



The Continental Boards of Counselors

Letters, Extracts from Letters,
and Cables from
The Universal House of Justice

An Address by
Counselor Edna M. True

Compiled by:
National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States



Bahá'í Publishing Trust/Wilmette, Illinois 60091

*Copyright © 1981 by the
National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States*

All Rights Reserved

Reprinted 1997

ISBN 0-87743-150-7

Printed in the U.S.A.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	v
I/LETTERS, EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS, AND CABLES FROM THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE	1
Establishment of Eleven Continental Boards of Counselors	1
Appointment of Continental Boards of Counselors (1)	1
Appointment of Continental Boards of Counselors (2)	6
First Appointments to Continental Boards of Counselors	7
Duties and Responsibilities of Continental Boards of Counselors	9
Clarification of Responsibilities of Continental Boards of Counselors	16
Collaboration of Continental Boards of Counselors and Auxiliary Boards with National Spiritual Assemblies	19
Augmentation of Membership of Continental Boards of Counselors	36
Work of Continental Boards of Counselors and Auxiliary Board Members	37
Augmentation of Membership of Continental Boards of Counselors	40
Relationship of Hands of the Cause and Continental Boards of Counselors	42
Establishment of International Teaching Center	45
Duties of International Teaching Center/Appointment of Additional Continental Boards of Counselors	46
Extension of Services of Auxiliary Boards	54
Expansion of Continental Boards of Counselors and Auxiliary Boards in Africa	56
Collaboration between Auxiliary Board Members and National and Regional Teaching Committees	57
Elucidation of Relationship between Continental Boards of Counselors and National Spiritual Assemblies	59

Local Spiritual Assemblies and Supporting Role of Auxiliary Board Members and Their Assistants	61
Establishment of Terms of Continental Boards of Counselors	64
Further Development of Continental Boards of Counselors and Appointments for 1980-85	65
2/THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CONTINENTAL BOARDS OF COUNSELORS TO NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES, AN ADDRESS BY EDNA M. TRUE	69

2 The Relationship of the Continental Boards of Counselors to National Spiritual Assemblies, an Address by Counselor Edna M. True

The Relationship of Continental Boards of Counselors to National Spiritual Assemblies*

An Address by Edna M. True

In his cablegram of June 4, 1957, one of his very last messages to the Bahá'í world, Shoghi Effendi called, with marked emphasis, for the closest collaboration of the Hands of the Cause and National Spiritual Assemblies, referring to them as the "two institutions, occupying, with the Universal House of Justice, next to the Institution of the Guardianship, foremost rank in the divinely ordained administrative hierarchy of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh."¹

Continuing, in this same message, the Guardian asserts that "The security of our precious Faith, the preservation of the spiritual health of the Bahá'í communities, the vitality of the faith of its individual members, the proper functioning of its laboriously erected institutions, the fruition of its worldwide enterprises, the fulfilment of its ultimate destiny, all are directly dependent upon the befitting discharge of the weighty responsibilities now resting upon the members of these two institutions. . . ."²

Both the content and the tone of this vital message emphasize profoundly the great importance of our understanding, as clearly as possible, the subjects we are now considering, namely, the functions and relationships of these two institutions, as a necessary first step towards realizing the nature and scope of the constant and close collaboration called for by the Guardian in this stirring

*Reprinted from *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XV, 1968-1973*, pp. 621-28, © 1975 by The Universal House of Justice. The footnotes have been changed slightly for this compilation.

1. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World: 1950-1957*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 123.

2. *Ibid.*

message—a collaboration which is so essential to the health and progress of our beloved Faith.

The most fruitful approach to our task, I feel, is to reflect together on the true nature and theory of operation of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order, of which all the institutions, including the two with which we are presently concerned, are inseparable, component parts. To do this, we must clear our minds of all former concepts of organization which we have heretofore experienced or known, and open our hearts, even more than our intellects, to a wholly new theory, completely unique and different from any hitherto practised, either in former religious dispensations or governments. As the Guardian has told us:

A word should now be said regarding the theory on which this Administrative Order is based and the principle that must govern the operation of its chief institutions. It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions.³

The Administrative Order . . . it should be noted, is, by virtue of its origin and character, unique in the annals of the world's religious systems.⁴

It is the Guardian who, in his "World Order" letters⁵ addressed to the early believers—at the very beginning of his ministry—has, with such painstaking care, loving patience and understanding, clarified for us the vital necessity, the unique characteristics, the unimaginable dynamic power, and assured accomplishment of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order. It is through this inexhaustible source of infallible knowledge that we have been enabled to at least glimpse the character and manner of the operation of this

3. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 2d rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 152.

4. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 326.

5. Shoghi Effendi, letters written between 1929 and 1936 compiled and published under the title *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*.

unique instrument bestowed by God for the fulfillment of His ultimate purpose for mankind.

What, then, are the basic features of this supreme Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh?

That the "bedrock" on which it is founded is "God's immutable Purpose for mankind in this day".⁶

That it is divine in origin and authority. "It should be remembered by every follower of the Cause," Shoghi Effendi wrote, "that the system of Bahá'í administration is not an innovation imposed arbitrarily upon the Bahá'ís of the world since the Master's passing, but derives its authority from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is specifically prescribed in unnumbered Tablets, and rests in some of its essential features upon the explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It thus unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith."⁷

That it is vitally necessary. ". . . the Spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh upon the world . . . can never permeate and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name, wholly identify itself with His principles, and function in conformity with His Laws."⁸

That it is unique and different from any other organization of the present or the past.

That it operates solely on the spiritual principles and the laws embodied in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

That it provides all the essentials for the establishment of the Faith and for the fulfilment of its ultimate purpose. ". . . the apostles of Bahá'u'lláh in every land . . . have before them in clear, in unequivocal and emphatic language, all the laws, the regulations, the principles, the institutions, the guidance, they require for the prosecution and consummation of their task."⁹

In the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh personality and prestige, wealth, intellectual prowess and material power are not needed

6. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

for its progress and success. In the words of Shoghi Effendi: “. . . the Cause associated with the name of Bahá'u'lláh feeds itself upon those hidden springs of celestial strength which no force of human personality, whatever its glamour, can replace; . . . its reliance is solely upon that mystic Source with which no worldly advantage, be it wealth, fame, or learning can compare; . . . it propagates itself by ways mysterious and utterly at variance with the standards accepted by the generality of mankind . . .”¹⁰

In contrast to the organizations of the world, the success and progress of the Bahá'í administrative system is through the spiritual growth and development of those who are responsible for the actual functioning of its institutions. Such development by the individuals is attained by following the spiritual laws and principles upon which it is based.

It is vitally important for us to know and fully understand that the inexhaustible and dynamic spiritual power inherently existing in this New World Order can be released only through the attainment and practice of spiritual qualities. The regenerating spirit of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, flowing freely throughout this system, will continue to strengthen and renew those operating within it, enabling the Cause to progress to its ultimate purpose and mission.

Shoghi Effendi has written: “This Administrative Order, as it expands and consolidates itself, will. . . demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind.”¹¹

The Hand of the Cause Horace Holley, whom the Guardian called an indefatigable and distinguished champion of the Administrative Order, has said: “The administrative aspect of the Bahá'í Cause is in reality no mere set of external regulations but the very fruit of its universal spirit. Bahá'í administration is nothing less than a worldwide ethic, the special characteristic of which is to transform subjective faith into positive cooperative action—unifying the whole being of each believer through his unity with his spiritual brothers. Its unbreakable foundation is the principle

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

of consultation, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared to be the fulfilment of individual conscience in this new age.'¹²

How few are the specific administrative directives given by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then the beloved Guardian; and, in contrast, how detailed are the guidelines of how we are to serve! In delineating the spiritual qualities we should practise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to them as "conditions". Shoghi Effendi described them as "obligations incumbent upon the members of consulting councils"¹³—thus implying that the desired results could not otherwise be obtained. Let us briefly review some of these conditions set out by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

"The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the Assembly . . . Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught.

"The second condition:—They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion . . . The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority . . . In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness . . ."¹⁴

Let us remember that at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension the organization of the World Order, although fully defined, was not yet established. It became the responsibility and life work of

12. Horace Holley, Introduction, in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932*, 7th rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. vii-ix.

13. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 22.

14. *Ibid.*

the Guardian to erect the institutions of this Administrative Order according to the laws and principles embedded in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Speaking of the *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—the Charter of this New World Order—the Guardian's secretary in March, 1930, wrote on his behalf in a letter to an individual: "The contents of the Will of the Master are far too much for the present generation to comprehend. It needs at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed . . ." ¹⁵

A review of the activities of the Faith during the fifty years since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms these statements, for we cannot help but be aware of two clear facts—that the functioning of this mighty Order is in its very beginning stages, and that we stand too close to the beginning of this unique system ordained by Bahá'u'lláh to be able to fully understand its potentialities or the interrelationships of its component parts. Far from discouraging those who are presently serving in the Cause, these statements should spur them on to greater endeavour and deeper faith. For throughout the Writings we are promised that through our increased efforts to function more and more according to the spiritual laws which govern the operation of this divine system, our understanding of its greatness and power will deepen, and our accomplishments will grow in quality and extent.

It is the process of applying these spiritual laws and ideas to every aspect of Bahá'í administration, and of translating them into practical action, that presents the greatest challenge facing the body of believers and particularly those who serve on the institutions of this Cause. I also feel it is this aspect of Bahá'í Administration that is the least understood and most urgently requires our prayerful study and concentrated efforts to comprehend and demonstrate.

As we consider the functions of the institutions of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies let us bear in mind, with particular emphasis, that they are severally component parts of the same living organism, and not separate in-

15. From a letter dated 25 March 1930, quoted in *The Universal House of Justice, Messages from The Universal House of Justice: 1968–1973* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 44.

stitutions each with its own exclusive, clearly defined responsibilities. While certain responsibilities have been assigned to each of these institutions, others are shared in common, even though these may be more in the special province of one or the other.

In the cable dated June 21, 1968,¹⁶ announcing the establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, and in the letters which followed, the Universal House of Justice has charged the Counsellors "with specific functions relating to the protection and propagation of the Faith in the areas under their jurisdiction."¹⁷ In its letter dated June 24, 1968, to all Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice stated that the Counsellors "will operate in a manner similar to that set forth by the beloved Guardian for the Hands of the Cause in his communications outlining the responsibilities they are called upon to discharge in collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies." The same letter made it clear that "The authority of expulsion and reinstatement will be exercised by the Hands of the Cause of God, subject in each instance to the approval of the Universal House of Justice."¹⁸

In general, therefore, the functions of the Continental Boards of Counsellors include propagation of the Faith; protection of the Faith; appointment and direction of Auxiliary Board members; trusteeship of the Continental Bahá'í Fund; and consultation with the National Spiritual Assemblies. Because the establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors insures the extension into the future of the appointed functions of the Institution of the Hands, it is assumed that the following obligations of the Hands of the Cause as set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament* apply to them: To "diffuse the Divine Fragrances"; to "edify the souls of men"; to "promote learning"; to "improve the character of all men"; and to be "at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things. They must manifest the fear of God by their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words."¹⁹

In delineating the functions of the National Spiritual Assem-

16. See p. 3.

17. See p. 9.

18. See p. 11.

19. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 13.

blies, the Guardian has stated, in effect, that their immediate purpose is to stimulate, unify and co-ordinate the manifold activities of the believers and the Local Spiritual Assemblies. They exercise full authority over the Local Spiritual Assemblies in their province and are to initiate measures and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in the whole country or nation. It is the duty of National Spiritual Assemblies to direct vital matters affecting the interests of the Cause in their country, such as the matter of translations, publication, the *Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár*, organizing and administering the teaching work and other similar undertakings that stand distinct from strictly local affairs. It is the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world who elect the Universal House of Justice.

In addition, as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "*It behooveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly.*"²⁰

Shoghi Effendi emphasized: "Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short, from every word and deed that might savour of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant members of the Bahá'í family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other."²¹

In considering the relationships of these two important institutions—the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the National

20. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 21.

21. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 143–44.

