

A Personal Consideration of the Four Year Plan and its Legacy from an Irish Bahá'í Perspective

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Abstract

The following paper, originally delivered at the ABS Conference in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal at the end of October 2000, is a very frank and detailed assessment of the Four Year Plan in the Republic of Ireland. Though highly personal and at times polemical, it may be regarded as a piece of socio-historical analysis.

Introduction

In its 1996 Ridvan Letter, the Universal House of Justice states: “The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude.” Towards the end of the Letter, the House comments:

This Plan to which we are now committed is set at one of the most critical times in the life of the planet. It is meant to prepare our community to cope with the accelerating changes that are occurring in the world about us and to place the community in a position both to withstand the weight of the accompanying tests and challenges and to make more visible a pattern of functioning to which the world can turn for aid and example in the wake of a tumultuous transition. Thus, the Plan acquires a special place in the scheme of Bahá'í and world history...

In this paper I intend to look at the Letter and consider four areas where I feel it raises questions, namely:

- (1) How did the Irish Bahá'í community respond to the special call in the Four Year Plan?
- (2) In the long term, what of substance emerged from the period and what was the legacy of the Plan?
- (3) How does this 1996 Letter with its the Four Year Plan differ from the Ridvan Letter of 2000 with its Twelve Month Plan?
- (4) What avenues do the latter directives open for us at this point where “we cross a bridge to which we shall never return?”

First, I will look at the main provisions of the 1996 Ridvan Letter. Then I will examine the response and reaction by the Bahá'í community in the Republic of Ireland over the four years covered by the Plan. Then I will consider the implications of the 2000 Ridvan Letter and its development of certain themes so that we may hopefully gain a clearer insight into where we have come from, what we are doing now and where we are going as Bahá'ís. Finally I will make a number of proposals arising from the paper which may help us at this critical period.

The Main Provisions of the Four Year Plan

The 1996 Ridvan Letter of the Universal House of Justice sets forth the objectives of the Four Year Plan in broad strokes.

The Four Year Plan aims at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. As we have stated earlier, such an advance is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believers, of the institutions, and of the local community.

The Letter goes on to highlight the pivotal role that the individual will play in this process:

The role of the individual is of unique importance in the work of the Cause. It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the teaching work and the development of the community depend.

The individual's role is carefully balanced when the House points out:

The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members... Progress... requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá'í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions...
... Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, and loving shepherds of the multitudes.

The Letter proceeds to stress that:

The community, as distinguished from the individual and the institutions, assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size. This is a necessary development to which much attention is required both with respect to places where large-scale enrolment has occurred and in anticipation of more numerous instances of entry by troops.

The Letter looks at specific areas in which Bahá'ís can act to facilitate the process. It paints the large picture as follows:

The Bahá'í world community will expand its endeavours in both social and economic development and external affairs, and thus continue to collaborate directly with the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world... particularly through the communities' involvement in the promotion of human rights, the status of women, global prosperity, and moral development.

On a local level the House stipulates that:

... it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings... [that] individuals [endeavour to] conduct study classes in their homes... In all their efforts to achieve the aim of the Four Year Plan, the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation.

The individual is advised to:

draw upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular reading and study of the Holy Texts... In addition to these, the individual, having been given the duty to teach the Cause, is endowed with the capacity to attract particular blessings promised by Bahá'u'lláh.

However, it goes on to advise and counsel that:

... sponsorship by the institutions of occasional instruction and the informal activities of the community, though important, are not adequate for the education of a rapidly expanding community. It is therefore of paramount importance that systematic attention be given to devising methods of educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith, and for training and assisting them to serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow. There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organised, formally conducted programmes of training on a regular schedule.

Then it clearly underlines the importance of these institutes:

What the friends throughout the world are now asked to do, is to commit themselves, their material resources, their abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted. These centres of Bahá'í learning will have as their goal one very practical outcome, namely, the raising up of large numbers of believers who will be trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.

The Letter concludes with the following rousing call:

May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity...

