

Message from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

This special edition of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the first conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in 1976, offers an opportunity to reflect with profound gratitude on the remarkable development of the Association over the past five decades. As successive guidance from the Universal House of Justice has been studied, applied, and explored in a spirit of learning, the Association has continually refined its understanding of its purpose and contribution. We warmly congratulate the Executive Committee and its many collaborators whose devoted efforts have brought a new creation into being, enriching the intellectual life of the North American Bahá'í community and strengthening the community's capacity to contribute to the advancement of civilization.

The letter dated July 24, 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, well known to those involved in the Association's work, noted that while every believer has the opportunity to introduce relevant aspects of the teachings into the discourses of society, "it is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests

that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived." As the conference was re-imagined, it has become a gathering-place for the expression of this vision. From its modest beginnings, when some eighty participants gathered, it has grown into a vibrant event that now regularly attracts over eighteen hundred friends who are eager to think deeply together and build their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the conversations shaping human thought. Increasingly, however, the conference serves as a punctuation point within a much broader, year-round process of learning that includes publications, seminars and reading groups, together creating a rich landscape of opportunities to correlate the teachings of the Faith with the pressing questions facing humanity.

A particularly precious feature of the Association's development has been the unique collaboration between the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States in advancing this shared endeavour—a partnership that is itself a fruit of the seeds planted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. In a beautiful recent letter to our Assembly, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States observed that the Association has contributed immensely to the intellectual life of the entire North American Bahá'í community and has helped release the society-building power of the Faith by fostering ever-greater capacity among the friends to participate meaningfully in the discourses of society. The Assembly notes: "Yet another aspect of

the Association's work that has made a significant impact is the attention it is giving to nurturing young people, an expectation of the House of Justice conveyed in the July 24, 2013, letter written on its behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada: "The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution."¹ Their letter continues: "We have been delighted to see how, building on the foundation laid by the training institute and the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, the Association has increasingly been able to offer young people entering academic fields or professions spaces where they can, in the company of experienced friends, apply insights from the Faith to thought in their fields. These young people are learning to view participation in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service that is coherent with the imperatives of community building and social action. And, importantly, by providing opportunities for people who are more advanced in their fields to work together with people just entering them, a culture of accompaniment is taking root."

The Universal House of Justice has recently emphasized that as the

contribution of the Bahá'í community to the progress of society becomes increasingly visible, it will be called upon to explain ever more clearly the principles that animate its efforts. It therefore observes that "it will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds."¹ In this light, the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies assumes particular significance. Its contribution is not simply to scholarship in the conventional sense, but to cultivating the capacities through which the friends can draw on the Revelation to participate thoughtfully in the discourses of humanity and illuminate them with insights drawn from the Revelation. Such efforts are surely among the devoted, spirited and diverse efforts described by the House of Justice in its 4 January 2026 message to the Bahá'ís of the world: "'It is the concern of the True One to reveal,' Bahá'u'lláh has stated, 'and the concern of the people to spread what hath been revealed.' The devoted, spirited, diverse efforts being made to carry to every receptive heart what the True One has revealed—to offer hope to a trouble-gripped humanity, to offer the means of being a conscious agent in the work of worldwide spiritual renewal—are an abiding cause for admiration and wonder, for rejoicing and gratitude."

1 Universal House of Justice, Letter dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.