

## **Letter to all Continental Counsellors dated 3 May 2018**

3 May 2018

Transmitted by email

To all Continental Counsellors

Dearly loved Co-workers,

The efforts before, during, and after the bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Baha'u'llah have given powerful impetus to the prosecution of the Five Year Plan. The Universal House of Justice noted in its Ridvan 2018 message how the Baha'i community has transformed since it embarked on the Plan: "It is more conscious than ever before of its mission. It has experienced an unprecedented surge in its capacity to bring friends and acquaintances into contact with its community life; to inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour; to articulate how spiritual truths can be translated into sustained practical action; and, above all, to converse not only about the teachings that will build the world anew, but about the One Who taught them: Baha'u'llah." With the first two years of the Plan behind us, we are greatly encouraged by the healthy trend observable in some regions of the world where such a surge in capacity has resulted in more and more clusters developing a pattern of activity that embraces large numbers at the same time as additional intensive programmes of growth keep emerging. In many other areas, the sacrificial endeavours of the friends to intensify the process of growth have yet to translate into significant numerical achievements in the movement of clusters.

In the six cycles leading to the celebration of the bicentenary of the Birth of the Bab in October 2019--cycles which demand the greatest share of our striving to bring 5,000 programmes of growth to the stage of intensity--the pace of systematic endeavour needs to accelerate. The analyses of the progress of the Plan in each geographic region carried out during the consultations held with each geographic group of Counsellors in 2017 were especially helpful in this connection. Valuable insights were gained in relation to the factors that facilitate the movement of clusters beyond the second and third milestones on the continuum of development, as well as effective strategies and approaches that strengthen the ability of the institutions and agencies, particularly training institutes, to create conditions for larger numbers of youth and adults to walk the path of service. We wish to share below some practical reflections from the regions and countries where great strides are being made in the movement of clusters and from the clusters that are at the very front ranks of learning.

"Facilitating the movement of clusters in a region or country"

Arranging adjoining clusters into groups has assisted institutions and agencies serving at the regional or national level to systematize the flow of support to the clusters where the friends are striving to pass the second milestone, particularly where tens of clusters, or even a hundred or more, are involved. The institutions and agencies at the regional and national levels have sought to create the necessary dynamics for growth within every group of clusters, conscious that every group represents a distinct reality and that their composition might evolve as the clusters within

them advance. They are also aware that, while all clusters within a group should keep progressing, not all clusters can advance at the same tempo. In some groups, one or two vibrant clusters serving as reservoirs of experience and resources are effectively supporting neighbouring clusters to swiftly move towards the second milestone. In others, much effort is expended by the regional or national institutions and agencies to strengthen the pattern of action within the strongest cluster with the potential of serving as a reservoir, while concurrently fostering mutual support among all the clusters and organizing common spaces for reflection and planning. One of the pitfalls to avoid is weakening any cluster by placing too great an expectation on it to support neighbouring communities.

Experience suggests that in regions and countries where movement past the second milestone is seen in an increasing number of clusters cycle after cycle, a few factors have played a key role. As mentioned above, regular support received from a strong cluster serving as a reservoir, either within the same group of clusters or situated further afield, has been instrumental in the progress achieved. Another contributing factor has been the way in which Auxiliary Board members, through dynamic and persevering endeavours, have been accompanying one or two of their assistants assigned to each cluster with a programme of growth and learning alongside them in the field of action how to nurture an environment that enables the nucleus of active friends to expand and grow in capacity. Furthermore, the capacity of the friends serving on regional and national institutions and agencies--such as Secretaries of Regional Baha'i Councils, regional and national growth facilitators, institute coordinators, and Auxiliary Board members--to analyse together the conditions in the clusters receiving their systematic attention and respond with agility to the needs of each has been another important factor. A distinguishing characteristic of the most advanced regions and countries is the unity of thought and action among these friends, so palpable that any of them can tell the same narrative of what is being learned in their region or country. In pursuing the goals they set before themselves in the Plan, they demonstrate such a spirit of tenacity and reliance on divine assistance that they refuse to yield even in the face of adversity. With conviction born of hard-won experience they are able to recognize and apply without hesitation effective approaches in cluster after cluster and facilitate in a methodical manner the movement of an increasing number of homefront pioneers, mobile tutors, and visiting teachers.