Response

To answer the first question, “How did the Irish Bahá’í community respond?”, one needs to look back to the air of anticipation and hope that was palpable during the Bahá’í Summer School in Waterford in August 1996. The widespread feeling of optimism and expectancy implied that great things would be achieved in the coming four years.

When the National Plan formulated by the National Spiritual Assembly was unveiled at that Summer School, a prominent role was assigned to the individual, who could “Share more confidently, constantly and effectively the healing Message of Bahá’u’lláh with an ailing humanity, through engaging in personal teaching,” “supporting the teaching projects of the Local and National Assemblies” and participating in training institutes.

The theme of training institutes was to be found in the goals assigned to Local Spiritual Assemblies, and it was reinforced as one of the more prominent goals of the National Assembly, which called for the development of national, regional and local institutes.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this National Plan was the advice that we develop an acceptance of “the fact that mistakes will be made, and a willingness to learn from them.” This, I felt, was a sign of a growing maturity, and suggested that we intended to stop sweeping problems under the carpet and then simply ignoring them.

In that first year of the Plan, a number of promising initiatives were undertaken. A National Training Institute was appointed in November 1996. Three months later, we had the first All-Ireland Teaching Conference near Enniskillen in Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. This was a very welcome development, which suggested that Bahá’ís could offer a potential lead to the political forces on this island, especially with regard to unity and co-operation. At this Conference, two important announcements were made. One was a cross-border teaching initiative called the Badi’ Project and the other was the establishment of an External Affairs Department with a full-time officer.

I volunteered for the Badi’ Project and spent several days with more than twenty other volunteers at a training session in the Reconciliation Centre, Glencree in Co. Wicklow, where Counsellor Viv Bartlett from Wales advocated the use of a “Direct Teaching Method.” As far as I could judge, this appeared to be a “cold turkey” approach to teaching, involving as it did stopping people on the street, introducing oneself and telling them a little about the Faith with the intention of interesting, engaging and hopefully enthusing them before inviting them to become Bahá’ís by signing the declaration card. Apparently the approach had worked when used in parts of London and some other places in Britain. I was sceptical, but spent a week on the Project in Belfast with another Dubliner. Before we arrived in the Northern capital, it was arranged that we would walk up the Shankill and down the Falls Road; on reflection, however, it was considered wiser to concentrate on Roman Catholic West Belfast because of our Southern Irish accents.

Some months earlier, I spent a week on the Letters of the Living Project in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, organised by the town’s Local Spiritual Assembly. This involved street teaching, holding an exhibition in a vacant shop, evening firesides in

the cottage in the Oldtown that serves as a Hazíratu'l-Quds and press and radio publicity. (The latter included an interview with a native adult believer.)

In January 1997 there was a meeting of the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) at the National Centre in Dublin, which hoped to reactivate Bahá'í scholarship here after a period of hibernation. The two-day meeting was chaired by Rob Weinberg from Britain, author of the biography, *Ethel Jenner Rosenberg* (George Ronald, 1995), who was lively, helpful and informative. About a dozen papers were presented, ranging from racial identity, Feasts and firesides, changing one's religion to one on the Hands of the Cause of God who had visited Ireland. There was also a very engaging and imaginative account of the steps taken by humankind towards global political unity entitled "Pan Planet."

In the arts, a Forum was launched on a sunny afternoon at the 1996 Summer School to a packed gathering. Subsequently the Forum held a number of meetings in Dublin, and a core group succeeded in bringing a multi-media exhibition by Bahá'ís, "Lift Up Your Hearts," to Clonmel Library and the Irish Writers' Centre in Parnell Square, Dublin, with financial assistance from the National Assembly. On an individual level, Belfast Bahá'í George Fleming achieved a limited success with his second solo painting show, "All God's Children," which portrayed the different religions of Northern Ireland. Vinnie Flannery organised a well-attended, interactive Arts Workshop Weekend in Co. Leitrim and showed considerable initiative by setting up a Bahá'í Arts Website in 1999, while I undertook a "Dream Journey" from Mizen Head to Malin Head, a conceptual art project with a substantial Bahá'í input that involved distributing leaflets and prayer books and visiting eight Bahá'í communities along the route in the final year of the Plan.

