

# Suomen Bahá'íden Kansallinen Henkinen Neuvosto

Nationella Andliga Rådet för Finlands Bahá'íer Suoma Bahá'íd Nášuvnnalaš Vuoiŋjalaš Ráddi

To the Bahá'ís of Finland at the beginning of the month of Sulṭán

18 January 2024

Bahá'í year 180

Dear friends,

By the end of 2023, a total of 125 groups inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's vision were active across our country, dedicated to the development of devotional life, the spiritual education of children, the unlocking of the spiritual and intellectual potential of junior youth, the study of the Bahá'í Writings and the development of the capacity to serve in study circles. The number of participants in these core activities is now close to 600. This level of development, unprecedented in our community, is a source of great joy and encourages everyone to move forward towards new learning. Since the launch of the National Nine-Year Plan, our community has made tangible progress in many ways in learning about building vibrant communities, opportunities for social action and participation in social discourse. We are immensely grateful for the smallest effort of every believer to unleash the society-building power of the Bahá'í Faith. Equally heartfelt thanks go to all Bahá'í institutions. Aware of the present urgent needs for development, they have supported the friends and communities in a systematic, exemplary and inspiring way.

In November, at the request of the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Finland reflected on the development of our community, especially from the perspective of the training institute and capacity-building among the youth. The following is a summary of our wide-ranging consultation with International Teaching Centre member Antonella Demonte and our liaison Counsellor Paul Verheij.

Our vision is that by 2046, every cluster in Finland will be involved in building a new way of life – a spiritual revolution that draws its power from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and applies that power to bring about a spiritual and social transformation. As the House of Justice wrote in its letter of 30 December 2021, 'The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is concerned with the transformation of both humanity's inner life and social environment.'

... A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.<sup>1</sup>

The task of Bahá'í institutions is to create conditions for the friends to learn how to make the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh accessible to the population of Finland and develop an outward-looking orientation. The National Assembly and its institutions and agencies are

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<sup>1</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021, ¶16.

increasingly striving to become learning organisations and to adopt the necessary attitudes to promote a culture of learning at all levels, especially at the grassroots level, where most of the efforts are made. This requires shifting from an *activity-oriented* ethos to a *process-oriented* mindset, which necessitates learning to give latitude to our institutions and agencies in an encouraging, flexible and creative atmosphere. With a process-oriented approach, we understand that individual activities are tools in a collective process of transformation, not an end in themselves.

A central feature of the spiritual enterprise of the Bahá'í community is the development of capacities to serve humanity, for which a worldwide network of training institutes was created at the end of the last millennium. The training institute supports an expanding grassroots conversation on improving social conditions through spiritual and material progress, and offers educational processes for different age groups, where friends, families and groups learn about spiritual principles and apply them in everyday life. Children aged 5 to 10 learn about the virtues of the human soul, see the planet as the shared home for all people and are encouraged to develop their own capacities for the good of the world. In the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, 11 to 14 year-olds examine moral choices in their everyday lives, learn to interpret the world around them, identify the constructive and destructive patterns acting in society and recognise the impact of these on their own thoughts and actions. Through service projects based on shared observations, they increase community well-being and a sense of trust between people. In study circles for youth and adults, participants deepen their understanding of the Bahá'í teachings and acquire spiritual insights and practical skills to promote community building, social action and social discourse. The three educational processes described above draw on the Ruhi Institute's curriculum and set of materials, which will expand over time and as needs change. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi on 7 June 1939 anticipated the development of such an educational system:

... the task of formulating a system of education which would be officially recognized by the Cause, and enforced as such throughout the Bahá'í world, is one which [the] present-day generation of believers cannot obviously undertake, and which has to be gradually accomplished by Bahá'í scholars and educationalists of the future.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Universal House of Justice, 'The training institute has no parallel as an instrument for the systematic exposure of limitless numbers of souls to the life-giving waters of the Revelation and the inexhaustible meaning of the Word of God.'<sup>3</sup> It is therefore natural that the role of the Institute will be further expanded, as the House of Justice has directed:

When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever-deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual 7 June 1939.

<sup>3</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021, ¶26.

<sup>4</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021, ¶22.

Inspired by this vision, our intention is to strengthen the institute process in Finland and create conditions and capacities for it to evolve, in the future, into a fully fledged educational organisation. This goal requires undivided attention, energy and commitment from the friends, communities and institutions over an extended period of time. We hope that all the friends – and especially the youth – will understand the centrality of the institute process at this crucial juncture in human history and recognise themselves as promoters of this expanding and experimental process. Our goal requires material resources and large numbers of collaborators, including people who will dedicate themselves to full-time service to the institute process for years to come – as well as physical facilities for the Institute in at least one neighbourhood.

