

“Every soul may find sanctuary...”

A Series on Queerness and the Divine Plan

The Past Series of Global Plans

Summary

The Bahá'í community has just completed a series of plans spanning over 20 years, where much focus was placed on developing a Framework for Action that can now be more fully implemented in the community building process. Bahá'í culture has shown much advancement during this period, and it is important that every Bahá'í understand this organic evolutionary process in order to harness such advancements for the benefit of their Queer friends. A major area of learning has been how to foster *universal participation* in a community and its impacts on the main protagonists: individuals, communities, and institutions. Although marked by turbulent times, the Bahá'í community comes out of these plans more reflective than ever of the world Bahá'u'lláh hoped to raise up. This article will further explore these developments in very practical ways so as to inform Bahá'ís and others of the foundation upon which further activities, including for the inclusion of Queer people, will be built.

The discourse on Queerness within the Bahá'í community often disregards the tremendous achievements it has undergone at the level of culture. We should not whitewash history, ignore the harm done, or advances that need to be made, but rather recognize the existence of a quintessentially Bahá'í foundation upon which to make these advances and achieve reconciliation. The willingness and efficacy of Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions to do this aside, we believe that every individual reading this should be aware of the aspects of Bahá'í culture, so far as it has been developed, that they can harness to combat prejudices against Queer people. Of course, everything lies on a spectrum, and as such we cannot guarantee that what we describe exists in the experience of every individual participating in Bahá'í activities.

In its letter, the House of Justice describes a community that has undergone a transformation, particularly in regards to its capacity to learn, grow and serve humanity. This highlights that part of a human being's very purpose is to learn how to contribute to building vibrant, outward-looking communities that will bring about spiritual and material progress, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society that influence that progress. The community raises its capacity by maintaining

a humble posture of learning, as the ability to learn has been seen as an essential characteristic for growth. There could not be a better set of characteristics paving the way for efforts to make a home for Queer believers in the Faith and for combating prejudice at every level of society. The Framework for Action developed over the last series of Plans provides an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices and vision relevant to advancing the work of the Cause in a particular arena of endeavour. It is a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It is applied most fruitfully when elements of this framework most relevant to the work of individuals, communities, and institutions can be consciously and progressively explored.

Some elements of this framework include:

- the development of a system of human resources, including a sustained Institute process and an accessible way for individuals to enter the process
- consciousness and familiarity with one's local surroundings and community
- sustained cycles of core/community activities
- raising capacity for elevated and meaningful conversations
- enriching participation in the prevalent discourses of society
- a procedure for the emergence and intensification of new programs of growth
- systematic development of institutional capacity and organization
- an increase in frequency and complexity of acts of service
- the gathering and application of insight learned at the grassroots level

As we move forward to the next stage of the Divine Plan, we do it with this framework sufficiently developed and ready for use. The last quarter-century has endowed the Bahá'í world with an incredible capacity to learn, grow and serve humanity. The House of Justice has reminded us in this letter that "Different settings and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are...", and that "...the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary." (UHJ, 30 December 2021) Naturally, a strong focus remains on being outward-looking, always sharing this thriving pattern of action with souls unfamiliar with the work of the Cause.

Essential to the framework for action is the main sequence of courses developed by the Ruhi Institute over decades of grassroots endeavour. The courses are organized so as to set the individual, Bahá'í or not, on a path of service shaped by the accumulating experience of the Bahá'í community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, in itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses—a path that invites participation, beckons to new horizons, demands effort and movement,

accommodates different paces and strides, offers structure, and encourages systematization. To walk along this path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice, calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes, necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration. It may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging as the participants advance together in a path of service.

The last series of plans has not been without setbacks, perhaps most so in the refocusing and diversion of energies from existing activities to those the House called on the Bahá'í community to learn about and in which to engage. Although the House never called on existing activities to cease, this was either necessary due to limited resources, or was incorrectly (and at times indirectly) induced to occur by Institutions or individuals who misunderstood the diversity of activities that could be embraced by the Plans. In hindsight, however achieved, the focus on a particular set of important activities did result in an enormous amount of learning generated, and it is likely due to this shift in energies that a framework for action was in the end developed to such a high degree. The House refers in their letter to this situation by reiterating succinctly its guidance:

Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society-building power of the Faith shine forth.