John McGill took over the External Affairs brief during the Plan's first year. He managed to organise an ecumenical service at St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and he played a prominent part in the Dublin City Assembly's 50th anniversary celebration at Dublin Castle in 1998, which was attended by President Mary McAleese, Professor Suheil Bushrui and over two hundred well-wishers.

The Women's Association recruited members at a Summer School early in the Plan, and arranged weekend meetings at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow and Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

In the third year of the Plan, the Panacea Dance Project came to Ireland from the United States, and spent a fortnight in Limerick, training young Bahá'ís to set up their own dance/drama groups.

However, the most innovative and long-lasting change to community life was brought about by the National Training Institute. It started by organising a couple of national weekend courses in Athlone. I attended both courses, and while I enjoyed the company and found them fairly interesting, at the time they seemed to be little more than a series of deepening workshops on the verities of the Faith with interactive trimmings. Following the Letters of the Living and Badí' projects which it organised, the Training Institute arranged and oversaw a "Service to Bahá'u'lláh" Project for local communities which centred on prayer sessions during the Fast. This was followed by organising a series of local courses with the assistance of Auxiliary Board members. Again these looked and felt like deepenings with an interactive element.

In the final Year of the Plan, by which time the National Training Institute had become the Training Institute Board, the Irish Bahá'í community was introduced to Study Circles. These were recommended to the believers after they had achieved some success in Italy as a teaching medium, though details of this activity and success were extremely difficult to come by.

I attended the first regional course in the Dublin area. We met on the third Sunday of every month from September 1999 until May 2000, with the exception of March (because of the Fast). One of the most obvious benefits of the Study Circle has been the involvement of "the learned arm" in the exercise. In Dublin we had the encouragement and involvement of the assistant for Protection and two assistants for Propagation. At the final session in May, most of the participants who had participated in and staged the course seemed impressed and satisfied with what had been achieved, and several said they were very much looking forward to the second course which was arranged to commence at the end of September 2000.

In summation, this was the considered response to the Plan. It was by no means the whole story, however.

Reaction

To answer the second question, "In the long term, what of substance emerged from this period and what was the legacy of the Plan?", we need to look a little closer at the response and, perhaps more important, at the reactions to the initiatives that were undertaken. Unfortunately we have few objective criteria to judge or estimate our progress as a community during the four years of the Plan, e.g. how exactly can the evolution of the administrative institutions be determined? Even such crude statistical evidence as the total number of believers in the Republic of Ireland - which appeared at one time in the Annual Reports - has disappeared. More often than not, we have to rely on anecdotal evidence or bland, feel-good sentiments. However, one has only to look at the number of group projects which have failed, faltered or simply faded away during the period to cause us to question or at least ponder on our commitment to communal action.

When I think back on the Letters of the Living and Badí' Projects during the first year of the Plan, I am struck by the fact that while the local Bahá'í communities in Letterkenny and in Belfast were for the most part helpful and supportive, very few of the local believers actually got involved in the day-to-day running of either Project. In Letterkenny, for example, the exhibition was mostly facilitated by the travelling teachers and only one local believer gave a fireside. National projects surfaced only sporadically after this ("Nur" and "Panacea" are the only two that come to mind), and then without any noticeable success in the teaching and consolidation fields.

In the arts, the one teaching/proclamation discipline specifically mentioned in the 1996 Ridvan Letter, the Forum limped on for the best part of a year, with the number of those attending its meetings dropping from twenty-two to three, while its successor, the Arts Task Force, appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly, issued a single newsletter before it lapsed into silence for the best part of a year.

John McGill spent over a year at External Affairs work before moving on to a more commercial brief. His post has not been filled, and, to my knowledge,

External Affairs has been swallowed up as a Subcommittee of the National Assembly, with one person acting as Information Co-ordinator.

The Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) disappeared off the agenda following its meeting in January 1997, surfacing very briefly at Summer School in Waterford last year, and has not been sighted until its reincarnation in Letterkenny at the end of October 2000.

After a number of well-publicised weekends, the Women's Association has been strangely silent with little or no information filtering through.

This is undoubtedly a feeble collective track record, but Social and Economic Development did not even make a token showing during the Plan. This was probably inevitable after the Irish community's unfortunate experience of a decade ago. Then there was a seemingly misguided attempt to approach this area in Third World terms (e.g. teaching on the off-shore islands and amongst the Travellers). It is here that we should have seen the dynamic consolidation of the spiritual and the material which 'Abdu'l-Bahá so clearly and cogently recommended and practised Himself over eighty years ago.

The sad but unavoidable conclusion that one draws from this record is that *we do not work well together* and that *unity is as yet only an aspiration*. It is a shame that the passage in the 1996 Ridvan Letter regarding community was not more closely studied and acted upon. The passage reads:

A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization comprised of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress. Since Bahá'ís everywhere are at the beginning of the process of community building, enormous efforts must be devoted to the tasks in hand.

A footnote by eminent religious scholar, Dr Moojan Momen, in his published address on the style of Bahá'í community functioning, is pertinent here:

What we have in the West, where Bahá'í groups meet for a few hours each week, can scarcely be called a community. The term "Bahá'í community" is more an expression of aspiration than of present reality ("Learning From History," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 1989-1990*, Volume 2, Number 2, p. 66).

One of the most encouraging signs on the horizon that "a lesson has been learnt" has been the survival - if not the success - of the process of Training Institutes and Study Circles. In the Ridvan Letter of 2000 we learn that, on a global scale, "The chief propellant of... [Bahá'í cultural] change was the system of training institutes established throughout the world with great rapidity - an

accomplishment which, in the field of expansion and consolidation, qualifies as the single greatest legacy of the Four Year Plan.”

In the Irish context, I see little sign that the Study Circles have been an unqualified success. Yet there does seem to be an awareness that the Institute process could be a permanent feature in the life of our communities. However, I feel that real difficulties will emerge if we continue to use and depend on unadapted Ruhi textbooks to foster this process.

When I attended the first Study Circle last September, I was more impressed by the main facilitator, who was diligent, thoughtful and refreshingly honest, than I was by the course itself. We spent most of our time studying and trying to memorise passages from the Writings as set out in *Ruhi Book Six: Teaching the Cause*. This was part of a series of textbooks which originated from the Ruhi Institute in Columbia. I never really came to terms with the textbook, which appeared simplistic, inappropriate in an Irish context and probably more suited to the mass teaching and mass conversion conditions of Central and South America. When I made inquiries, I gathered that this series of books is being used for three reasons: (1) They are simple and basic and therefore accessible in most cultures, (2) they have been used with relative success in a number of areas and circumstances worldwide and (3) they have a structured objective which is as desirable as it is rare. However, there is little first-hand evidence available to show if this approach has enhanced the believers' ability and willingness to teach in the developed world, apart from the brief statement about the success with Study Circles in Italy. When I asked about adapting the course to Irish circumstances, I was told that there hadn't been time to develop a structured course, which could take ten years to do.

The most unfortunate aspect of the current situation has been the decided lack of information about the process itself. Communications from the Board down to the individual believers in local communities has been slow, intermittent and patchy. As of this writing, there hasn't been a single national progress report on the Institutes since the process started four years ago. This - and an Information Pack explaining in some detail the purpose, methods and successes of the “centres-of-learning” courses and Study Circles - would be appreciated and would possibly help to stimulate interest in the process. This is necessary, as there still seems to be considerable resistance to the whole idea, despite the encouragement of both the House of Justice and the National Assembly. This may be due to prejudice and conservatism, but is most likely due to lack of information and poor communication.

