

Association for Bahá'í Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective

INTRODUCTION

In January 1976, eighty people gathered at Cedar Glen in Bolton, Ontario, for the first annual conference of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith. The Association was established the previous year by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in response to a specific goal assigned by the Universal House of Justice to the Canadian community at the inception of the Five Year Plan: to cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses, and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and institutions of higher learning. Although the founding membership was small and the institutional infrastructure minimal, it was clear from the outset that Bahá'í thought had much to contribute to the intellectual life of society, and that the time had come to pursue that contribution more systematically and in earnest.

Over fifty years later, this retrospective reflects on what those five decades have built and set in motion. It traces the arc from that small gathering in Bolton through the decades of institutional growth and intellectual

development that followed, to the capacities the Association is now working to cultivate, guided at each turn by the Universal House of Justice. It also builds on the Ten Year Retrospective published in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 2023, carrying that account forward and situating subsequent developments within the full arc of the Association's history. Two companion essays in this special issue examine recent developments in greater depth: the first, "Approach to Learning," examines the conceptual framework and dispositions that have come increasingly to guide the Association's work since 2013; the second, "Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives," draws on the experience of special interest groups and other collaborative initiatives to illustrate how that learning is taking shape across diverse fields.

This retrospective does not attempt to chronicle in detail every conference, publication, or decision of the past five decades, or to name all the individuals whose contributions have shaped, and continue to shape, the Association's work. Where names appear, they represent a small cross-section of the many individuals who played significant founding roles, made specific administrative contributions, produced influential publications, were members of senior institutions, or are scholars from the wider community. The account that follows offers a high-level overview that strives to illuminate the major themes, developments, challenges, turning points, and patterns of growth

that have defined the Association's history and its evolving role in the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. Those with long memories of earlier decades will find that much is not represented here, and their recollections and additions would be warmly welcomed. At the same time, this narrative is enriched by personal reflections included in this special issue from individuals who have been part of the Association for many years, offering insight into the personal journeys, transformative experiences, and evolving understandings that have shaped its development—dimensions of the story that no institutional account can fully convey. Appendices listing the notable plenary speakers at each annual conference (Appendix A) and members of the Executive Committee by year (Appendix B) are also included, and it is hoped that a more detailed narrative will be undertaken in the years ahead.

What animates this account, finally, is a conviction shared by those who have served and participated in the Association throughout its history, namely, that the work of Bahá'í scholarship—pursued with rigor, humility, and love, in the company of others, consciously oriented toward addressing the needs of a humanity in transition—is not peripheral to the life of the Faith but integral to the release of its society-building power in ever-greater measures. That conviction is the thread that runs through this retrospective. It has deep roots. The writings of the Central Figures are replete with passages attesting to the importance of

scholarship and learning, the harmony of science and religion, and the obligation of every soul to investigate truth independently and collaboratively. Those principles, and their relationship to the methods, assumptions, and traditions of Western academic disciplines, have long been subjects of reflection and inquiry in the North American Bahá'í community, and have provided the fertile ground in which the Association took root and grew. The pages that follow are written in awareness of that heritage and in gratitude for all those who contributed to it.

FOUNDING AND EARLY GROWTH, 1975–1979

The impulse to found the Association came directly from the Universal House of Justice. At the inception of the Five Year Plan in 1974, the House of Justice called on the Canadian Bahá'í community to adopt, as one of its goals, the cultivation of “opportunities for formal presentations, courses and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning.” The National Spiritual Assembly of Canada responded by convening a policy conference at the University of Ottawa in January 1975. Chaired by Alex Frame, the conference brought together some thirty individuals of varied backgrounds from all parts of Canada for two purposes: to consult on the Five Year Plan goal, and to hold a one-day conference with presentations on topics spanning the human sciences, artistic expression,

spiritual realities, and the history of the Faith. The gathering concluded with a performance by the Ballet Shayda, a dance company founded by a Bahá'í artist and committed to the creative presentation of the Faith, an early sign that the Association's understanding of scholarship should be capacious enough to include the arts.

Out of this consultation came a recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly to establish a Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith, which the Assembly approved at its February 1975 meeting. The Executive Committee of the newly created Association met for the first time in May 1975, with Hossain Danesh as founding Chair and Douglas Martin as Secretary. Danesh would go on to serve on the committee for eighteen years, until 1993, and Martin for nine, until 1985. The founding committee also included William Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Elizabeth Larin, Michael Rochester, and Don Rogers. Hatcher and Eyford's service proved similarly enduring, continuing for fourteen and sixteen years, until 1992 and 1991, respectively. René Steiner served as Secretary-Treasurer in 1977–1978, and Jane Nishi Goldstone joined the Executive Committee in 1977, serving roughly eight years into the mid-1980s.

Among those closely associated with the Association from its earliest years were David Smith, who presented at the second annual conference, held over New Year's 1976–77, on Bahá'í community and group identity, and Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, who

contributed papers at the early thematic conferences on adolescent substance abuse and stress in family life and also wrote for the Association's early monograph series. Both would go on to speak at multiple conferences across the following decades and later serve as Continental Counsellors, working closely with the Association throughout their service. Jane Faily, who also spoke at the second annual conference alongside David Smith, served in an administrative capacity for the Association from 1978 to 1979, contributing to the foundations of the young organization. The 1979 conference, on the theme of "Spiritual Education: The Missing Ingredient," drew the participation of Willard G. Oxtoby, a distinguished scholar of religion at the University of Toronto, signalling from the early years an aspiration to engage in genuine dialogue with the wider academic world.

During its initial meetings, the Executive Committee decided that the Association should direct all its attention to cultivating opportunities for the formal presentation of the Faith at Canadian institutions of higher learning, as directed by the Universal House of Justice. The Committee's reflection on the word "cultivation" from the 1974 letter shaped its approach from the beginning. In the Committee's view, that word called for careful attention to the preparatory stages of a program designed to awaken members of the Canadian academic community to the existence of the Faith, to inform them of its intellectual and spiritual

integrity, and to demonstrate the quality of the academic resources the Faith offered.