Another way in which certain believers felt setbacks were in regards to unsupported lines of action, usually in social action or public discourse, that aimed to address Queer prejudices and alienation. In any community, the members will be conceptually and experientially on a spectrum, some being further along in their learning and understanding than others. Although unity in vision and action is required to gain momentum and maintain strength, it is evident that this should have been done with a greater appreciation for diversity, or less trepidation with regards to Queer topics. Moving forward, the community will learn about how to be both united in vision and aim, while embracing many lines of action.

From a Queer lens, the benefits of the advance in Bahá'í culture described in the previous several paragraphs and referred to by the House of Justice needs to be

sufficiently explored in a separate publication, which we hope can be used as a resource for those exploring how the Plans relate to their spiritual lives and relationships with the Cause and Bahá'u'lláh. In the meantime, we would like to highlight only a few such advancements here in very practical terms. The advancements all centre around the concept of *universal participation*. The fundamental belief underpinning this concept is the idea that the only way we can grow is by including ever greater numbers of people in the work of the Cause and that all people can be accompanied to become protagonists and agents of change in their communities. In fact, it is said that the very spirit of the Covenant demands such universal participation, although that is a dependency to explore elsewhere. We have seen this concept applied in the community building activities of the Bahá'í community, most notably in the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP, or sometimes JYEP). These were initially intended to be Bahá'í activities that others are actively invited to attend, but mainly with the purpose of seeing what Bahá'ís have to offer them as participants and observers, or through seekers in the Faith as a religion to adopt. Now, all populations in a neighbourhood are seen as protagonists that can take ownership of both the program and the lives and futures of the junior youth. This new mindset is viewed as essential to the growth and quality of all core activities. Queer friends interested in becoming protagonists in the community building process that draws from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings will find this concept of universal participation extremely appealing. However, they must be viewed as equally worthy protagonists by their co-labourers in the field of service.

We can also see universal participation in the development of a cluster, particularly in the way it progressively embraces more diverse ways in which an individual can contribute to its advancement. This is made possible by the increased focus of Institutions and individuals to nurture a spirit of collaboration and mutual support, rather than one of siloed efforts and hierarchical relationships. At the beginning of the last series of plans, it could arguably be said that the Bahá'í world had gone through some turbulence regarding the question of how Bahá'ís could legitimately and effectively contribute to the community's understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, including but not limited to the appropriate stance of Bahá'ís on many social issues such as abortion, women's rights, Queer topics, and other nuanced topics. These topics of public discourse were polarized by an array of cultural, economic and societal forces, further exacerbated by the proliferation of similar discussions on online/virtual platforms. Let us look at ways in which universal participation has been realized more fully in regards to the contribution of enrolled Bahá'ís:

1. A unique aspect of the structure of Bahá'í Institutions is that there is no clergy in the sense of a professional, appointed body of individuals that have jurisprudential authority. The Institutions that have actual authority are

elected and consist of at least nine members, while the appointed branch takes on the role of channelling inspiration, creativity, and mobility that the clergies of the past harnessed, without the authority or problematic elitism and power dynamics. Characterising all Institutions is a sense of humility and love in their relationships with individuals in their jurisdiction. This aspect hints at a theme that permeates throughout the Bahá'í Cause, one that prioritizes consultation, the voice and contribution of the people, accessibility, diversity, and the capacity of all. Although frustrating at times to those who lack patience, this aspect of our culture has gained a more full expression in clusters that have moved further along in their development, and in communities that have grown to a certain size. The results that can be seen in such places include a broad development of individual capacity to contribute to community life and to gain insight from the Writings, greater participation of youth, children, women, minorities, and those that may lack formal education or societal privilege, and an openness for new, unique, challenging, and even highly critical voices.

2. A corollary of universal participation is that nascent Bahá'í Institutions require time to develop organically. As these Institutions develop, they are able to shed inherited and problematic traits from their non-Bahá'í counterparts and engage with the believers and wider community in a way that is more in line with the vision set out by Bahá'u'lláh. Such a development is only possible if the foundation of universal participation is laid, rather than one of exclusion. The way exclusion can be manifested in the administrative process is by ignoring the capacities, skills, and abilities of populations not seen in stereotypical roles in governance or community associations. By developing in this organic fashion, growing pains eventually give way to a relationship between Institutions and individuals that is remarkable and unique. For Queer believers, advanced Local Spiritual Assemblies and other Institutions like the Auxiliary Board and Regional Bahá'í Councils, learn to better read the reality of their community, foster individual spiritual health rather than only on enforcement, host spaces for this population to meet and share, foster creativity and initiative while maintaining focus, and to remove obstacles for Queer seekers and like-minded people so that they may engage with Bahá'u'lláh's Writings and the Bahá'í community.