In this connection, a pattern has crystallized in a few regions of the world, in which friends with relevant experience--either from a nearby cluster or from another group of clusters--are deployed to the clusters striving to establish intensive programmes of growth, with the vision that their objective is to build capacity for service in an expanding group of local friends, protagonists in the movement of their community towards Baha'u'llah's World Order, and to empower them to take ownership of the unfoldment of the growth process in their cluster. The friends assisting a cluster from outside are oriented and accompanied by the institutions and agencies in order to help them visualize the path of a cluster moving towards establishing an intensive programme of growth. At the outset, a promising neighbourhood or village could be designated in which to focus the work. Initial efforts might aim at conversing with local inhabitants and identifying eager youth and adults who are assisted to study one or two books of the sequence of institute courses and to begin a few devotional meetings, children's classes, and junior youth groups. Where possible, these friends may be invited to participate in reflection meetings, expansion phases, and institute campaigns in a stronger cluster. Before long, the local friends are

encouraged to study more institute courses and, at the same time, to sustain and expand their activities. As the nucleus of friends expands and activities multiply, a greater sense of community is engendered. A cadre of local tutors would likely be trained and begin working with mobile tutors from outside, and a core group of friends with experience emerges and begins supporting others in service. A further advance is made when a scheme of coordination is put in place with an Area Teaching Committee and one or more institute coordinators, and the newly formed cluster agencies receive orientation from the regional institutions and agencies. The cluster reflection meeting becomes an occasion when the friends consciously recognize that an intensive programme of growth is in motion.

In some areas, such progress might be made in four three-month cycles of activity; in others, it may require much longer. Clarity about this path helps the institutions and agencies to plan the deployment of resources accordingly. It is important for any friend helping from outside to realize that capacity building requires intense effort and giving much time. Mobile tutors and visiting teachers might not succeed in achieving their objective if they dedicate only weekends; the seeds of their endeavour are more likely to germinate and grow deep roots if they visit the cluster for two weeks at a time, for example, or even decide to pioneer for three months or more. The demands of the Plan in the next six cycles require expanding the pool of such dedicated friends in every region and country at a scale never before experienced. To support such a movement, the regional and national institutions and agencies will need to be alert that the current structures do not become a limitation. When conditions are propitious, they can consider, for example, appointing additional regional or national institute coordinators and growth facilitators from among experienced individuals to facilitate the efforts of visiting tutors and teachers and nurture fledgling cluster institute coordinating teams and Area Teaching committees in specific sub-regions or groups of clusters. In some instances, an individual might be required to serve full-time to coordinate the movement of tens of homefront pioneers.

"Nurturing the capacities of the cluster agencies"

In each cluster approaching the second milestone, identifying, orienting, and nurturing a group of friends to serve as cluster institute coordinators and as members of an Area Teaching Committee--and helping them to enhance their capabilities as the cluster advances to the third milestone and beyond--is indeed a tremendous task facing regional and national institutions and agencies, especially Auxiliary Board members. With the recent release of all three units of "Building Vibrant Communities", Book 10 in the sequence of institute courses, the friends everywhere now have an invaluable instrument with which to pursue the imperative of establishing and supporting cluster agencies in cluster after cluster. Initial experience suggests that, as the friends integrate their review of the content of this book into their pattern of action, reflection, and planning, they cultivate a long-term commitment to learning in action and develop the habit of thinking in terms of systems and processes that build capacity rather than only of the numerical increase of activities. The Auxiliary Board members may also arrange for them, if needed, to benefit from the experience in a more advanced cluster. Experienced individuals can also be invited to assist the fledgling cluster agencies. To ensure that the process of learning is sustained cycle after cycle, the Area Teaching Committee, the training institute, and the Auxiliary Board members can maintain in writing the history and unfolding journey of the cluster along its path of development.

