasional dramatic leaps, and with intermittent stretches where progress stalls or is even reversed, as humanity forges the relationships that constitute the foundations of a united and peaceful world.

Prospect

The destructive forces that buffet the world do not leave the Bahá'í community untouched. As a result, in various places and at various times, the progress of a particular community was retarded by insidious social tendencies or temporarily restricted or even extinguished by opposition. Periodic economic crises reduced the Faith's already limited financial resources, hindering projects for growth and development.

Prospect

The effects of world war paralysed for a time the ability of most communities to implement systematic plans. The upheavals that have reshaped the political map of the world have created obstacles to the full participation of some populations in the work of the Cause. Religious and cultural prejudices once thought to be receding have re-emerged with fresh vehemence. Bahá'ís have striven to address such challenges with perseverance and resolve.

Prospect

Yet, over the past century, no nobler response to the hostile forces unleashed to oppose the advance of the Cause has been witnessed than that of the Bahá'ís of Iran.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran continues unremittingly to the present day. Despite all they have endured, the Bahá'ís of Iran have responded with unbowed courage and constructive resilience.

Prospect

They have won imperishable distinction through such achievements as the establishment of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education to ensure the education of succeeding generations, their efforts to transform the views of the fair-minded among their compatriots—whether inside or outside the country—and above all, their endurance of countless injustices, indignities, and privations in order to protect their fellow believers, maintain the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith in His beloved homeland, and safeguard its presence in that land as a benefit to its citizens.

Prospect

In such expressions of unswerving fortitude, of consecrated devotion and mutual support lie essential lessons for how the Bahá'í world must respond to the acceleration of the destructive forces that can be expected in the years ahead.

Prospect

At its heart, the challenge presented by the interplay of the processes of integration and disintegration is the challenge of holding fast to Bahá'u'lláh's description of reality and to His teachings, while resisting the pull of controversial and polarizing debates and beguiling prescriptions that reflect futile attempts to define human identity and social reality through limited human conceptions, materialist philosophies, and competing passions.

Prospect

If Bahá'ís become entangled in the delusory notions of contending peoples, if they emulate the values, attitudes, and practices that define a self-absorbed and self-serving age, the release of those forces necessary to redeem humanity from its plight will be delayed and obstructed.

Prospect

Rather, as the Guardian explains, “The champion builders of Bahá’u’lláh’s rising World Order must scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension, and distress. Let them forge ahead into the future serenely confident that the hour of their mightiest exertions and the supreme opportunity for their greatest exploits must coincide with the apocalyptic upheaval marking the lowest ebb in mankind’s fast-declining fortunes.”

Prospect

None can anticipate precisely what course the forces of disintegration are destined to take, what violent convulsions will yet assail humanity in this travailing age, or what obstacles and opportunities may arise, until the process reaches its culmination in the appearance of that Great Peace that will signalize the arrival of the stage when, recognizing the unity and wholeness of humankind, the nations will “put away the weapons of war, and turn to the instruments of universal reconstruction”.

Prospect

One thing, however, is certain: The process of integration will also accelerate, knitting together ever more closely the efforts of those who are learning to translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into reality with those in the wider society who seek justice and peace.

Prospect

Shoghi Effendi promised to the Bahá'ís of America that the time would come when they would be called upon to engage their fellow citizens in a process of working for the healing and betterment of their nation. That time has now come. And it has come not only for the Bahá'ís of America, but for the Bahá'ís of the world, as the society-building power inherent in the Faith is released in ever-greater measures.

Prospect

Releasing such power has implications for the decades to come.

- Every people and every nation has a part to play in the next stage in the fundamental reconstruction of human society.
- All have unique insights and experiences to offer for the building of a unified world.
- It is the responsibility of the friends to assist populations to release their latent potentialities to achieve their highest aspirations.

Prospect

- Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a unified world will offer a hopeful and clear direction to peoples whose perception has been distorted by the confusion prevailing in the world, and a constructive path for cooperation in the search for solutions to long-standing social maladies.
- As the spirit of the Faith increasingly permeates the hearts to enkindle love and reinforce the shared identity of humanity as one people, it instils a sense of loyal and conscientious civic responsibility and, in place of the pursuit of worldly power, redirects energies towards disinterested service in the pursuit of the common good.

Prospect

- Populations increasingly adopt the method of consultation, action, and reflection to displace endless contest and conflict.
- Individuals, communities, and institutions across diverse societies increasingly harmonize their efforts in common purpose to overcome sectarian rivalries
- Spiritual and moral qualities foundational to humanity's progress and well-being take root in human character and social practice.

Prospect

The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. Let all take inspiration from the words of the beloved Guardian.

“The potentialities with which an almighty Providence has endowed it will no doubt enable its promoters to achieve their purpose. Much, however, will depend upon the spirit and manner in which that task will be conducted.”

Prospect

“Through the clearness and steadiness of their vision, through the unvitiated vitality of their belief, through the incorruptibility of their character, through the adamant force of their resolve, the matchless superiority of their aims and purpose, and the unsurpassed range of their accomplishments, they who labour for the glory of the Most Great Name ... can best demonstrate to the visionless, faithless, and restless society to which they belong their power to proffer a haven of refuge to its members in the hour of their realized doom.”

Prospect

“Then and only then will this tender sapling, embedded in the fertile soil of a Divinely appointed Administrative Order, and energized by the dynamic processes of its institutions, yield its richest and destined fruit.”

The Universal House of Justice



The Universal House of Justice