I felt that a start was made to remedy the situation in July this year when one of the assistants came to our Local Spiritual Assembly in Dublin City with a 17-page document, *Training Institutes and Systematic Growth*, prepared by the International Teaching Centre to explain what was happening. I subsequently enjoyed the explanatory session on Training Institutes and Study Circles at the Waterford Summer School in August this year. Anne O' Sullivan, who has been appointed to the Board, gave an excellent presentation on the history of the Training Institutes, which helped put the process into some kind of historical perspective. Pat Murphy gave us some background detail on Study Circles and answered questions about them.

In summation, it is extremely difficult to see what of substance emerged from the period in question or how it helped to realise the overriding goal of the Four Year Plan - that of significantly advancing the process of entry by troops. According to the Ridvan letter of 2000, the earlier Plan called for “a clarity of understanding which made systematic and strategic planning a prerequisite of individual and collective action.”

In Irish terms we simply have not seen this yet. Nevertheless, if the Training Institute courses can lead us to an appreciation and realisation of this, it will undoubtedly raise our consciousness, witness an upgrading of teaching activities, lead to a change in the culture of our communities and prove itself a worthy legacy of the Four Year Plan.

Subsequent Developments and the Twelve Month Plan

To answer the third question, “How does the 1996 Letter with its Four Year Plan differ from the Ridvan Letter of 2000 with its Twelve Month Plan?”, I would draw attention to the marked change of emphasis that one finds in the later Plan. The goals of the present year (2000-2001) are given a single paragraph and entry by troops receives, in contrast to the earlier Plan, little more than a passing mention. The Lesser Peace is not explicitly mentioned at all. The Training Institutes and Study Circles are given considerable attention and prominence, but the real surprise is that there were almost two full pages devoted to the care and the needs of children and youth. The reason for this change is not immediately obvious, but it did not appear to follow or emerge from anything outlined in the Four Year Plan.

I made inquiries among the friends and heard a variety of explanations and opinions about this concern for younger Bahá'ís.

First, the present generation of Bahá'ís had failed in their tasks and responsibilities and would soon be swept away to be replaced by a new, brighter and more systematic generation which will come of age towards the end of the next twenty-year thrust of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan.

Second, we had neglected our children by not giving them a clear lead and had not instructed them in the verities of the Faith.

Third, we had not been properly aware of them as our most precious resource.

And fourth was the cynical suggestion that it was simply a way of moving the agenda forward, by distracting and diverting us from the fact that we had not achieved any significant entry by troops (“the number of new believers has as yet only slightly surpassed those of recent years” - Ridvan Letter 2000) or lived to see the Lesser Peace established by the end of the 20th century.

A passage in the *Ruhi Institute Book: Learning About Growth* that deals with children's education foreshadows and signals this concern as far back as 1991. It reads:

Doctrines that have disregarded religious education for children, and have left them to acquire their standards and beliefs supposedly by free choice, from their interaction with society, have contributed greatly to the present state of moral disintegration. The proponents of these doctrines do not seem to appreciate the fact that there are political, economic and cultural interests in

society which aggressively promote their own desired patterns of thought and behaviour. But even if this were not so, humanity, left to its own devices without divine guidance, has produced nothing more than injustice and suffering: there is no reason to suppose that any new generation of children will create a better world without an education that is basically spiritual.

Whatever the reason, I think we can expect that increasing attention will be paid to education for young people and indeed for all. In fact, at this year's Summer School in Waterford, I noticed an increasing emphasis on both education and youth. It was evident in the interactive methodology which Dr Iraj Ayman employed in his sessions (e.g. group consultations on the Covenant and on teaching), in the appearance of a number of enthusiastic young people on the main programme as speakers and in the activities of a pioneer paying a flying visit from China, who was offering Chinese scrolls and artefacts to raise money for the International Fund as well as teaching T'ai Chi, a graceful form of "moving meditation" in the afternoons.

