



National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand

Te Rūnanga Wairua Tapu o nga Bahá'í o Aotearoa

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2 Rahmat 178

To all the friends in Aotearoa

Dearly loved brothers and sisters,

Tēnā koutou katoa

Playing our part to befittingly honour 'Abdu'l-Bahá

We greet each and every one of you with great affection at this time when the need has never been greater for us to walk the path of service in the footsteps of the beloved Master.

This year's momentous Ridván Message from the beloved Supreme Institution states that their letter to the Bahá'ís of the world dated 25 November 2020, provides the charter for this significant One Year Plan and for befittingly honouring 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Covenant in this centenary year:

Besides providing for advances within clusters everywhere, the coming Plan will be a year for profound reflection on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre, as the community prepares to commemorate the centenary of His Ascension.¹

You are urged to continue to study, consult, act and reflect upon both the Ridván Message and the letter of 25 November 2020, which contain so much that is powerfully uplifting to our souls, enlightening to our minds and guides our service at this time to be effective and respond to the needs of humanity. Both are attached.

Transformation in the face of negative societal forces

Our hearts cannot but be distressed when we see the wretched conditions affecting so many of the world's peoples, including those of Aotearoa. These challenges reflect the disintegrative process at play in a world that has not yet responded meaningfully to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. The crises that continue to engulf mankind are essentially spiritual in their causes. Therefore, the only effective response to a spiritual cause, is a spiritual solution.

It is important to remain conscious of the effects of the prevailing destructive forces in society, so that we take care to not become influenced by them. One of the most prevalent, of course, is the force of materialism, which can so easily and insidiously dominate our lives and cause us to feel we are "too busy" to give much time to Bahá'u'lláh. As the House of Justice highlighted in its Ridván 2015 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, "ultimately, it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan's framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society." The House of Justice has indicated

¹ House of Justice letter of 25 November 2020 to the Bahá'ís of the World



that it is within this context that it becomes possible for the friends to gradually address problems in our lives and in our surrounding communities.

To help create the mindset, the will, and the energy to be involved in this way, the House of Justice has been encouraging the believers for many years to apply the teachings of the Faith to advance the process of integration through a practise of learning in action, characterised by action, reflection, consultation, and study. Undertaking this with others as you walk a path of service together, is rewarding and encouraging, particularly so as the circle continues to widen as an expanding nucleus of co-workers.

It goes without saying that the watchword in all of this is unity in diversity. The engagement of Tangata Whenua is crucial and we know it is a key to success with progress of any kind in our land. The House of Justice has reminded us “that there are numerous souls among the Māori population who not only have the capacity to embrace this vision, but who are ready and eager to work towards its realization”.

As we direct our energy towards the building of the good in this period of global uncertainty and transition, let us take care to not become embroiled in the controversies that divide, that dissipate our energies and deflect us from our purpose to unify society. Let us “labour serenely, confidently, and unremittingly to lend our share of assistance, in whichever way circumstances may enable us, to the operation of the forces which, as marshalled and directed by Bahá’u’lláh, are leading humanity out of the valley of misery and shame to the loftiest summits of power and glory.”²

Goal of participation

Out of all the mass of humankind God hath chosen the friends, and He hath favoured them with His guidance and boundless grace. His purpose is this, that we, all of us, should strive with our whole hearts to offer ourselves up, guide others to His path, and train the souls of men...³

In these remaining few months, it is the National Spiritual Assembly’s ardent hope that the friends throughout Aotearoa make every precious moment count towards achieving the **goal of 30,000 souls meaningfully engaging with this centenary year leading up to and including the key holy days at the end of November**. The goal is to befittingly honour ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during the remaining months of this period of special spiritual potency, and if we think of what He would want us to do to honour Him, surely it would be for us to serve humanity through the power of the Word of God, by joining hearts to Bahá’u’lláh’s mighty Revelation, in a way that gives impetus to their spiritual journey in life.

The core activities are all centred on the Word of God, and together form the basis of a community-building that combines worship and service to begin to change the dynamics and culture of a community. As of the end of April 2021, nationwide there were 4,243 participants in the core activities, of which over one third (1,692) were friends of the Faith. Knowing that if each of these individuals who are participating in core activities, whether they are enrolled Bahá’ís or not, reaches out to widen their circle of engagement in meaningful ways to an average of 7 other individuals, the target of 30,000 is well within reach.