It is obvious that the opportunities for the youth to benefit from and build the institute must be greatly increased, as youth have a very special role to play in the development of the institute:

Appreciating the effectiveness of the institute process, every follower of Bahá'u'lláh will feel a desire to contribute to its advancement in some way – not least, the Bahá'í youth. Institutes know well that releasing the potential possessed by young people is, for them, a sacred charge; we now ask that Bahá'í youth view the future development of the institute in the very same light. At the vanguard of a nine-year, community-wide endeavour to bring the institute to a higher level of functioning, we expect to see a broad movement of youth setting the standard. They should seize every opportunity – in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction – to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute's programmes. Some youth will be able to devote a period of service – perhaps even successive years – to the provision of education, especially to those younger than themselves; for many, support for the institute's activities will be an ever-present dimension of their lives throughout their own education and as they seek a livelihood from their calling in this world; but for none should it be anything less than a cherished commitment.<sup>5</sup>

The Bahá'í-lukio [Bahá'í High School] education entity – an important agency for our community – has been developed and maintained for decades through the dedicated efforts of many friends, and many of the adults in our community are Bahá'í-lukio alumni. In our consultation, we realised that the training institute and the general framework for action in the Nine-Year Plan accommodate the original vision of the Bahá'í-lukio programme: to support youth in deepening their understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and applying them to their own lives. We see that through the processes of the Nine-Year Plan, the mission of the Bahá'í-lukio will be fully realised and further expanded, with the aim of building an education system that will give the Finnish population, and especially young people, the opportunity 'to develop undreamt of capacity for service to humanity.'<sup>6</sup> As we mentioned above, we consider it very important to strengthen the institute process and to take all necessary steps to unleash its full potential in the country. In this light, we considered the possibility of adapting the current curriculum and delivery of the Bahá'í-lukio and saw that making such a change would be challenging and time-consuming in relation to the development needs of our community. Our unanimous decision is to bring the Bahá'í-lukio programme to a conclusion by the end of spring 2024.

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<sup>5</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021, ¶24.

<sup>6</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Finland 21 June 2023.

We extend our heartfelt and humble thanks to all the many friends who have lovingly and committedly served in the Bahá'í-lukio contributing to the capacity-building of the youth over the past years and decades. The opportunity to gather together regularly, to delve into the Word of God and build a worldview based on it, and to have meaningful conversations with peers and adults has strengthened the whole community and equipped it for future development. We do not think of discontinuing the Bahá'í-lukio as the end of one thing, but as transitioning to a global process of education. The study of the Bahá'í Writings, youth gatherings and meaningful conversations will continue in the lives of young people and the wider community – only in a slightly different form. Support for the youth movement will be discussed at the institutional meeting in February. Future plans will take into account the opportunities for all young people to participate in the growing youth movement, including those who have no other Bahá'í youth in their community.

In looking at the development and needs of our community in our sparsely populated country, we identified the characteristics of a twofold process. First, to strengthen the rising spirit of universal participation in our community, we continue to invite all the friends to become more familiar with the provisions of the Plan, to explore the spiritual enterprise, to build unity of vision and to apply those insights in their own locality. The National Nine-Year Plan drawn up by the National Assembly has already pointed the way for this development and opened up the friends' understanding of the many possibilities of the spiritual enterprise. The friends have paid attention to the importance of expanding nuclei and see opportunities in a wide variety of networks – they are 'working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus.'<sup>7</sup> Such universal participation in the spiritual enterprise also requires that everyone has access to the experiences of growth and insights generated in the most advanced clusters.

The second feature of the twofold approach is to promote one of the chief objectives of the Nine-Year Plan: The Uusimaa cluster is expected to pass the third milestone by 2026. Global experience shows that bringing at least one cluster up to this level of development will boost development in the whole country. It is therefore natural that institutions will give abundant attention to enhancing learning in the Uusimaa cluster and systematically develop ways to disseminate insights and experiences throughout Finland. Over time, Uusimaa will become a resource cluster, a reservoir of knowledge and experience for the adjoining clusters and the country as a whole. Friends living in other parts of Finland will have ample opportunities to participate in the efforts in Uusimaa through regular seminars designed for learning. As experience is gained, similar developments will occur in other clusters. Given the geographical size of Finland, it is important that, in the long term, resource clusters will also develop in other parts of the country to support neighbouring clusters.

As we consulted on the strengthening of the relationship between our community and our institutions, we paid particular attention to the vital role of the Auxiliary Board Members. The National Assembly is therefore extremely grateful to Sahba Frooghi and Maria-Patricia Jansson, who have served in this capacity with exemplary dedication and effort for the growth and well-being of our community. Over the coming months and years, we look forward to learning more and more about the dynamic interaction that characterises the cooperation between the two branches of Bahá'í Administration at both local and national levels. The cooperation between the National Assembly and the Institution of the Counsellors has steadily deepened,

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<sup>7</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021, ¶11.

for which we are very grateful to Counsellor Paul Verheij. In addition, new developments will also be seen in the activities of the National Assembly itself. Among other things, we aim to enable the full-time service of the National Secretary to be extended to five days a week and to be able to provide secretarial support staff. We will also increase the ability of the National Treasurer to devote more and more of her time to her pressing tasks.

Our delight at all that has been achieved so far and at the exciting prospects for our community in the years ahead does not diminish our awareness of the world's ever-worsening problems. Eradicating the root causes of war, social injustice and deepening division requires the use of that remedy which the omniscient Physician has brought to humanity. Is this not the most compassionate response to the plight of a world besieged by pain? In the words of the Universal House of Justice:

The dysfunctional state of present-day society makes the need for the release of the society-building power of the Faith abundantly clear and pressing. We cannot but expect that, for now, convulsions and disturbances will continue to afflict the world; you will no doubt appreciate, then, why every earnest supplication we offer for all God's children to be relieved from bewilderment and bitter hardship is coupled with an equally heartfelt prayer for the success of the much-needed service you are rendering for the Cause of the Prince of Peace.<sup>8</sup>

With loving greetings,

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Finland



Safa Hovinen, Secretary

cc: Counsellor Paul Verheij  
Auxiliary Board Members

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<sup>8</sup> The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message 2022, ¶6.