With this in mind, the committee identified the following five initial objectives: increasing membership across the Bahá'í community, publishing the Bahá'í Studies series, preparing a textbook on the Faith in both French and English, convening annual meetings, and arranging formal presentations at Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning. One early response was to establish a structure which mirrored existing academic societies, in which a small, usually self-organized group of scholars could develop and formalize its research and communications. Such a model would have given Bahá'í Studies a familiar and credible form when approaching academic institutions for collaboration and the introduction of Bahá'í-related curricula. From these early steps, much has been learned.

The annual conference served as the Association's primary vehicle from the start. The first four conferences, between 1975 and 1979, were held at community venues and university settings in Ontario and British Columbia, with attendance growing from eighty at Cedar Glen in Bolton, Ontario, to 200 at the fourth conference, held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto in January 1979. This fourth conference was open to the public, with some thirty participants from the wider community in attendance, among them the head of the Department of Religious Studies at the

University of Toronto. Despite relatively modest numbers, the conferences attracted speakers from a wide range of disciplines, including mathematics, medicine, history, law, psychology, and the arts. Combining intellectual seriousness with inclusivity was a central aspiration from the start.

The Bahá'í studies monograph series launched with the 1976 publication of *Bahá'í Studies 1*, the proceedings of the first conference, and continued with volumes addressing themes related to the metaphysical nature of physical reality, Bahá'í history, the Bahá'í Faith in Russia, and a violence-free society. Among the most significant of these early volumes were William Hatcher's Volume 2, *The Science of Religion*, and John Hatcher's Volume 3, *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*. Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian contributed essays to two further volumes in the series, on Auguste Forel for Volume 4 and on Tolstoy's appreciation of the Bahá'í Faith for Volume 5, *The Bahá'í Faith in Russia*. Peter Morgan became the series' editor beginning with Volume VI in 1979, also serving on the Executive Committee for thirteen years, from 1978 to 1991; his editorial work would help pave the way for the eventual establishment of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. Among other themes, these gave rigorous intellectual expression to the relationship between science and religion, a relationship that would remain central to the Association's work for decades to come. William Hatcher also presented at the annual conferences and lectured

on this theme and related subjects at several Canadian universities, including Mount Allison, the University of Moncton, and other Maritime institutions. The Association further launched a companion quarterly, *Bahá'í Notebook/Cahier Bahá'í*, designed to complement the monograph series with shorter articles, literary pieces, poetry, and music in both English and French. Morgan also went on to serve on the Executive Committee for thirteen years, from 1978 to 1991.

Beyond their scholarly value, these volumes aimed to describe the Bahá'í Faith to curious readers while correlating its teachings with questions of the age. The volume on the violence-free society, authored by Hossain Danesh and published in 1979 as a Special United Nations Year of the Child edition, initially printed 5,000 copies, with a second printing of 15,000. The volume was also presented at the United Nations in a joint project with the Bahá'í International Community, distributed to all participants at the World Congress on Mental Health in Salzburg, and featured at the Governor's Conference on Child Abuse in Reno, Nevada, demonstrating early on that the Association's publications were relevant to audiences well beyond the academy. Meanwhile, formal university presentations were taking shape across the country, with lectures delivered at institutions from the Maritime provinces to British Columbia. By the close of the Five Year Plan, plans for formal credit and non-credit courses at the Universities of British Columbia,

Toronto, and McGill were near completion. In the same year, four regional conferences were held for the first time in British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario-Quebec, and the Atlantic region, drawing participants from across the country.

In a letter dated 19 March 1979, the House of Justice commended the Association "for the continuing work . . . and for the valuable contributions to the knowledge of the Faith contained in the publications," describing the Canadian Association as "one of the very favourable outcomes of the Five Year Plan" and noting that it "bodes well for the maturation and eminence of the Canadian community." Also in 1979, at the inception of the Seven Year Plan, the House of Justice set as a further goal for the Canadian community to "expand the opportunities for teaching in Canadian institutions of higher learning and further develop the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith." By this point, membership had grown to nearly 500, including many from outside Canada. The Seven Year Plan called on the Association to build on that foundation. It was becoming clear that the Association's role within the broader work of the Faith would deepen with each successive Plan.

GROWTH AND CONSOLIDATION, 1980–1983

At the Fifth Annual Conference in Ottawa in 1980, the Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture was inaugurated.

Named for the distinguished Bahá'í historian and Hand of the Cause Hasan Balyuzi, the lecture was established in his memory as an annual feature of the Association's conference program for many years to come. The inaugural Balyuzi Lecture was delivered by Drs. Muḥammad and Abbas Afnan, with Hand of the Cause John Robarts and Douglas Martin among the other featured speakers at the conference. The same conference introduced an essay contest with categories for high school, university, and general participants aimed at encouraging Bahá'í scholarly engagement across age groups and levels of formal education.

Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum, Hand of the Cause of God, attended the Sixth Annual Conference in 1981. At this conference, she both concluded the annual gathering and opened the International Bahá'í Conference on Marriage and the Family that immediately followed it. The Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture that year featured Douglas Martin and Glenford Mitchell; Mitchell would be elected to the Universal House of Justice the following year. Members of the Continental Board of Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, and National Spiritual Assembly members from Canada and the United States were also present, underscoring the breadth of institutional support the Association had attracted.

These conferences coincided with a significant step in institutional consolidation. After nearly a year's search for a suitable property, the Association

took possession in March 1981 of 34 Copernicus Street in Ottawa, a building situated at the edge of the University of Ottawa campus. Following several months of renovation, the Centre for Bahá'í Studies began operating in 1982, housing the Association's secretariat, a reference library, classroom space for courses and lectures on the Faith, and the office of the Bahá'í International Health Agency. The Association now had a physical home from which to pursue its mandate in a steady and systematic way. The day-to-day work of the Association fell to Christine Zerbinis as Executive Secretary, whose sustained stewardship of the Association's operations and membership on the Executive Committee provided organizational continuity for nearly two decades.