² *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996, 2018 printing), pp. 203-204

³ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*



Let us keep in our hearts and minds the poignant and energising words that the Beloved Master imparted to us in two of His Tablets of the Divine Plan:

Thus far ye have been untiring in your labours. Let your exertions henceforth increase a thousandfold. Summon the people in these countries, capitals, islands, assemblies and churches to enter the Abhá Kingdom. The scope of your exertions must needs to be extended. The wider its range, the more striking will be the evidence of divine assistance.⁴

Drawing on the experience of the bicentenaries

The training institute (and the processes associated with it that develop human resources), is “an instrument of limitless potentialities”⁵ This has been proven time and again in every setting throughout the world, and Aotearoa is no exception. We are seeing that as the proven strategies are applied, the fruits are abundant. We know that this movement is irrepressible. In 2017 and 2019, when the friends put their hearts and souls into meaningful engagement with their wider communities to pay tribute to Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb for the respective bicentenary celebrations, we saw how the numbers of those participating in bicentenary-related activities throughout Aotearoa was able to grow, from a wonderful 10,064 in 2017 to a magnificent 13,392 in 2019.

The beloved Supreme Institution noted after the second bicentenary some of the elements that led to the “stunning climax”⁶:

- The celebrations were the fruit of effort carried out devotedly with unity and a sense of undaunted initiative;
- The friends felt assured in their response to the call to service;
- Local communities, neighbourhoods, and villages became arenas for intensified activity of all kinds;
- The knowledge of what the community could accomplish — witnessed at the last bicentenary — prompted a release of tremendous energy and enterprise, supported by a sound process of preparation and reflection;
- Each avenue of activity became a natural invitation to engage with the institute;
- The broadest possible spectrum of people were brought into the embrace of the community’s activities.

The House of Justice in that same message described the nature of some of the activities:

- Celebrations within families and among families featured prominently;
- Gatherings organised by youth for their peers were a strength;
- Opportunities for animated retellings of the lives of the Báb and His early disciples were eagerly seized;
- Festivities were given added depth through conversations on the needs of society, often begun by the parents of young children;

⁴ Cited in a letter of the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors dated 3 May 2018

⁵ The Universal House of Justice; 28 December 2010; to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

⁶ The Universal House of Justice, 8 November 2019 to the Bahá’ís of the World



- The bicentenary elicited artistic works of beauty and feeling, creative expressions of devotion too numerous and diverse to describe.

The beloved Supreme Institution then urged everyone to extend the community-building process further still.

We urge everyone who worked to bring about this success to hasten now and gather again to reflect and to consult, and to determine how best to apply, in each unique setting, all that your experience has taught you: how an expanding nucleus of friends can cultivate a growing pattern of activity; how children can advance to the next grade and junior youth to the succeeding text, further developing their moral and spiritual qualities; how institute courses can yield much-needed skills and capacities; how the path of service can widen to accommodate large numbers; how real hope for the betterment of society can be demonstrated in action; and how all of God's peoples can be enabled to take inspiration from His new Revelation, and souls who are receptive can be invited to identify with the Cause of the Abhá Beauty. 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.

The National Assembly is confident that friends everywhere will draw on the experience and learning gained from the bicentenaries to build even more participation for this centenary year and, God willing, the goal of 30,000 souls having a meaningful engagement with this centennial period will be achieved.

'The ability to channel the release of tremendous spiritual energies for the advancement of the Cause'

The bicentenaries galvanised local communities throughout the world, and proved that the community of the Greatest Name has "the ability to channel the release of tremendous spiritual energies for the advancement of the Cause...The vision of what is made possible by observing a Bahá'í Holy Day was immeasurably expanded."⁷ With the Twin Holy Birthdays occurring this year on the weekend of 6-7 November 2021, just three short weeks prior to the Centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that weekend of two very special holy days to celebrate the Birth of the Báb on Saturday and that of Bahá'u'lláh on Sunday, can give a tremendous spiritual boost of energy if used to their fullest potential, to give added impetus leading up to the Centenary shortly thereafter.