Spiritual Assemblies—it should be borne in mind that Bahá'í Administration is founded on institutions, laws and principles enshrined in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation; that all of its institutions are divinely ordained—are integral, inseparable components of a living organism, interdependent and inclusive, not independent and exclusive; and that the health, strength and success of each is closely affected by the condition of the whole. As the Universal House of Justice wrote: "The Bahá'í world community, growing like a healthy new body, develops new cells, new organs, new functions and powers as it presses on to its maturity, when every soul, living for the Cause of God, will receive from that Cause, health, assurance, and the overflowing bounties of Bahá'u'lláh which are diffused through His divinely ordained Order."²²

Since the establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors in June, 1968, the Universal House of Justice has explained and clarified many important aspects of the relationships of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies in communications some of which have been addressed to the two institutions jointly, and others specifically addressed to one or the other.²³

In a letter dated April 24, 1972, addressed to both the National Assemblies and the Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice stated: "Other developments in the Institution of the Hands of the Cause and the Institution of the Continental Boards of Counsellors will no doubt take place in future as the International Teaching Centre comes into being and as the work of the Counsellors expands."

As important and necessary as is the understanding of the functions and specified relationships of the Boards of Counsellors and the National Assemblies, the Writings of our Faith clearly show that of still greater import and significance is the spirit in which their members serve. When the relationship between them is one of mutual understanding, of confidence and trust, of sincere love and co-operation; when in their deliberations and actions they are following the precepts and guidelines which have their source in divine wisdom and which have been so clearly and so fully deline-

22. The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 38.

23. For the texts of the principal communications, see pp. 3, 6, 16, 36, 40, 42.

ated for them, any matters or questions which arise in regard to their respective functions can be frankly and openly discussed and all issues easily and amicably resolved.

Such a relationship, we must recognize, is unique to this divinely-ordained Administrative Order. The secular world is increasingly characterized by destructive competition between institutions—when there are two legislative bodies, they manoeuvre against each other for power; legislative bodies compete with the judiciary and with the executive branch.

In contrast, the relationship between Bahá'í institutions is one of warm co-operation and collaboration, based upon genuine love and dedication to a common goal. It resembles a marriage, in that there is space for each partner to grow and develop; there is mutual respect and encouragement, and differences are settled by taking counsel together in an atmosphere of loving understanding.

So close are we all to the ways and standards of the world, it is difficult to wholly believe in the efficiency of spiritual means for practical accomplishments. Our human intellect can so easily guide us to other ways which, in its light, seem more desirable and effective. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated May 27, 1966, gives us much understanding and wise counsel in this respect: "Service to the Cause of God requires absolute fidelity and integrity and unwavering faith in Him. No good but only evil can come from taking the responsibility for the future of God's Cause into our own hands and trying to force it into ways that we wish it to go regardless of the clear texts and our own limitations. It is His Cause. He has promised that its light will not fail. Our part is to cling tenaciously to the revealed Word and to the institutions that He has created to preserve His Covenant."²⁴

The standard of collaboration between Bahá'í institutions set before us in the messages of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice calls for far more than our human idea of co-operation—even loving co-operation. It is a matter of spiritual growth, and for this we need divine wisdom. How greatly blessed we are to have for our assistance all the guidance needed. Ours is the clear task of striving to understand and obey that guidance.

To all of the other qualities and virtues needed to achieve the

24. The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 87.

standard we are called upon to exemplify must be added faith—unshakable faith in Bahá'u'lláh's divinely ordained Administrative Order and in its inherent, dynamic spiritual power to fulfil every aspect of His worldwide Mission.

As Shoghi Effendi so wisely counselled the early believers, soon after he became the Guardian of the Faith: "Is not faith but another word for implicit obedience, whole-hearted allegiance, uncompromising adherence to that which we believe is the revealed and express will of God, however perplexing it might first appear, however at variance with the shadowy views, the impotent doctrines, the crude theories, the idle imaginings, the fashionable conceptions of a transient and troublous age? If we are to falter or hesitate, if our love for Him should fail to direct us and keep us within His path, if we desert Divine and emphatic principles, what hope can we any more cherish for healing the ills and sicknesses of this world?"²⁵

(Adapted from an address by Edna M. True delivered at the North Atlantic Oceanic Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland; September 5, 1971.)

25. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 62–63.