Again in 1981, following a recommendation by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada and with the approval of the Universal House of Justice, the Association's name was changed to the Association for Bahá'í Studies. Its geographic scope was concurrently extended to cover all of North America. This change marked a fundamental reconception of the Association's role, shifting it from a national Canadian body to a continental organization with a correspondingly broader mandate and membership base. Canada's National Spiritual Assembly remained the supervising Assembly. The Executive Committee, however, would now be appointed annually by the National Spiritual Assemblies of Alaska, Canada, and the

United States—a tripartite structure that would continue for many years, until it was eventually clarified that Canada would be solely responsible for the appointments. In the years that followed, the Association paid close attention to the Alaskan Bahá'í community. Its distinctive circumstances—a significant Indigenous population and the geographic challenges of remote communities—remained a particular concern.

Running alongside the annual conferences was a series of international thematic conferences that reflected the Association's ambition to bring Bahá'í thought into sustained engagement with specific intellectual and social questions. The International Bahá'í Conference on Health and Healing in 1980, held immediately following the Fifth Annual Conference, drew presentations from across the health sciences, including several by Hossain Danesh, and generated sufficient scholarly material to merit publication in a subsequent volume of the *Bahá'í Studies Notebook*. It also led directly to a proposal for a Bahá'í International Health Agency, which was submitted to the Universal House of Justice and approved. The Agency was created under the auspices of the Association and began operations in July 1982 at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies, an early example of the Association giving rise to new institutional forms in response to specific fields of inquiry. The International Bahá'í Conference on Marriage and the Family in 1981—the gathering Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih

Khánum opened at the close of the Sixth Annual Conference—generated further proceedings for the *Notebook* series and produced a proposal for a Bahá'í Institute on Marriage and the Family, submitted to the National Spiritual Assembly for its consideration.

Over these years, membership grew from fewer than 500 at the close of the Five Year Plan to over 1,100 by 1981 and nearly 1,800 by 1983, with representation from Canada, the United States, and an expanding international membership. The publication program kept pace, with the monograph series reaching Volume 11 by 1983, while the *Bahá'í Studies Notebook* series, inaugurated in December 1980 to accommodate essays, articles, and poetry alongside more formal scholarly work, was preparing a double issue on marriage and the family. Importantly, the *Notebook* series welcomed creative writing alongside more formal scholarship, on the understanding that imaginative expression was a legitimate vehicle of Bahá'í inquiry, not merely a supplement to it.

In just over seven years, the Association had grown from a small gathering in Bolton, Ontario, into a continental organization with a physical home, an evolving publication program, an initial network of regional committees, and a conference program that spanned both Canada and the United States. It had catalyzed new institutional initiatives in health, in interfaith scholarship, and in campus engagement. The Eighth Annual Conference, held in Chicago in

1983, drew participants from thirteen countries, affirming the Association's emergence as a continental scholarly organization. The House of Justice took note of all these developments, commending the Association in a letter of 24 November 1982 for the "steadily increasing scope of its interests, for its expanding membership and for the valuable stimulus it is providing particularly to the North American Bahá'í community," and assuring it of prayers at the Sacred Threshold for divine confirmations to surround its work.

INTELLECTUAL LANDMARKS, 1984–1990

As the Association's American membership grew, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and its Office of External Affairs became an increasingly important source of institutional support. Mentioning only those who served for extensive periods, Sheila Banani—a Knight of Bahá'u'lláh—Robert Henderson, Richard Thomas, and Techeste Ahderom all served on the Executive Committee for many years, participating in conferences, symposiums, and other spaces as speakers or in other active capacities, and so helped deepen the Association's ties to the American Bahá'í community. Robert Stockman, who first became involved with the Association during this decade, would go on to join the Executive Committee in 1990, serving until 1998. Others from Canada would also contribute for many years, such as Nasser Sabet

and Ann Boyles, who volunteered with the Association before joining the Executive Committee, serving on the *Journal's* editorial committee at various points over the decades, and also collaborating with the Association as a Continental Counsellor. Duncan Hanks served from May 1984 to October 1988, intermittently, as an assistant to the Executive Director, with primary responsibilities for Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies (CABS), membership services, Centre management, and coordination of the Ninth through Thirteenth Annual Conferences.

The annual conferences also grew in both scale and institutional prominence. The Ninth Annual Conference, held at the Château Laurier in Ottawa in November 1984 on the theme "The Vision of Shoghi Effendi," included three Hands of the Cause—Dhikru'lláh Khádem, John Robarts, and 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá—and featured papers presented on behalf of Hand of the Cause 'Alí-Akbar Furútan and Universal House of Justice member David Hofman. A special session on peace featured Rodrigo Carazo Odio, the former president of Costa Rica, then serving as president of the United Nations University for Peace. The Tenth Annual Conference, held at the University of British Columbia in 1985, continued this momentum, with Counsellor Don Rogers and journalist and UN official Varindra Vittachi among the noted speakers.

The Eleventh annual conference at the University of Western Ontario in 1986 was the largest in the

Association's history to that point and for decades to come, drawing 2,000 participants. Centered on the theme of "Creating a New World Order," it took place in the wake of the previous year's issuance of the Universal House of Justice's statement, "The Promise of World Peace," addressed to the peoples of the world. The conference took as its animating premise the conviction that achieving world peace was not only possible but inevitable. The roster of speakers reflected the moment's significance and so is recorded here in full. Hand of the Cause Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm and Hand of the Cause Dr. Varqá brought the vision and perspective of their station to the proceedings. Adib Taherzadeh, who later served as a member of the Universal House of Justice, delivered the Balyuzi Lecture on "The Human Soul" and addressed the conference alongside the systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo, a member of the Club of Rome, whose work on global interconnectedness resonated directly with the conference's central themes and who also performed as a pianist at the Conference's Concert for Peace. Other speakers included Counsellor Don Rogers, as well as Husayn Banani, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Jane Faily, Bahia Mitchell, Mohan Lal Purushothaman, and Marion Woodman, alongside Ross Woodman of the University of Western Ontario, who presented on "The End of the World: Whatever Happened?" and who had served as a member of the first National Spiritual Assembly of Canada.