One passage in the 2000 Letter cites another new but related theme: the need for systematic and strategic planning, the appreciation that systematisation will facilitate the process of growth and development and the need to improve our teaching activities that will, hopefully, lead to a change in the culture of the Bahá'í community. As I understand it, this all suggests that there will be a conscious attempt to move our culture away from the "Social Club" mode of development with its casual, "It'll come all right on the night" attitude, its inspired amateurism and anti-intellectualism into a more structured, thoughtful and interactive educational approach.

We increasingly need to ask if we interact and respond in a significant or constructive way to the wider society with its numerous problems. Or do we cocoon ourselves from the violence, poverty, insanity, sexual malaise, sickness, drug abuse, prejudices, rabid consumerism, greed, corruption, alienation and dehumanisation that surround us beneath the veneer of First World modernity? It is extremely difficult to listen to all this glib chatter about the Celtic Tiger and the unprecedented prosperity of our burgeoning economy and then to consider the plight of our poor. Even today we have many, many people living on the streets of cities and towns and in some of the worst physical conditions in all of Europe. Ireland, for instance, has the highest rate of child poverty in the EU; there are well over 1,000 homeless young people in the Dublin area alone. Or consider the long lists of people having to wait for hospital beds and operations, and the fact that the national illiteracy rate is as high as 25%. No one who today calls himself or herself a Bahá'í in Ireland can be complacent about this deplorable situation. Of course it is a highly complex problem and one that has been with us for a long time.

I believe that the Training Institutes are an exciting development, possibly a tiny but significant step on the path to global solidarity. But we need to broaden the concept as we have little more than mere potential at present. There is no doubt that we need teachers who will help to channel and deepen new believers as they come into the Faith. In the past we have seen what can happen when numbers of young people come into the Faith in places like Carlow, Gorey and, before that,

Dundalk. There were neither the structures nor the organisation to secure consolidation, and we experienced the unpleasant phenomenon of “Exit by Troops.”

I am not naively proposing that Study Circles and Training Institute courses are the answer to all our problems or that they should monopolise our community activities in the immediate future. Instead of just effective teachers, we need to develop a fresher, broader and more mature *vision* than hitherto, one that indissolubly links the spiritual to the material. If we continue to ignore or pay lip-service to this connection, we should not expect the world to pay any attention to us: too often we start with words, end with words and use words in between, believing that we hold the moral high ground and priding ourselves on our spiritual susceptibilities. Two of Bahá'u'lláh's counsels from *The Hidden Words* come to mind at this point:

O SON OF MY HANDMAID!

Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds... (Persian 76).

O MY SERVANTS!

Ye are the trees of My garden; ye must give forth goodly and wondrous fruits, that ye yourselves and others may profit therefrom... (Persian 80).

In the first round of Study Circles I attended in Dublin, we spent practically all of our time studying and trying to memorise passages from the Writings contained in *Ruhi Book 6*. We spent a little time promoting recreational, social and cultural activities and no time at all in undertaking as a group acts of service. With hindsight, even the facilitator felt that this was an unbalanced programme. Reading through the November 1999 issue of the national newsletter, *Re Nua (New Day)*, I see that for the Service aspect, the Tralee Study Circle devoted time to cleaning up a local beach, while the Ennis Study Circle offered aid and hospitality to the refugees who had settled in the area. These certainly indicate the direction in which we should be moving. However, I think there should be a special link between the specific reading and the work we undertake. Unless there is a more structured link, we will most likely find ourselves taking one-off actions and then start flailing around in the dark or conveniently forgetting this aspect. It is here that we could implement Social and Economic Development projects, which could guide and channel our service, help and support to humanity.

In summation, if the Four Year Plan set our agenda, then the Twelve Month Plan was mainly about ways and means, structures and strategies, attitudes and approaches that will be needed for the next stage of our journey now that we are crossing “the bridge to which we shall never return.”

Looking Forward

Finally we come to the question: “What avenues are open to us at this point?”

