

16 March 2020 / 16 Loftiness 176

To the Canadian Bahá'í community

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

So soon after having addressed you in our letter dated 31 January 2020, we turn to you again with love and profound gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh. As the National Spiritual Assembly reflected with the Counsellors on Canada's part in the worldwide achievements of the bicentenary celebrations, we saw a community that has flung open its doors to the diverse peoples of this nation and is being shaped by the processes of growth gaining momentum. In these suddenly constrained circumstances, what joy it brings us to think of you in the ways that 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes you: leaven in the world of humanity, beacons of light lifting the oppression of a world whose oneness is becoming clearer and clearer. In no recent time has there been a greater need for your clear-sightedness, connectedness, confidence and outward-looking vision, qualities that will now shine in a different context.

The National Assembly has been receiving many inquiries about the measures that should be taken by the Bahá'í community to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), including adjustments that should be made to activities that bring the friends together in larger numbers. We have urged Local Spiritual Assemblies as well as regional institutions and agencies to be guided by reliable public health sources in making decisions about particular events, according to the reality of each province, territory or locality. This is the time for reliance on science and facts provided by trusted public health sources.

In most parts of the country, this means cancelling larger events according to your provincial or territorial social distancing guidelines. It means being ever conscious of protecting those at higher risk—our elders or those whose immune systems are compromised. It means changing patterns of greeting and showing love to each other, replacing physical affection and handshakes with other forms of expression. It means limiting travel to only that which is essential, observing rules of hygiene that call for washing hands for twenty seconds, and cleaning and disinfecting much more frequently and thoroughly than might be habit. Those who have travelled overseas and just arrived back in Canada are now asked by public health officials to stay at home for 14 days. These measures we take out of love for our fellow human beings and our desire to protect them from unnecessary suffering. You have been hearing much about these matters and we do not want to dwell on them here, as critical as they are. If you have not already done so, we urge you to visit your city or provincial/territorial government website, or that of the federal government at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>.

We turn, then, to the work you have been doing to draw thousands upon thousands of your friends and coworkers, your neighbours and family into spaces where the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation lifts the soul. The guidance of the Universal House of Justice over the last 25 years and the work of the Five Year Plan have equipped you for this moment. You know well that meaningful conversations can take place one-to-one and in small groups of friends and need not involve an organized gathering. You have experimented with a myriad ways of celebrating holy days, including outdoors and in small numbers. You have experience with home visits that draw the hearts closer, to each other and to Bahá'u'lláh, and can be a source of light even while maintaining recommended physical distances. Above all, you have embraced a vision of your community that reaches beyond your fellow Bahá'ís, to all those who advance the work of community-building with you, and beyond them, all the souls in your neighbourhoods and villages. These, the peoples of the world, have become your people.

Whatever the circumstances before you, we know you will find creative ways to continue to teach the Cause and to support each other in providing the balm of Bahá'u'lláh's healing message. Vigilant and informed, you are encouraged to use all you have learned and adapt to these exceptional circumstances. In consultation with your fellow servants of the Cause—Bahá'ís and those from the wider community—a path will be found to continue the momentum you have already built, under unique conditions that we will recount for many years to come.

This is also a time when we must draw on all that we have learned about nurturing both physical and spiritual health. Many of you will have new stretches of time available, as schools in some provinces are closing and the encouragement to work from home is saving travelling time for some. These minutes, hours and days are gifts that can be used in study, immersion in prayer and service, each according to his or her circumstances. We wish to make special mention of the most vulnerable in our communities and neighbourhoods, our old and new friends, who will need our loving, watchful attention. The army of youth who have arisen in service are conversely among the least vulnerable to the effects of the virus. What special role might this troop of inspired, experienced, sacrificial servants of the Cause play? Recent examples abound of the community's extraordinary contributions, including those of the young, in emergency situations: among them Haiti, Vanuatu, Mozambique and in the last few weeks, Italy, whose inspiring story can be accessed at <https://news.bahai.org/story/1401/>.

As for national gatherings, the National Assembly has carefully considered the National Convention in light of public health guidelines and with deepest regret, has decided to cancel plans for a centralized consultative gathering of the delegates this year. The delegates had already been asked to mail their ballots to ensure the election of the National Spiritual Assembly. This step, usually invoked only in by-elections, is in accordance with guidance of the Guardian that the election of a National Spiritual Assembly may take place either “through correspondence or preferably by [the delegates] gathering together, and first deliberating upon the affairs of the Cause throughout their country...”. Only once in the history of the Canadian Bahá'í community has this gathering been cancelled: these are unusual days indeed.

Another conclusion the Assembly has reached, regrettably, is to suspend visits to the Shrine in Montréal. The nature of this precious site and its contents make it impossible to create safe conditions for visitors. The period of closure has not been determined, and the National Assembly will be monitoring the situation to allow re-opening as soon as it is possible to do so.

It is clear: humanity is becoming acutely conscious that it inhabits one common homeland. In its 8 November 2019 message following the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, the Universal House of Justice wrote: “In this continuing period of special potency, at an hour when the world seems powerless in the face of overwhelming peril and souls have succumbed to dismay and despair, Bahá'u'lláh has shown us another glimpse of what the community that bears His name can accomplish through courage—even heroism—in the discharge of its God-given mission. We will pray earnestly in the Holy Shrines for His unfailing confirmations to surround every child and every youth, every woman and every man, every family and every community that treasures His love in their hearts.”

It is towards this courageous and heroic people—every child and youth, every man and woman, every family and community—that the National Assembly directs its love and heartfelt prayers in these fateful days.

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



Karen McKye, Secretary