The conference also extended beyond its formal proceedings and included a Native American peace pipe ceremony attended by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, who later addressed the Persian-speaking Bahá'ís in Persian after the conference's official close. The program was additionally designed as a family event, offering a nursery, a children's peace conference for ages six to eleven, and a junior youth peace conference for ages twelve to fifteen, with Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, Dr. Laszlo, and Adib Taherzadeh among those who presented to the younger participants.

The following year, the Twelfth Annual Conference took place at Princeton University, with the theme "Converging Realities: An International Conference on Science, the Humanities, and Religion." This inaugurated the practice of alternating conferences between Canada and the United States, and brought together an impressive interdisciplinary group of scholars—including Ervin Laszlo, Karl Pribram, Anatol Rapoport, and Lowell Livezey—alongside accomplished Bahá'í contributors. Holding it at Princeton also signalled the Association's aspiration to engage with the mainstream academic world on its own ground.

In parallel with the annual conferences, periodic gatherings focused on specific themes extended the Association's reach into the wider academic world. In March 1984, the Association hosted the First International Symposium on the

Relationship of the Bahá'í Faith and Islam at McGill University, bringing together Bahá'í and Islamic studies scholars, including four prominent scholars from the wider academic community, and representing one of the earliest institutional dialogues at an academic level between the Bahá'í Faith and another religious tradition. The proceedings were published in 1990. Two years later, the Bahá'í-Marxist Dialogue at Louhelen Bahá'í School in January 1986 took the conversation into even more challenging intellectual terrain. One member of the Association's executive described it as demonstrating "the intellectual force and respect which the Bahá'í teachings so readily command even when perceived by those who operate within the confines of a secular and materialistic vision of reality," and as identifying "important areas of challenge which Bahá'í scholarship will have to take up as the Faith begins to engage directly the attention of proponents of some of the most powerful of the current world doctrines." The proceedings, published in 1987, contained papers by three Marxist and three Bahá'í academics.

The regional committees also contributed to this outward reach. In November 1987, a conference on interracial unity was held at Louhelen Bahá'í School, and in December of that year, the New England Regional Committee organized a conference on the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity at Harvard Divinity School. Altogether, these initiatives confirmed that the Association

had the capacity to convene events with significant academic credibility, to attract scholars from beyond the Bahá'í community, and to foster substantive engagement with diverse intellectual traditions.

The mid-1980s, moreover, brought several additional milestones in the Association's development. Professional interest sections were formally established in the arts, education, marriage and family, and human habitat, joining the Bahá'í International Health Agency, which had been operating since 1982. Among the significant publications of this period was *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* by William Hatcher and Douglas Martin, published in 1985 by Harper and Row—a work that brought the history, teachings, and institutions of the Faith to a broad general and academic readership and became one of the most widely read introductions to the Faith in the English language. The 1986 co-publication with Fitzhenry-Whiteside of *Unity: The Creative Foundation of Peace* by Hossain Danesh, and its distribution to Canadian bookstores, added to this reach, placing Bahá'í intellectual work in the hands of readers well beyond the Bahá'í community. Legal incorporation as a non-profit organization in June 1986 allowed the Association to issue tax receipts directly and operate with greater financial stability, and the constitution adopted at incorporation opened membership to all rather than limiting it to registered Bahá'ís. By the end of the Seven Year Plan in 1986, fourteen international affiliates were

in operation across five continents, with the number reaching nineteen by 1990. Each affiliate was an independent body operating under its own National Spiritual Assembly, with some, like the North American Association itself, serving Bahá'í communities spanning more than one country, and all connected to the North American Association through a shared sense of scholarly purpose.

All of this unfolded within a framework of guidance from the House of Justice that gave the Association direction and significance. A letter dated 1 January 1984 observed that the Association's progress "has been truly remarkable," that its activity "inevitably . . . has international ramifications, especially in so close-knit a community as the Bahá'í world," and that the House of Justice felt "it is providential that this particular aspect of the work of the Faith should have come to light under the aegis and with the example of the Canadian Bahá'í community." A year later, its letter dated 21 January 1985 expressed its "high commendation for the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies," noting that its activities had "already been extremely valuable for the Cause, and can only increase in significance and value in the years ahead." The letter further expressed confidence that the Association's influence on Bahá'í scholarship in general and on the prestige of the Faith in the eyes of the academic world would "grow accordingly" as the international affiliates developed. The goals of the Six Year Plan, outlined in a letter of

the House of Justice dated 26 February 1986 to the Bahá'í world, included specific objectives directly relevant to the Association's work. These were to "foster appreciation of the Faith in scholarly circles by developing Bahá'í scholarship, by endeavoring to have the Faith included in the curricula and textbooks of schools and universities, and by other means," and to "develop and foster Bahá'í scholarship and lend support to the Associations for Bahá'í Studies."

Then came what many would regard as the most consequential institutional development of the entire period. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* was launched in 1988 as a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary quarterly that provides Bahá'í scholarship with a permanent, academically credible home. The Executive Committee decided from the outset that the *Journal* should be published trilingually in English, French, and Spanish—with manuscripts published in the language of submission and abstracts in the other two—a commitment that reflected the continental character of the Association's aspirations. The House of Justice later expressed appreciation that the Editorial Board had ensured that "not only the content of the *Journal* but its editorial style reflects appropriately the principles of the Faith," observing that "the scrupulous care shown by the *Journal* in this regard, and particularly in its review policy, has doubtless contributed much to winning the publication the widespread and well-merited admiration it enjoys in the Bahá'í world."

The work of the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada continued to evolve across these years. In 1990, thirty-three Campus Associations were operating across Canada, with annual national meetings bringing together representatives of the Association, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, and members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board. By this point, the national CABS newsletter was helping give the network a common voice.