Among the complexities that the agencies in the most advanced clusters are learning to address effectively, particularly in those with sizeable Baha'i communities, is paying adequate attention to the two dimensions of the growth process, namely, to nurture "endeavours undertaken by believers across the cluster as their circumstances permit" and at the same time to foster "community-building efforts in small settings of heightened receptivity". Clusters may be less equipped to grow, or challenges can emerge, when the cluster agencies focus on only one of these dimensions.

"Systematizing efforts to nurture endeavours undertaken by believers across the cluster"

In clusters that have made a significant breakthrough in nurturing endeavours undertaken by believers across the cluster, we have observed that the friends and the cluster agencies have been building on the strength generated by the efforts surrounding the bicentenary celebrations, when each believer and Baha'i family felt mandated to reach out to and teach their friends, colleagues, neighbours, and relatives. The cluster agencies map out the locations of families and individuals with the view of opening up sufficient spaces for consultation, reflection, and planning and extending to them whatever assistance they need in teaching the Faith and serving. Forming teaching teams has proved to be effective in maintaining enthusiasm and sustaining commitment to teaching among the believers. The content and environment of cluster reflection meetings and other spaces, such as the Nineteen Day Feast and occasional teaching conferences, is the subject of ongoing consultation and learning among the Auxiliary Board members and the cluster agencies, particularly the Area Teaching Committee. Local Spiritual Assemblies play a vital role in fostering a culture of teaching among the friends and strive to inspire high participation in collective campaigns for expansion. The Auxiliary Board members in this context are appointing a number of assistants, as needed, to make certain that teaching teams and groups of families receive encouragement and assistance to plan and to learn in action.

An important strategy that has led to dramatically increased rates of participation in teaching endeavours and numbers of core activities in the most advanced clusters has been the effort of the Area Teaching Committee, in collaboration with the Local Assemblies, to encourage the hosting of devotional meetings in more and more Baha'i homes, thus "laying the spiritual foundations of future Houses of Worship". It is most heartening to see this process extend to other households in neighbourhoods where Baha'is reside and to the homes of youth, junior youth, and children who participate in the educational activities of the community, resulting, sometimes, in hundreds of devotional gatherings occurring every week in a cluster. The challenge before the Area Teaching Committee has been to think beyond merely multiplying this activity and to approach this area of action from the perspective of capacity building, conscious that every devotional meeting, like any other core activity, is a potential portal for growth. This entails raising up human resources who can collaborate with the Area Teaching Committee in promoting devotional meetings. The friends assisting in this way accompany families to become more outward oriented by inviting not only their own kin but also their neighbours, friends, colleagues, and even the entire neighbourhood. The hosts of devotional meetings are also supported in learning not just to share prayers, but to foster profound conversations on Baha'u'llah's teachings, introduce to the attendants the community-building efforts, and invite them to participate. To systematize this endeavour and promote mutual support and assistance, units of several families have formed around more experienced families.

## "Fostering an expanding nucleus in a neighbourhood"

In its Ridvan 2018 message, the House of Justice wrote:

... there must emerge in many hundreds of clusters a growing band of believers who can maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity, and who are distinguished by their ability and their discipline to reflect on action and learn from experience. Raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals in each place--not just at the level of the cluster but within neighbourhoods and villages--is at once a formidable challenge and a critical need. But where this is occurring, the results speak for themselves.

Experience suggests that, to establish a centre of intense activity in an urban neighbourhood, selecting a suitable area where conditions are favourable for a long-term process of community building and committing to its development are critical. The receptivity of the population is discovered through visits and interactions with local residents. Once the neighbourhood is identified, often a team of two or three friends who are imbued with a strong sense of mission is encouraged to settle with a long-term dedication to becoming one with the population and to raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals. In many cases, an Auxiliary Board member works closely with this team. The path that has proved effective in neighbourhoods where the process is well advanced is to establish the rhythm and pattern of expansion, training, and accompanying with an initial vision of seeing some tens of young people serving as animators, teachers, and in some cases as tutors, and to work systematically with families whose children and youth are engaged in each stage of the educational process. To find the first cohort of local youth, the team reads the reality of the neighbourhood carefully and strives to understand details about the population, including the number of households, youth, junior youth, and children as well as the patterns of life and the social structures present.

