

Coping with Community Development

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There are only two years left before the turn of the century. ‘Abdu’l-Baha called the Twentieth Century the “Century of Light,” and the Universal House of Justice regards the last four years of this century as the time when, as it is stated in the Ridvan 153 Message, the world will drastically change. This is the time when the two processes of change initiated by the force of Baha’u’llah’s revelation will take place at an accelerating speed, and this is a time that can be called one of the most dangerous periods in the history of the Earth.

Recognizing the importance of the period at the end of the century, we Baha’is have undertaken our Four-Year Plan. The main target of this project is to accelerate the process of new membership. To attain this target, the Universal House of Justice suggests that we need to have three elements, believing in the possibility of attaining the target. The three elements are the individual Baha’is, the Baha’i organizations, and the Baha’i communities.

"Baha’i people" means each one of us—each of us is responsible for supporting the World Order that Baha’u’llah envisioned. "Baha’i organizations" means the Universal House of Justice, administrative organizations like the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, the International Teaching Center, the Continental Board of Counsellors, the Huququ’llah, the annual Conventions, and the monthly Feast held every nineteen days. These organizations are the structural elements of the Baha’i Faith, and, at the same time, they are our communities. However, the concept of community is very difficult to understand.

Counsellor Lee Lee Loh Ludher attended our national Convention this past year representing the Asian Continental Board of Counsellors. She drew a picture of a boat with everyone aboard rowing together. She explained that the boat represents our community. Her talk helped us understand the concept, and we realize that this boat must be strong and should not be made of easy-to-sink clay, as described in the old Japanese story *Kachikachi-yama* or the Burning Mountain.

As the 153 Ridvan Message has noted, everywhere in the world it seems that the the Baha’i communities are just beginning to grow. For example, I often go to Myanmar to visit Baha’i communities there. Their communities were established more than 100 years ago. There are even villages where all residents are Baha’i. ‘Abdu’l-Baha called these communities ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s Village. However, I found that even in those old, well-established communities people ask such questions as what Baha’i communities are, and how can they be established. Therefore, even these old communities are at a beginning stage. So it is timely for this conference to address the issue of community building.

A great variety of activities are needed to build dynamic communities. The 153 Ridvan Message gives several key concepts for community building. Communities are organizations where people with various backgrounds are spiritually united and work together to maintain unity. At the same time, these organizations explore ways for social progress and development. Members of these communities are all

people, young and old; in other words, they are assemblies of people who are different in age, educational background, professions, customs and tastes. In communities different people work together for the welfare of everyone.

Prosperous communities need improved activities so that each member's expression of virtues is compatible with the functions of the Local Spiritual Assemblies. We can also see improved activities in the unity and friendship within communities and in the dynamics of community activities for growth. To promote unity and friendship, Baha'u'llah especially recommends consultation.

The basis of a community is the unity among its people. Going back to Counsellor Ludher's boat metaphor, without unity, we could not build a strong boat or our boat would sink as soon as it is launched. A community is not simply a collection of people. Each community has its own character which is different from each member's character and different from administrative organizations. In a community all members are united under the authoritative leadership of its administration. By leadership I don't mean the old type of power mongering, based on money, physical strength, or special knowledge. Such leadership decides everything arbitrarily by itself. Our Baha'i communities need leaders who decide everything through consultation with all members and whose authority is based on the excellence of their personal character, their ability to unite organizations, and their ability to be a living example of an ideal Baha'i life. These leaders should be members of the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies.

Currently there are forty Local Spiritual Assemblies in Japan. The number is actually smaller than it was twenty years ago. This is partly because the communities have not been strong enough to retain old members or to bring in new members. Yet to have strong communities, we need many more members. We must solve this dilemma by improving our communities.

Local Spiritual Assemblies must go into a new stage characterized by facilitating the community members' spiritual progress through setting up plans, developing human resources, and leading community members with brotherly love. Shoghi Effendi explains that the Assembly members must not only carry out their missions wisely and efficiently but must also deepen themselves to understand how important it is to help each other. The Assemblies must tap the dynamic potential that exists in the Baha'i Faith. They must steer people's lives and help them exchange their ideas and harmonize their activities.

By seeing how effectively the Spiritual Assemblies encourage their members, we can assess how well those Assemblies execute their duties and how mature they are. We can also see how mature an Assembly is by seeing the Assembly's spiritual and social position, its potential to encourage expansion. The functioning of the Assembly has been discussed extensively in works by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. However, it takes a week-long seminar to understand the role of the Assembly completely. Fortunately, Japan's National Spiritual Assembly is planning to hold Local Spiritual Assembly seminars, starting in Kyushu. I hope you will join these seminars.

When we look at the general situation in Japan, we can find a good hint of its future in a quotation from a letter written by 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1920:

Japan is like unto a farm whose soil is untouched. Such a soil as this has great capacity. One seed produces a hundred fold. Now, praise be unto God, ye have found such a farm. Ye must develop the lands; ye must

free them from thorns and weeds; ye should scatter the seeds of the love of God thereupon, and irrigate them with the rain of the knowledge of God. Rest ye assured that heavenly blessing will be bestowed!
(*Japan Will Turn Ablaze*, p. 33-34. Dec. 9, 1920)

I think that we must spend a long time during the first stage removing the weeds and thorns. So we must ask ourselves what activities will help remove those weeds? Praying together is one very effective activity. Although it takes a long time to study about praying, praying together sincerely will unite the friends. Community prayer will produce waves of water which will irrigate our dry land. The Ridvan Message notes:

As we have said in an earlier message, the flourishing of the community, especially at the local level, demands a significant enhancement in patterns of behaviour: those patterns by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly are manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth. This calls for the integration of the component elements—adults, youth and children—in spiritual, social, educational and administrative activities; and their engagement in local plans of teaching and development. It implies a collective will and sense of purpose to perpetuate the Spiritual Assembly through annual elections. It involves the practice of collective worship of God. Hence, it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Baha’i centres, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of believers.
(Ridvan Message 153 [1996])

However, each member of a community should be spiritually strong. Our Four-Year Plan must facilitate the type of human development that will spiritually strengthen each member. In other words, we need to create an unprecedented scale of human development networks, and as a result increase the number of Baha’is in Japan.

In Japan we already have the Baha’i Institute for Development (BID) under the National Spiritual Assembly. The BID has eight representatives nationwide, and their activities are growing. We must contribute internationally to the field of human development through the BID. Our contribution will include taking part in seminars, facilitating training courses, providing information, donating funds, giving time and providing meeting places. All we have to do is choose the activities that we can do depending on our personal situation. This is a good time to consider what activities we are involved in and to try to find more activities that we can join.

Our Four-Year Plan has only two years left. The Universal House of Justice expects every one of us to carry out our planned activities during this critical period. Our Japanese Baha’i community is expected

to be an international role model and assistance provider preparing for the accelerating changes to be seen the world over.

This conference includes specific case reports from Chikushino and a village in India. At the end of this conference, every one of us will hopefully go back home determined to contribute to our local communities. With such activities, the Association for Baha'i Studies-Japan, will be free from the deficiencies of traditional academic organizations, such as "words, words, only words," "spending time and money uselessly" and "criticizing unimportant details."

At the middle of our Four-Year Plan, I would like to pray that this conference will play a role in producing the World Order that has been envisioned by Baha'u'llah.