During the same period, the annual conferences took up some of the most pressing social questions of the age. Over 800 participated in the Fourteenth Annual Conference, held in Irvine, California, in September 1989 on "Full Partnership: An International Conference on the Equality of Women and Men," with Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull among the noted speakers, bringing an Indigenous voice and perspective to the conference's central themes. Louise Profeit-LeBlanc's presence at both the 1988 and 1989 conferences likewise signalled an evolving Indigenous engagement with the Association's work that predated the formal establishment of dedicated Indigenous spaces. The Fifteenth Annual Conference in Atlanta in 1990 on "Models of Racial Unity" drew 750 participants and generated a major publication, Richard W. Thomas's *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, later revised and republished in 1993. Given the particular significance of

the conference's theme, its full roster of noted speakers is recorded here: Joy Berry, Hossain B. Danesh, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Lloyd Davis, Francis Edwards, Wilma Ellis, Ruth Simms Hamilton, Robert Henderson, Everette Lee, Kevin Locke, B.G. Ramcharan, William Roberts, David Smith, and Richard W. Thomas. The Midwestern Regional Committee's conference on Robert Hayden's poetry in February 1990, developed in collaboration with the University of Michigan's English Department, which contributed financially to the conference, reaffirmed the Association's capacity to partner with mainstream academic institutions around both the arts and questions of race and social justice.

In view of such developments, a new position was created that year, with Pierre-Yves Mocquais appointed Academic Director, a service he would later resume for a second term from 2007 to 2014. In this role, he worked directly with CABS and helped identify speakers who could demonstrate how to present the Faith in an academically appropriate way and connect the Writings with their respective disciplines. His service to the Association extended well beyond this appointment, serving for many years on the JBS Editorial Committee as well as helping to sustain a climate of productive scholarly inquiry that remained attentive to the centrality of the Covenant to the Association's work.

Membership of the Association now stood at 2,331 paid members, having peaked at 2,409 the previous year,

with representation from across North America and nineteen international affiliates. It had, by this point, evolved considerably from its origins as a vehicle for formal university presentations into a multidimensional scholarly organization with a flagship journal, a continental conference program, a growing roster of international affiliates, and a demonstrated capacity for regular intellectual engagement with the wider world.

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE, 1991–1999

In a letter dated 25 December 1990 written on its behalf, the House of Justice commended the efforts the Association was making, with the support of the Counsellors and National Assemblies of North America, to expand its activities and increase its membership. It moreover confirmed that the Association had an important role to play in fostering Bahá'í scholarship and in demonstrating its value in reinforcing the Bahá'í community's efforts to reach diverse strata of North American society. In doing so, it explicitly linked the Association's scholarly work to the community-building and outreach efforts of the broader Bahá'í community. This connection would prove defining throughout the 1990s and beyond.

The following year, in a letter dated 2 February 1992, the House of Justice expressed its joy at two major courses on the Bahá'í Faith being offered at Canadian universities and conveyed its

hope that Bahá'í groups on other campuses would work to establish similar courses. The Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies continued their work of organizing speaker tours, supporting student groups, and cultivating a Bahá'í scholarly presence at Canadian universities throughout this period. To this end, Neil Macmillan was appointed as national CABS coordinator in 1996. In the latter years of the decade, he helped launch an electronic newsletter and facilitated a cross-country speaking tour for William S. Hatcher that reached thirty-one communities from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, undertaken at the express request of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. He also coordinated a separate tour under the auspices of the Bahá'í Council of Ontario in which Will van den Hoonaard visited eight campuses across the province.

The Association's annual conference was not held in 1992, as all energies and attention were devoted to the Bahá'í World Congress in New York. The annual conferences of this period otherwise addressed a wide range of themes. Consistent with the theme of the Congress, the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's passing was marked at the Sixteenth Annual Conference in Victoria in 1991 with a focus on His life and Writings. The Seventeenth conference in Montréal in 1993 took up spirituality in relation to personal and social transformation and was accompanied by a symposium on *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which had just been published in English for the first time, bringing

together scholars to reflect on the significance of this central Text of the Faith. The Montréal conference also marked a high point in the inclusion of the arts in the Association's conferences, building on the depth, breadth, and stirring artistic content of the 1992 Bahá'í World Congress. A cross-section of artists—actors, painters, dancers, and musicians, many of them youth—created an original and bold stage production drawing on the Writings, particularly the Seven Valleys.

Then, across the following three years, the Association undertook an ambitious and sustained thematic project. The "Anarchy into Order" series ran from 1994 to 1996, tracing a thematic arc from humanity's role and destiny (Cambridge, 1994) to uniting the nations (San Francisco, 1995) to crafting better governance (Edmonton, 1996). Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull contributed as a noted speaker at the 1994 Cambridge conference, marking her third appearance at an ABS annual conference. Also present was Paul Chartrand, a member of Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, whose participation underscored both the continuity of Indigenous engagement with the Association's work and its capacity to attract Indigenous leaders of national prominence. This three-year engagement with questions of world order was among the most sustained and thematically unified the Association had yet undertaken.

As this work was unfolding, the House of Justice was also clarifying

the Association's place within the larger institutional landscape. Its letter of 10 October 1994 to all National Spiritual Assemblies identified the Association as one of a range of voluntary Bahá'í associations and agencies that would often be in a position to act as task forces, assuming responsibility for specific projects under the direction of their respective National Spiritual Assemblies in service to the community's larger goals.

This institutional framing proved directly relevant to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada when, in response to the launch of the Four Year Plan in 1996, it assigned to the Association the following set of tasks: assisting Regional Institute Committees in developing training institutes; supporting deepening on the Covenant; intensifying work in external affairs in areas including human rights, the status of women, and moral development; and collaborating on international service. The Association was thus called upon to function not only as a scholarly society but as an active participant in the systematic development of the Bahá'í community. In response, its 1997–98 annual report opened with a statement describing its role in facilitating consultations that could generate new methods for studying the Writings and applying them to society's needs. The image invoked was that of a laboratory, where theoreticians and practitioners could engage in genuine consultation rather than in debates on the merits of competing approaches. The report identified five areas toward which this

work was directed: the development of Bahá'í scholarship as such, the nurturing of Bahá'í students and faculty, the maturation of Bahá'í communities, the raising up of educational institutions, and the transformation of leaders and decision-makers. These framed the Association not simply as a learned society serving its members, but as an agency with responsibilities reaching well beyond its own constituency.

