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To the Bahá'ís of Canada

Dearly-loved friends,

In its 26 March 2016 letter to the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Bahá'ís of Canada, the Universal House of Justice wrote: “The process of entry by troops that emerged so tenuously in the Ten Year Crusade, and was fostered in the decades that followed, is now being extended through a sound process of community building in center after center in all those countries and territories that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá marked out so long ago. Your sister communities, so many of which you helped to establish, are now mature, and you stand with them ready to take on the sterner challenges that lie ahead. The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society”.

This moving description directly links Canada’s legacy and its future, relates the early pioneer work around the world to its present-day form in neighbourhoods and villages, and connects the heroism that the words of the beloved Master called out of the hearts of His loved ones to the eager response of countless friends today to the call to reach out to the “widest possible cross-section of society and to all those with whom they share a connection—whether through a family tie or common interest, an occupation or field of study, neighbourly relations or merely chance acquaintance—so that all may rejoice in the appearance, exactly two hundred years before, of One Who was to be the Bearer of a new Message for humankind.”¹ During the first stage of the Plan, leading up to the celebration of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh, the unprecedented expansion of a conversation to over 100,000 souls was an offering of love to Him.

As this conversation has grown during the first stage of the Plan, capacities have developed: to act with intensity and purpose; to work together in groups, planning and organizing; to invite and welcome friends and strangers alike; to teach directly, confidently and systematically. Immense spiritual forces have been released, to now be channelled during this second stage leading up to the two hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, when the greatest share of the effort needed to fulfil the goal of the Plan is required.

Each person who responded to the invitation to celebrate the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh is a potential protagonist in the community-building process. The House of Justice wrote: “However, the real transformative power of the Faith is likely to be perceived more readily still if people experience how worship and meaningful service are being woven into the fabric of the lives of Bahá’ís everywhere. Indeed, from the community-building activities of the Five Year Plan emerges a pattern of collective life within which anyone can discern the vivifying influence of the divine teachings brought by God’s Manifestations.”² A change of culture begins to take root, nurtured by an outward-looking orientation, confidence in the interaction of the Word of God with the human soul, an “eager embrace of the approaches explored in the institute courses, a diligent cultivation of community life through the

¹ 18 May 2016, Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies

² Ibid

multiplication of core activities, and an audacious outreach and effective teaching among receptive populations.”³

We take time to describe these elements of growth though you know them well. In our message to the Bahá’ís of Canada studied at the unit conventions, the National Assembly referred to the new and promising landscape in Canada that is in the hands of experienced, enkindled gardeners. As gardeners, growers of the Cause, you have learned with certainty that a vibrant, healthy community is most easily developed in the more intimate setting of a neighbourhood or village. “The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible... for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed.”⁴

The first steps on this path can be taken through direct teaching, establishing a children’s class, hosting a devotional gathering or starting a study circle, yet experience has shown clearly that the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme is the most effective way to build a community that eventually engages all its members, of all ages. For the junior youth programme to thrive, an ever-expanding circle of dedicated youth are needed. For this circle to grow and be supported in the demanding work of serving their younger peers and their families, the entirety of the community must be growing in capacity to reach out, to teach, to provide the necessary resources, to affect the devotional character of a neighbourhood and bring the remembrance of God into the day-to-day life of a population. In this environment, receptivity can be quickly perceived in a longing to serve, to participate in changing the world.

It is clear: a defining moment has arrived. This letter is penned with joyful admiration for all that has been achieved. It is also written in recognition of the urgency of the hour. It is a call to action.

The first call is to every believer. It is a summons to a new intensity, focus and consecration in the work of teaching from now until the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, whatever your circumstances and whatever the opportunities before you. Whether you are living in a small village with a few friends who know of the Faith, or a large metropolis where entire populations are becoming attracted, what time can you consecrate — daily, weekly, monthly — to the teaching work? How can each one of you deepen your conversation with those with whom you gathered to celebrate the Glory of God? What extraordinary measures are possible, and even beyond what now may seem possible?

Where cycles of activity in a cluster are regular, could every soul arrange his or her life to be able to participate fully in teaching projects and campaigns during the expansion phase, in teaching and deepening activities during the consolidation phase, and gatherings for reflection and planning? Where cycles do not yet exist, could a group of friends begin to think together in this systematic way? Could special effort be devoted to building on the capacity to work together in collective efforts, teaching directly, multiplying core activities, and enhancing the devotional character of community life? Time — that most precious gift — will be needed even when the hope of rest beckons: weekends, holidays, evenings. In these sacrifices lies the heroism of the day.