As the process thus unfolds, a band of local friends joins the initial team. Their capabilities develop progressively as they study institute courses and carry out more and more complex acts of service. Gradually, as they are assisted to plan systematically, study relevant guidance, and reflect on their action, they develop a deeper sense of ownership of the growth process and an ardent desire to see it encompass the entire population.

The educational activities in the neighbourhood become more systematized when a suitable facility is rented or acquired, allowing the nucleus of friends to meet daily and institute activities to run regularly. Furthermore, unless a system is established by which children and junior youth are retained in children's classes grade after grade and in the junior youth programme from one level to another, the Faith cannot permeate deeply into the soil of the neighbourhood. If such formalization is achieved, engagement in these "foundational activities" becomes "so embedded in the culture of the population that it is viewed as an indispensable aspect of the life of a community". As the pattern of action and the process of learning established in one neighbourhood are extended by the friends to other neighbourhoods, the entire cluster is thrust into a new stage of large-scale growth.

"Extending the process in village after village"

A similar process unfolds in rural settings, but with its own dynamics. The centre of intense activity may be a single village or, in low-density areas, a group of small villages. Given that the population in such places may number in the hundreds or few thousands, we have seen that within several cycles the community-building process could welcome the participation of a significant percentage of the population. After an initial period during which the first cohort of friends is trained and mobilized into the field of service, village gatherings organized in consultation with local leaders raise the entire community's awareness of the beauty and purpose of the process unfolding in their midst, and the level of engagement reaches new heights. Inspired by their children's participation in the educational activities, adults and families take part in devotional gatherings that strengthen the sense of community among people of different beliefs and backgrounds. In a rural cluster, passing the third milestone occurs readily as the process is diffused from village to village through the friends from more advanced villages making efforts to engage their relatives and friends in a neighbouring village, and through the deployment of teaching teams during the expansion phase of a cycle. As the number of villages becoming centres of intense activity increases, the regional and national institutions and agencies are alert to expand the scheme of coordination in a timely manner, for example, by assigning additional coordinators and growth facilitators both to focus on certain villages that have advanced significantly and to support the expansion of the process to new villages. In many well-advanced regions and countries, the institutions and agencies are maintaining a list of the villages that have established core activities in each cluster, and they are monitoring the degree of penetration of the community-building process into the life of the population.

"Establishing a regular rhythm of youth gatherings and institute campaigns"

The clusters advancing beyond the third milestone clearly demonstrate the capacities, on the one hand, to constantly widen the circle of conversation with youth about the teachings of Baha'u'llah and service to humanity and, on the other hand, to ensure uninterrupted progression of youth along the path of service, from participating in conversations and youth gatherings to entering the sequence of courses, to serving, and eventually to supporting others in service.

In this connection, the value of establishing a rhythm of holding youth gatherings and institute campaigns every one or two cycles is becoming well recognized. The gatherings and campaigns--which may initially be held at the cluster or even regional level and later in neighbourhoods and villages--become more effective and sustainable if synchronized with the local patterns of life. In some places, rather than having a youth gathering followed by an institute campaign, the study of the youth conference materials is integrated into the programme of the campaign. In preparation, the cluster agencies and others assess their available resources and identify and train those who could act as facilitators of the youth conference materials, as tutors during an institute campaign, and as individuals who stand ready to accompany teams of youth when they begin serving as animators and children's class teachers. Friends who are not directly involved in facilitating the gatherings and institute courses can be called on to assist with home visits to parents and with the logistics of the campaigns to allow those serving as tutors to focus on the training process. Based on such practical considerations, a goal can be set to bring a fresh cohort of youth into the process.