The conferences of this period illustrated these priorities in action. San Francisco in 1995 had already demonstrated what such purposeful engagement could look like: the city was chosen because it had been the site of the signing of the United Nations Charter fifty years earlier, and the conference brought Bahá'í perspectives on multilateralism and global governance into a public conversation of particular historical significance, connecting directly with the post-Cold War debates about the architecture of international order. The following year, the Edmonton conference, focused on crafting better governance, closed the "Anarchy into Order" series with a forward-looking examination of institutional design. A year later still, the Twenty-First Annual Conference, held in Washington, D.C., in November 1997, focused on fostering human rights and featured a range of scholars, diplomats, and public figures. The Balyuzi Lecture was delivered by Judge Dorothy W. Nelson of California on international human rights law, while the keynote address was given by Suheil Bushrui, the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of

Maryland. The following September, the Twenty-Second conference, held in Montréal, took up the theme of the Covenant, featuring a day-long series of panel discussions among adherents of several different religions, exploring how the concept of Covenant is understood across religious traditions. The following September, the Twenty-Second conference, held in Montréal, addressed the theme of the Covenant, featuring a day-long series of panel discussions among adherents of several different religions, exploring how the concept of Covenant is understood across religious traditions. William S. Hatcher delivered the Balyuzi Lecture, "Love, Power, and Justice," on the theme of his book of the same title, published in 2002. Counsellor David Smith presented, alongside Meim Smith, on "The Expression of the Covenant in Marriage and Family Life," and Counsellor Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian delivered a plenary address on "The Universal House of Justice: A Model of Governance." The decade closed with the Twenty-Third Annual Conference, held in Tempe, Arizona, in June 1999 on the theme "Sacred Justice: Uniting the Human Family," which continued this engagement with questions of justice and social transformation, with Richard Thomas delivering the Balyuzi Lecture on the state of race relations within the American Bahá'í community.

The decade also saw further organizational consolidation, alongside its challenges. By the time of the 1997 Washington conference,

the Association's special interest groups, covering fields including Arts, Agriculture, Marriage and Family, Religious Studies, and Education, had become an established feature of its work, with five groups holding workshops there. At its August 1998 meeting, the following year, the Executive Committee adopted formal criteria for establishing a special interest group, requiring a petition of at least nine members and a modest administrative fee and setting minimum expectations for a newsletter, membership directory, and annual report. The criteria applied to groups formed from that point forward, leaving the standing of the five already active groups unaffected. At the same time, membership, which had climbed from 360 in 1979 to a peak of 2,409 in 1989, had declined steadily through the middle and later years of the 1990s, reaching 1,833 by 1998 and 1,754 by 1999. Concurrently, of the thirteen regional committees that had existed earlier in the decade, only four remained active by 1996–97. The Executive Committee was candid in its own assessments, noting that the membership base would need to grow substantially to sustain the Association's administrative operations and reach financial independence. Part of the assessment was that the energies of the Four Year Plan were drawing members and resources toward new priorities, and that the regional committee structure had contracted accordingly. This period also coincided with broader issues arising in the scholarly community whose implications for the Association

are described in the fourth standout theme in the section below.

Even as the regional structure contracted, the Association maintained specific commitments to the Alaskan Bahá'í community, with plans to support programs addressing alcoholism, racial unity, oral history, and distance learning, in recognition of the distinctive challenges and opportunities of serving remote and Indigenous communities. A longstanding member of the Executive Committee, Haifa Sadighi, from Alaska, represented these interests directly during her years of service from 1990 to 1999. As the decade closed, a significantly reconstituted Executive Committee, consulting with both National Spiritual Assemblies, embarked on a process of setting new goals and direction, with emerging consensus around further integrating Bahá'í scholarship and the general work of the Association with the current needs of humanity.

The broader picture nonetheless pointed to an organization of wide reach. There were twenty-seven international affiliate associations worldwide, from Argentina and Brazil to Singapore, Russia, and Japan, each operating independently under its own National Spiritual Assembly but connected by a shared sense of scholarly purpose. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* was indexed in multiple academic databases; the Association held full membership in the Council of Editors of Learned Journals and the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association; and a web presence was established in

1999—demonstrated to the membership at a plenary session of that year's conference in Phoenix—connected members to international affiliates and Campus Associations. In the spring of 1999, moreover, the Association published June Manning Thomas's book *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*. Thomas received an Association Award for Excellence at the 2005 Cambridge conference, and her book was republished twenty-five years later with a new preface, a testament to its enduring relevance.

FOUR STANDOUT THEMES, 1975–1999

Looking back across the founding period from the vantage point of 1999, the scale of what had been built in just over two decades was striking. A small gathering of eighty people at Cedar Glen in 1976 had grown into a continental organization with over 2,400 members at its peak, a peer-reviewed journal indexed in multiple academic databases, twenty-seven international affiliates on five continents, a physical home at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa, a network of Campus Associations across Canada, and a conference program that had drawn participants from across North America and beyond—including 2,000 at its largest gathering in 1986. The Association had hosted landmark dialogues with Islamic, Marxist, and Christian scholars, partnered with mainstream academic institutions, and produced publications that reached audiences well beyond

the Bahá'í community. All of this had been accomplished while remaining consistently attentive to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, which had affirmed the Association's work during each successive Plan. Yet the organization was now asking, with characteristic candor, whether its structures and strategies remained adequate to the scope of its ambitions. A number of themes from this period would continue to shape the Association's development in the years ahead, and remain relevant today. Four are mentioned here.

The first and most vital is the pattern of guidance from the Universal House of Justice, which was essential to the development of the Association's identity, vision, and purpose. At each successive Plan the House of Justice had either initiated, affirmed, or expanded the Association's mandate, and the letters accumulated over two decades—ranging, for example, from the 1979 commendation of the Association's work and publications, its efflorescence hailed as one of the favorable outcomes of the Five Year Plan, to the 1984 description of the Association's emergence as “providential,” to the 1996 praise of the *Journal's* editorial standards as contributing to its “widespread and well-merited admiration”—reveal an Association whose work was consistently understood by the highest Bahá'í authority as integral to the advancement of the Faith.