³ 1 May 2006, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada

⁴ 29 December 2015, Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

A pattern is emerging where, alongside efforts everywhere in the cluster to teach in whatever context is available to the friends, teams of individuals of all ages visit youth, junior youth and their families to share a vision of growth, explore together the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, invite them to participate in the courses of the institute and initiate new activities. This approach is proving its effectiveness and should be pursued in cluster after cluster. Periodic collective efforts to do so are especially critical and require commitment on the part of all community members to participate and lend their support.

The implications of our arrival at this stage are clear: each cluster moving towards the second milestone and beyond needs a neighbourhood; the work in a neighbourhood is sustained most easily when the effort is aimed at multiplying vibrant junior youth groups; to multiply junior youth groups requires a veritable army, especially — but not exclusively — youth, many of whom are devoting time to serving among a population, and fostering its movement as they learn to nurture its younger generations through the training institute. In this context, efforts will intensify to raise new animators in the wider community. Conversations will take place, friendships will be forged, a longing to serve will be enkindled, training will develop capacity, tests will be encountered: all these require a loving, supportive community which gradually welcomes the younger generations and their families into its embrace.

The second call, then, is especially to the young ones of the community: youth in high school, young adults engaged in higher education, young families beginning new patterns. Much depends on you, yet you are surrounded by a community that stands ready to support and champion you, rejoicing to see itself progress as an interdependent, organic whole. Again, time is needed, moments of life that your elders know to be swiftly-passing and yet seem to stretch out, limitless, in the time of youth. Animators are needed to establish and strengthen the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme as the most effective impetus for community-building in a neighbourhood. Pioneers are needed to settle in neighbourhoods and villages, with long-term commitment to learning about a population. However, in a letter dated 23 May 2016 to the Bahá'ís of the World, the Universal House of Justice described a pattern that takes advantage even of short periods of time: “While many friends who wish to serve as homefront pioneers can make commitments that span years, there are those who may only be able to offer shorter periods, sometimes as little as three months. Such friends can kindle a spirit of selfless service and transmit valuable experience from stronger clusters to emerging ones. In time, they return to their communities much inspired and enriched, able to contribute even more effectively to the advancement of their own clusters. We hope that the friends, especially the youth who may have the time and determination to do so during their extended holidays, will take advantage of the opportunity to enter the pioneering field...” It is our longing to see hundreds of high school and university students plan to regularly dedicate time during their summers and holidays in this way, with the unhesitating support of family and community.

All 119 clusters in Canada with a programme of growth aim to establish intensive programmes of growth by the end of the Plan, towards a worldwide goal of 5,000. Another 23 are taking their first steps along a continuum of growth. We challenge the friends in every one of these 119 clusters to either begin or strengthen work in a neighbourhood, focussing on learning about a receptive population who will take the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and apply it to their own spiritual and material conditions. For this to happen, we have seen in cluster after cluster, a basic junior youth spiritual empowerment programme that engages 50 to 100 junior youth — 5 to 10 groups — must be established. This is the work of the hour: urgent, joyful, focussed, consecrated. Step by step, heart by heart, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, a new world is rising. “In this worthy occupation all find a calling, and of the joy that comes from being engaged in this work none should deprive themselves. We entreat the one Beloved that the whole of this bicentennial year may be filled with this joy that is purest and sweetest: telling another soul of the dawning of the Day of God.”⁵

⁵ Ridvan Message 2017, Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World

Last year, the National Assembly shared joyful news of steps that have been taken to make pilgrimage more accessible to a greater number and diversity of believers. We call this to your minds now, as you consider ways to lend powerful spiritual impetus to your plans for the remaining cycles of the Plan. However, there are many for whom a trip to the Bahá'í World Centre will not be possible. The National Assembly is therefore soon launching a special program of visits to the Shrine in Montreal, blessed by the footsteps of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912 and referred to by Him as His home. We will share more news of this development shortly.

In the notes of those who were in His presence during those precious days, there is an account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá standing at the window, quietly looking out. When asked what He was doing, He responded that He was summoning souls. How else could we end this letter than with that image, with our love and our promise of ardent prayers for your own work of summoning souls. In a few short weeks, members of National Spiritual Assemblies from around the world will assemble in the Holy Land to elect the Universal House of Justice. You will be with us at the sacred Threshold.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF CANADA



Karen McKye, Secretary