However, to capitalise fully on what the month of November has in store, prayerful thought, consultation and action needs to start now on the part of all individuals, communities and institutions. The greatest honour we can bestow on 'Abdu'l-Bahá is to fulfil all of the remaining cluster goals of the previous Five Year Plan, and consolidate all of the achievements made during that Plan,

... while cultivating the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community recognised for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation. At the national, regional, and cluster levels, we look to communities of proven strength to help those in

⁷ Ridván 2021 Message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World



which less experience has accrued. In this year-long effort, every community must draw on whatever untapped potential it may possess and seek to overcome any obstacles that are impeding its growth, thereby preparing it for the demands to come. For it is within the context of a flourishing community, especially a centre of intense activity in a village or neighbourhood, and when each element of the Plan's framework is given the attention it requires, that those elements most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community's powers in the field of action.⁸

Our spirits have been lifted immensely by the bold aspirations of the regional institutions, whose tireless service we so much admire, to meet the pressing requirements of the progress of the Cause at the present stage of its development in each of the regions. We know that the processes of the Divine Plan have become more and more complex, but the nature of the consultations occurring amongst the various institutions of both the appointed and elected Arms of the Administration, have evolved accordingly, and a distinctive conversation is carried out, sometimes formally and sometimes informally, at various levels. There are rich interactions flourishing in a loving and respectful atmosphere about the experiences that are unfolding within the framework for action, and unity of thought is readily attained in such an environment. Any and all individuals can access many of these rich encounters and reflection spaces, to learn how they may best lend their share to the pressing needs of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, of which we are now in the third epoch.

The discharge of each believer's fundamental spiritual obligation to teach the Cause, is an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. This will be aided by courageously and deliberately opening oneself to be guided to receptive souls, and establishing ties of friendship with them on the basis of shared understanding arising from a conversation between two souls. This is the fundamental building block of community-building, from which a rhythm of community life emerges. Receptivity by these souls we engage with can express itself in a willingness to participate in the core activities, which in turn set in motion the process of community building. And every soul must feel welcome to not only delve into the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, to understand its implications for individual growth and social progress, but also to join the community of the Greatest Name.

Use of the arts

The bicentenaries prompted innumerable beautiful art works and other creative expressions of devotion that touched hearts and reached many souls, causing an attraction, and leading them to know about these Central Figures of our beloved Faith. It is the hope of the National Assembly that friends who have an artistic inclination are similarly being moved to contribute artistic endeavours — whether musical, dramatic, poetic, literary, visual-graphic, story-telling or other — to the rich tapestry of the commemorative activities. We are aware already of one very beautiful collaborative project that is occurring, involving a number of women using a particular cultural medium for their artwork to honour the centenary. We very much look forward to seeing the emergence of many more examples.

A film that is a "portrait of the Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá"⁹ will become available in time for the centennial commemoration. This film will be a magnificent resource to share as widely as possible from the time it becomes available. A second film, following soon after the first, will reflect on the first 100 years of the Formative Age of the Faith.

⁸ Letter dated 25 November 2020 of the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

⁹ Ibid



We are so grateful to the beloved Universal House of Justice, for what will undoubtedly be very valuable resources to support the endeavours of the friends everywhere, and from which we can all draw precious inspiration.

Setting personal goals

With a new state of mind that reflects a heightened awareness of the value of process, the necessity of planning, and the virtue of systematic action, each of you is no doubt considering setting your personal goals to work towards over the coming months, such as the number of meaningful conversations you engage in to speak about the Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and His unique place in the history of our planet. There will be a myriad of opportunities and each of the friends will have unique circumstances, so the range of possible actions and goals will be vast. However, if each person can keep a record of their efforts to honour the centenary year, these will be compiled so that an overview of our nation’s contribution can be obtained, and we will know if the goal of 30,000 souls being involved in meaningful ways has been reached.

The cultivation of individual initiative in the expansion and consolidation work, through participation in the life of the community and cluster, is an area for all three protagonists — the individual, the community and the institutions — to foster. We know that passivity is bred by the forces of society today. Entertainment is “on tap” and people generally find it easier to be a “receiver” of information, knowledge, and culture, than to be a protagonist, treading a common path of service and promoting a way of thinking, studying and acting that develops a different type of culture. However, an irrepressible movement is taking place in our nation and around the world, and we know that none of you would wish to be left out of this dynamic process that generates so much joy and fulfilment as we witness transformation occurring.

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast as we know, and it calls for profound change at the level of the individual and in the structures of society. The way this takes place has been clearly laid out for us by the beloved House of Justice, and it provides an opportunity for all to be involved in small or large ways. Your personal plans and goals to honour these precious few months will add to the whole and contribute to a mighty endeavour.

A year of profound reflection on the life of the Master and the strength of the Covenant

Bahá’u’lláh had designated ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.”¹⁰ Shoghi Effendi writes: “He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Centre and Pivot of Bahá’u’lláh’s peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word ...”¹¹

The approach to this very special year is to call to mind Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant, and how we show our faithfulness to it through our loyalty and obedience to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and in our determination to energetically serve the current stage of the Divine Plan. Above all, the love we have for the Cause is reflected in our efforts to share the Faith with the diverse people of our nation.