In some clusters that are advancing the frontiers of learning, the institute campaigns occur during longer school and university holidays and last for ten days or more, during which participants are able to complete at least two courses and carry out the related practical components. The time devoted to memorizing the Sacred Word and offering prayers together nurtures a profound love for the Faith, an appreciation for its teachings, and a commitment to furthering its aims. Artistic presentations are shared, for example, in evening programmes, some of which delve into the history of the Faith. Often, immediately after the campaign, the youth dedicate an intensive period for service, and activities are established. The institute creates opportunities for youth to advance further in their study of the sequence of courses by arranging campaigns during holiday breaks, shorter weekend campaigns, and ongoing study circles as circumstances dictate. As a new group of youth enters the sequence of courses every cycle, the institute follows the progress of participants so that in every subsequent cycle these youth study one or two books in the sequence while sustaining their junior youth groups and children's classes. It can be expected that, if properly accompanied, from every cohort of youth some will emerge who develop higher capabilities and begin to serve as tutors, collaborators, and coordinators. As mentioned, the availability of an accessible and adequate institute facility formalizes and systematizes these efforts and ensures that the process can continue unhindered.

"Increasing the flow of youth entering the sequence of courses"

In many clusters, while the pattern of youth gatherings and institute campaigns may be well established and sizeable numbers of youth may be entering the sequence of courses every year, the friends might find that, owing to migration or other reasons, they are unable to advance beyond a certain level of activity. To accelerate growth, say, by doubling or even tripling the number of human resources serving, the agencies in each cluster need to conduct a thorough analysis of the situation. The experience of one cluster at the frontiers of learning is instructive in this regard. The friends' analysis led to the conclusion that to see a doubling of the number of core activities, the number of youth entering the institute process would also have to double. To achieve this, they dedicated much more time and energy to inviting significantly larger numbers of youth to contribute to the betterment of their society. At the same time, more tutors were trained, additional coordinators and collaborators were assigned, and more venues were opened for institute campaigns.

Experience has shown that inviting young people to participate in the process is about more than issuing invitations and waiting for them to appear; it often involves several substantial conversations with youth and sometimes their parents, through which veritable friendships are swiftly formed. While in most places, at this time, a significant percentage of the youth joining the process are those met in the wider society through conversations in various settings and during intensive periods of expansion, we are extremely encouraged to see in a few areas that such eager youth are increasingly emerging, as hoped, from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. As training institutes strengthen their capacity to sustain and expand the number of junior youth groups from year to year, more and more clusters will certainly see an appreciable flow of youngsters from junior youth groups into the main sequence.

"Accelerating the pace"

Dear friends, the consultations in the Holy Land provide an opportunity to review the pace of the movement of clusters in each geographic region, paying special attention to certain countries and regions that have substantial goals to achieve. As you consider measures that could accelerate the process of establishing new intensive programmes of growth and project how much can be accomplished in the next six cycles and by the end of the current Plan, we hope that the above exploration of practical elements and approaches will be helpful in your discussions.

When the dynamics in one cluster become particularly vibrant, the energy thus generated radiates not only to neighbouring clusters but throughout an entire country. Therefore, strategic attention will need to be paid to raising the number of clusters with patterns of activity that embrace large numbers. Striving to have in each country or region at least one cluster that has moved beyond the third milestone is a worthy mission, one that could be entrusted to your Auxiliary Board members, particularly in those countries or regions that have yet to experience sustained large-scale growth.

Regarding some three hundred clusters in the world that have passed the third milestone, it is important that they continue to push the frontiers forward. To this end, we are initiating a pilot learning project in some fifty selected clusters to help these communities build the capacity to sustain five hundred, one thousand, or even more core activities.

Time is fleeting, and a heroic response is urgently needed. The enormous thrust expected in the second phase of the Five Year Plan requires all to spare no time, no effort, and no resources in accelerating the momentum and increasing the intensity of the capacity-building endeavour. Let us keep in our hearts and minds the poignant and energizing 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 Abha Kingdom. The scope of your exertions must needs be extended. The wider its range, the more striking will be the evidence of divine assistance.

... unquestionably the divine teachings must reveal themselves with a brighter effulgence, the breaths of the Holy Spirit must display a penetrating intensity, the ocean of the love of God must be stirred with higher waves, the breezes of the rose garden of the divine love be wafted with higher velocity, and the fragrances of holiness be diffused with swiftness and rapidity.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

The International Teaching Centre

Enclosure

cc: All Continental Boards of Counsellors