In engaging with social discourse and the issues of society, controversial or straightforward, these Institutions become more adept and systematic. They become more open to engage with topics not typical of introductory Bahá'í themes, more interested in gaining new perspectives on the Writings from both Bahá'ís and others, more confident in consulting as an Assembly on a topic

and delivering its own guidance on it, and adopting in general a more comprehensive mindset.

3. Academic research in the field of Bahá'í Studies has had a turbulent history, with much good and bad to be said. Some of this has been around how Queer topics are permitted to be published, or accepted by the community, in academic, scholarly, or even informal settings, and we would like to point out some new phenomena that are emerging in this regard. The Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS), long being the centre of most scholarly engagement with the Cause, at least for Bahá'ís, has over the past decade modified its mandate and approach to be more in line with the Plans. This has meant it has taken on less of a traditionally academic role as a journal and conference in exchange for a supportive and collaborative role in encouraging Bahá'í scholarship among the general Bahá'í population. Although this may confuse and irritate academics of Bahá'í Studies, it is very much in line with the universal and inclusive approach of all Bahá'í initiatives. Although ABS and other similar organizations have much room to grow to fulfil this mandate, there has already been a noticeable increase in the capacity of this generation's youth to study and explore the Bahá'í Writings. Along these lines, such scholarly or academic organizations are increasingly willing to discuss supporting the exploration of Queer topics by Bahá'ís. A new avenue of scholarly insight has also arisen, and that is the community building activities. Far from being simply service projects or classes for children, these activities create spaces for a plethora of new ideas and grassroots, real-world learning, to be generated. Although such learning and insights are usually expressed through artistic and local media and publications, they no doubt influence culture and eventually find their way into academic expressions. Thus a typically niche area of endeavour like academia and scholarship becomes accessible to all. It is in this arena that the majority of exploration on Queerness for Bahá'ís has historically taken place, and given the focus on community building activities for Bahá'ís, it is certain that the impact of Queer voices and learning around Queer experiences will make its way into mainstream Bahá'í discourse.

Two more characteristics of a community that embraces universal participation are mutual support and decentralization. Mutual support can in one way be traced back to the central concept of a twofold moral purpose: the idea that our lives are meant to enrich ourselves and others, and that a truly moral action does both. This can evolve in practice to the appearance of common endeavour in the community building process, and the realization that the welfare of the individual cannot be separated from that of the world at large. Although they may seem artificial and forced when in their infancy, efforts such as home visit campaigns, the presence of Assistants and Auxiliary Board Members in activities, the sharing of stats and stories/learning, the

training of facilitators (tutors, animators, teachers), the cold contacting of fellow believers and protagonist to build friendships, and the decentralization of holy days, elections, gatherings, and institutions, all eventually serve to catalyze a more interconnected, supportive, friendly, and spiritually uplifting home for believers. It is ironic that most of these initiatives seem to some as forced, unnecessary, invasive, and even cult-like, where after years they become not only staples of our communities, but some of the most attractive and desired aspects of them. Furthermore, decentralizing administrative and community affairs, such as the recently implemented two-stage election process for certain Local Spiritual Assemblies, serves to form closer bonds of friendship, support, and familiarity with those in your own neighbourhood. It can also spark more effective educational efforts and encouragement when it comes to the nature of Bahá'í elections and participating in the sacred act of voting.

Although we have not put in great effort in describing the relevance of the cultural advances highlighted in this article to Queer people, we wish to emphasize again the necessity for these quinessentially Bahá'í cultural characteristics to be present if effective and concrete action is to be taken to extend the healing medicine of Bahá'u'lláh that the community holds in trust to the Queer friends. The next article in this series will explore explicitly how the new Plan can be harnessed to do this, but this could only have been done with an appreciation of at least a part of the journey so far travelled by the Bahá'í world.

Reference

Universal House of Justice. Universal House of Justice to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, Haifa, Israel, December 30, 2021. www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/1#758524470