¹⁰ Bahá’u’lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*

¹¹ Shoghi Effendi in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*



Study of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is a tribute that we can all pay to His station — a station that has no parallel in all of religious history. He was a “perfect embodiment in word and deed of all that His Father taught, the One through Whom the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh was ‘proclaimed, championed and vindicated.’”¹² This year marks a century since the Will and Testament called into being the Administrative Order — the pattern for the divine civilisation to emerge — and this document has been described by the beloved Guardian as, among other profound descriptions, an “immortal” document. The Will and Testament is available free online at the Bahá’í Reference library site¹³ or to purchase from the Bahá’í Distribution Service¹⁴. There are also many resources available for us to gain insights into the life and writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá¹⁵. Most excitingly, the first shipment is about to arrive of a new volume of Writings by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and a new essay about the uniqueness of His message in the West, released by the Bahá’í World Centre. The new volume, *Light of the World*, comprises a selection of seventy-six tablets, from among thousands penned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in which aspects of the life of Bahá’u’lláh and the purpose of His Faith are recounted. “Who better to tell us about Bahá’u’lláh,” the preface of the new volume states, “than His most cherished Son, Who shared, as His closest associate, His life of exile, imprisonment, and persecution?”

We can all draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. The Beloved Master’s hope for all of us was that our hearts would overflow with love for one another, and that we would see all of humanity as one family. As we turn to the Covenant, the power of the Holy Spirit binds our hearts in unity. The strength of this unity gives power to our service as we press on in serried lines, because after all, it is love that spurs each of us into the field of action.

Conclusion

The Bahá’í community and its supporters have a rising capacity and a growing ability to draw on the energies of more and more people. For example, devotional gatherings are being held in an increasing number of homes, drawing in others, infusing the community with a devotional spirit and character, fostering meaningful conversations and opening doors to the other core activities. This is the foundation for spiritual conquest, where we can each be heroes, in small ways and large, with deeds that shine upon the record of this momentous year. The resilience and vitality of the community of the Most Great Name in Aotearoa has been demonstrated in abundant ways. Now is the time for each of us to bring those qualities to the fore during this period of special potency to utilise this solidarity and dynamism for collective progress in the dynamics of community life.

Galvanised into action by the mandate you have been given to befittingly honour ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the steps you take each day from now, leading up to the centenary commemorations, will determine the extent of the influence that the historical nature of this milestone year will have on the hearts and minds and lives of our fellow brothers and sisters in Aotearoa, giving them hope and reassurance and shining a light on the pathway forward for them under the umbrella of Bahá’u’lláh’s stupendous Revelation.

¹² Letter dated 25 November 2020 of the House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world

¹³ <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdu-baha/will-testament-abdu-baha/>

¹⁴ <https://bds.bahai.org.nz/products/will-and-testament-of-abdu-baha>

¹⁵ See this article on “Bahá’í Aotearoa” for examples: <https://bahai.aotearoa.bahai.org.nz/home/2021/6/4/the-master-exploring-his-wisdom>



The Day of the Covenant on Thursday 25 November 2021 will be especially meaningful this year, as explained in the 25 November 2020 letter of the House of Justice. The Holy Day on Saturday 27 November marking 100 years since the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá will be exceptionally poignant, particularly in our gatherings that span the 2:00 a.m. point on that day, marking exactly 100 years since His departure from this world in the early hours of that morning in 1921, and thereby concluding the first century of the Formative Age of the Faith.

We attach, as a gift for your reflections, a small compilation of extracts from messages of the House of Justice, spanning the past quarter century, all of which refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Hard copies of this booklet will be sent to all communities to be made available to friends who would like it in that form.

Moments that are sacred in human history and that are commemorated at Holy Days have the power to uplift individual souls and join hearts together through this shared experience. We have no doubt that the centenary commemorations later this year will be no exception, and the National Spiritual Assembly will pray ardently that your efforts between now and then will see the greatest number of souls enabled to be uplifted by this sacred period.

We can do no better than to echo the words of the Supreme Body, as we assure you of our constant prayers:

We pray earnestly, also, for the Almighty to bestow upon you assurance, stamina, and staunch spirits. May your minds be ever bent upon the needs of the communities to which you belong, the condition of the societies in which you live, and the welfare of the entire family of humanity, to whom you are all brothers and sisters.¹⁶

Arohanui

Loving Bahá'í greetings,
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand

Suzanne Mahon
Secretary

cc: Counsellor Tessa Scrine

¹⁶ Naw Rúz message 177 of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World