In the coming period we should be prepared to explore, experiment and learn from our mistakes: the Guardian did, after all, describe the Bahá'í Faith as "scientific in its method." I feel and strongly believe that in the recent past we have emphasised individual initiative at the expense of group action and have thereby reflected the ethos of the Old World Order, which relishes and exalts "the cult of the individual." This paradigm was best encapsulated by former British Prime Minister, Lady Margaret Thatcher, when she stated: "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." This, it seems, is a world away from the vision of unity and co-operative endeavour advocated by Bahá'u'lláh.

I believe that if the Training Institute Board can be more forward-looking in a creative and flexible way in relation to educating the believers and in teaching the seekers and involving the community, it will indeed raise our consciousness, upgrade our teaching activities and change our community's culture. The 2000 Ridvan letter, in hindsight, properly stressed that we should engage the youth and children in this educational process. It asks us to understand and appreciate how systematisation will facilitate the processes of growth and development, and we certainly need to develop skills in nurturing our group projects. In this regard I look forward to watching the development of the "Area Growth Programme" to see what lessons will be learned. This is one of the principal goals of the Irish Bahá'í community during this Twelve Month Plan: this puts the spotlight on the teaching work in the Limerick area, with its sizeable Bahá'í community, and will be closely monitored to see what works and what is practically effective and then to build on it. Limerick is an excellent area to make a start on structural development, given its track record, with entry by troops in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the ambitious goals it set for itself at the beginning of the Four Year Plan.

In summation, the future offers many opportunities for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith (as well as challenges), probably more if we can "arise to seize the tasks at this crucial moment, which is so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity."

Nine Proposals

Some of the above observations may seem unpalatable, harsh, even negative, but I have made them only because I honestly believe that we can all do much better. Most important, we must strive to be more efficient in our communications in three ways:

First, we must communicate with ourselves in order to draw on our inner resources; second, with our fellow believers so that we can bond and work with one another more fruitfully; and third, with society and humanity at large so that we can reach their hearts and minds and allow them to be touched by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh.

So I will finish by making nine *positive* suggestions and proposals, which may help us to communicate more effectively.

- (1) That we use *Ré Nua (New Day)*, our national journal, to let us know what is happening at the various Study Circles around the country on a regular basis. Only brief reports from Ennis, Tralee and Dublin appeared during the past year.
- (2) That we have an Annual Report from the Training Institute Board, outlining the progress and difficulties of the period and the goals for the coming year.
- (3) That the Training Institute Board consider sending out an Information Pack to every family or believer in order to acquaint them with the history, development and hopes of the process. The aim here is to interest, involve and enthuse the believers at the grassroots.
- (4) That we look at Social and Economic Development again, this time from a fresh perspective. This might be done in co-operation with the Board or through a Conference, which would examine the way our near neighbours in Britain - through Agenda 21 - and on the Continent worked in this field rather than to the Third World for a model.
- (5) That we think seriously about developing a Universal Educational Model (UEM) in this country at some time in the future. The idea is to use the Internet to connect the Study Circles operating in Ireland first of all, to have them exchange ideas, learn from one another, grow and develop together and then to link up with Study Circles in other countries. It would be marvellous if we could thus achieve a World Wide Web of believers, that would set a valuable example of unity in diversity to the wider society.
- (6) That we consider holding a second All-Ireland Teaching Conference in 2001 to launch the next Plan and also encourage greater co-operation between the two communities on our small island.
- (7) That we examine the feasibility of setting up a second Summer School with a more truly academic basis. This would hopefully attract outside scholars who are sympathetic to the Bahá'í Cause.
- (8) That the Arts Task Force be encouraged to plan each year three to four Arts Weekends with distinct themes where practising artists can discuss their work and encourage group endeavours (e.g. in music, drama and dance).
- (9) That the National Pioneering Committee be encouraged to keep in touch with pioneers after their moves to new localities, to monitor their progress and to help them settle in if need be. Host communities should be encouraged to welcome and integrate the pioneer(s), who can sometimes feel isolated, alienated or discouraged after a short while at their post.

In conclusion, it is our own response to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, and even more important, how we continue to respond, even in small ways, that count. I believe that this is the best way that we can show our love for Bahá'u'lláh and His awesome vision.

October 2000