The second theme is the significance of the institutional development of 1981, when the Association expanded

from a Canadian association to a North American and then internationally connected body. This development in scale, accountability, and ambition shaped everything that followed. The 1984 letter's description of this development as having "international ramifications" situated it within the broader unfolding of the Faith's engagement with humanity's intellectual life. By 1999, with twenty-seven international affiliates and the *Journal* indexed in multiple academic databases, the implications of that development were becoming more apparent.

The third theme is the creative tension between serving a broad Bahá'í membership and functioning as a vehicle for rigorous scholarly engagement. Compounding this tension was the question of how to engage the mainstream academic world most effectively, given the largely materialistic framework that permeates that world. The 1998 Executive Committee minutes reveal that the organization was actively wrestling with such questions, and that the search for the right balance was not always easy. The Islam-Bahá'í Symposium of 1984, the Marxist-Bahá'í Dialogue of 1986, the Princeton conference of 1987, and the launch of the *Journal* with its insistence on rigorous peer review and editorial standards reflecting the principles of the Faith each offered opportunities to test the approach. Indeed, the House of Justice's own framing of the Association's role in fostering scholarship while reaching "the diverse strata of North American society" suggested

that this tension was not a problem to be resolved but a dynamic to be explored—advising that the Association not attempt "to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take" and instead "strive to develop . . . respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavours" (19 October 1993), guidance later gathered, together with related correspondence from the Universal House of Justice, into the 1999 compilation *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*.

The immediate occasion for this compilation was an episode of stand-out significance: the emergence of a campaign led by certain individuals who sought to replace the interpretive authority established by the Covenant with a kind of academic authority attributed to those technically trained in Middle East studies, and thereby to alter the essential character of the Faith. This relates to the fourth stand-out theme, namely, the relationship between scholarship and the Covenant. Conducted through internet discussion groups, this campaign tested the capacity of the Association to sustain a climate of productive inquiry while remaining attentive to the centrality of the Covenant to all aspects of the Faith's intellectual life. In response to this campaign, the House of Justice clarified several fundamental issues, including the relationship between scholarly freedom and institutional authority, the role and formation of individual conscience—noting that conscience is not an unchangeable absolute and can represent an accumulation of

culturally absorbed prejudices whose influence may go unrecognized—and the appropriate means of expressing differing views. The compilation made clear that, while individual exploration of the Bahá'í teachings is highly valued for its potential to contribute to community discourse, the resolution of differences of understanding on fundamental questions is not to be found through continued discussion alone but by referring to the Universal House of Justice, whose authority in such matters is established by the Covenant itself. The Association's leadership engaged deeply with these questions in close consultation with the Continental Board of Counsellors, seeking to strengthen both the intellectual vitality and the spiritual foundations of its work.

Related to both these latter themes, the compilation also spoke directly to the broader methodological challenge of avoiding “materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to the very nature of the Faith,”¹ and affirming that “truth in such fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded and if discourse is limited by a basically deterministic view of the world.”² An earlier letter in the same compilation, from 5 October 1993, observed that “no segment of humanity is so well equipped as the Bahá'í community to take a leading role” in developing scholarly

paradigms capable of engaging spiritual, moral, and cultural realities, describing this as “a priceless opportunity of service and achievement.” Learning to act on that conviction in active collaboration with academics from the wider society, and with full attentiveness to the framework of the Covenant, would remain the very essence of the work of the Association.

CONSOLIDATION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS, 2000–2013

The years between 2000 and 2013 were largely devoted to consolidating the Association's understanding of its role and purpose. It was a time when the Association was exploring the implications of what had already been built as well as the challenges and opportunities that had emerged. The founding and earlier generations had established the conferences, the *Journal*, the affiliates, and the regional infrastructure; the question now was how to further animate these structures and strengthen the Association's unity of vision.

Related to the third theme mentioned in the previous section, one constant throughout this period was the effort to communicate that the Association is not only for academics, that Bahá'í scholarship is not only the academic study of the Faith, and that scholarship can and should take diverse forms. The Executive Committee regularly studied the 1999 compilation on Scholarship and drew on key guidance throughout this period. Among the most frequently consulted was the letter dated 19

1 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 20 July 1997.

2 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 8 February 1998.

October 1993, written on behalf of the House of Justice, which emphasized that the terms “Bahá'í scholarship” and “Bahá'í scholars” should not be used in an exclusive sense that would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. The House of Justice clarified that the goal was to create a Bahá'í community in which the members encourage each other, where there is respect for accomplishment, and where it is recognized that every individual is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Questions were also raised during this period about what constitutes Bahá'í scholarship in the context of the annual conference: how to ensure that serious scholarly engagement remained central while also integrating the conference more fully into the ongoing life of the community and the priorities of the global Plans, how to make the conference part of an ongoing process of learning rather than a standalone event, and how to engage young scholars and connect their development to a life of service. These and related questions would occupy the Association for years to come.

With such questions in mind, the Executive Committee adopted a vision statement in 2002 that was further refined in 2004. This statement envisioned the Association as a vibrant, diverse, Covenant-centered, service-oriented organization. Its aim was to foster new paradigms of Bahá'í scholarship across

a wide range of disciplines, in a spirit of inclusiveness, openness, and creativity. The statement called for ongoing university courses on the Faith, flourishing Campus Associations, thriving regional committees, and systematic mentorship of young scholars. A letter dated 22 February 2005, written on behalf of the House of Justice, provided further clarification that would sharpen the Association's self-understanding: that associations for Bahá'í studies remain essentially programs of the Bahá'í community itself, and it would be misleading to imagine them as simply replicas of professional associations familiar in present-day academic life. Thus, neither a purely academic body nor a purely community organization, the Association occupied a distinctive institutional space. Learning to inhabit that space with confidence and clarity was itself part of the work of this period.

Also integral to this learning was the Association's work with young scholars. A letter dated 25 February 2005 from the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, subsequently shared with the Canadian National Assembly, emphasized the importance of the period of youth for the formation of scholarly habits and attitudes. It noted that those who display scholarly interests will begin to adopt the conceptual framework within which they can pursue such activity throughout their lives, and stressed that all such development should be grounded in unreserved participation in the Faith's global plans. This guidance deepened

the Association's commitment to engaging young scholars and nurturing their development as a form of service to the Cause.

At the same time, the annual conference remained the Association's most visible activity throughout this period, and attendance grew substantially. As noted in the Introduction, this retrospective cannot mention every eminent individual who contributed to the conference's rich program over these years or those which followed; in the interest of concision, the account here largely limits itself to some of the members of senior Bahá'í institutions and various notable speakers from the wider society. The reader is warmly encouraged to consult Appendix A for a full listing of noted speakers at each conference, including the many distinguished Balyuzi Memorial Lecturers, who brought such intellectual rigor and spiritual insight to the proceedings, uplifting all who were assembled.

The Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference in Mississauga in 2000 marked the Association's twenty-fifth anniversary, dedicated to the memory of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, with Violette Nakhjavani offering a tribute to her life. In the years that immediately followed, the conferences in Seattle in 2001 and Mississauga in 2002, both on the theme of "Towards a Spiritual Civilization," drew among the highest attendance in the Association's history to that point. The 2001 Seattle conference was blessed by the presence of Universal House of Justice member Ian Semple, a founding member

of that institution in 1963, alongside Counsellors Eugene Andrews and Rebequa Getahoun Murphy, and the Balyuzi Lecture was delivered jointly by architects Fariborz Sahba and Hossein Amanat on the significance of the buildings on the Arc. The following year in Mississauga, Udo Schaefer delivered the Balyuzi Lecture on the theological foundations of Bahá'í ethics, Counsellor Shahriar Razavi addressed "Learning as the Foundation of a Spiritual Civilization," and Counsellor Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian closed the conference with a plenary reflection on "Materialism and Discontent."

This momentum carried into the years that followed, which regularly drew over a thousand participants and attracted many contributors from within and beyond the Bahá'í community. The 2003 San Francisco conference on "Religion and Community in a Time of Crisis" brought eminent social theorist Philip Selznick into conversation with Bahá'í perspectives on civility and community, alongside Ann Boyles on "Binding Together a Fragmented World." The next year, at the 2004 Calgary conference, the Twenty-Second Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture was delivered by Ali Nakhjavani, a recently retired member of the Universal House of Justice and one of the first members of that institution in 1963, whose lecture on Shoghi Effendi's Ten Year Crusade was subsequently published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. That same year, Counsellor David Smith, who had presented at the Association's second

annual conference back in 1977 and would go on to contribute to its conferences and other gatherings over the course of nearly three decades, spoke on "Translating Knowledge into Action." The same plenary session also featured architect Siamak Hariri, who spoke on "The Emergence of the Design for the Bahá'í Temple for South America," then under construction in Santiago, Chile. Moving to Cambridge in 2005, the conference on "Science, Religion, and Social Transformation" opened with Counsellor Stephen Birkland's official conference welcome and continued the next morning with recently retired Universal House of Justice member Douglas Martin's plenary address, "The Bahá'í Community and the Life of the Mind." Returning to San Francisco in 2006, the conference on "Religion and the Evolution of Consciousness" featured the Twenty-Fourth Balyuzi Lecture by Janet Khan on "Rank and Station: Reflections on the Life of Bahíyyih Khánum," as well as Universal House of Justice member Peter Khan, who urged Bahá'ís not to confuse the priority given to core activities with exclusivity at the expense of acquiring knowledge, citing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the acquisition of knowledge as an "inescapable duty."

The 2007 Mississauga conference, on the theme "Scholarship and Community Building," included a plenary interview with Ross Woodman, Professor Emeritus at the University of Western Ontario and a member of the first National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in 1948, in which he explored

the relationship between Bahá'í ideas and academic scholarship and reflected on his long service to university Bahá'í communities. Counsellor Dan Scott, who had recently served on the National CABS Coordinating Committee before being appointed a Counsellor, also opened and closed the conference's special faculty and student development sessions. The following year, the 2008 San Diego conference drew participants from twenty-five countries, the largest international representation the Association had yet seen, and featured former Universal House of Justice member Hushmand Fatheazam delivering the Balyuzi Lecture on the scope and value of Bahá'í scholarship, alongside House of Justice member Paul Lample, who addressed learning and the unfoldment of the Bahá'í community. That emphasis on learning carried into the 2009 Washington conference on "Environments," where Counsellor Ann Boyles keynoted the special program for university faculty and students, addressing the role of scholarship in the context of the global plans of the Faith. The 2010 Vancouver conference on "Rethinking Human Nature" was the largest gathering since 1986 and opened with a talk by former Universal House of Justice member Hooper Dunbar, "The Dual Character of Human Reality," which explored the distinction between humanity's animal and spiritual natures and the transformative power of Divine Revelation in bringing forth a "new race of men." This inquiry deepened the next year at the 2011 San Francisco conference

on “Transforming Habits of Thought,” which was inspired directly by the 28 December 2010 message of the Universal House of Justice and reflected the Association’s growing attentiveness to the guidance emerging from the Plans and its implications for Bahá’í scholarship. That trajectory culminated in the Thirty-Sixth conference, held in Montréal in 2012 to mark the centenary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to North America. Fittingly, given the conference’s theme, “The Vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for North America,” former Universal House of Justice member Douglas Martin opened the gathering with a plenary address titled “A Hundred Years On,” while the conference as a whole brought together Bahá’í scholars alongside prominent figures from the wider community, including Aboriginal rights advocate Louise Mandell and former Canadian Minister of Justice Irwin Cotler.

Publishing milestones punctuated this period as well. Nader Saiedi’s 2000 publication, *Logos and Civilization*, was described as the year’s outstanding event in ABS publishing. In 2008, the Association entered a co-publishing partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University Press to launch a new Bahá’í Studies series, the first volume of which was Saiedi’s *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Both were significant markers of growing integration between Bahá’í scholarship and mainstream academic publishing.

Throughout this period, the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* continued to appear,

maintaining its commitment to rigorous peer review and providing a sustained platform for Bahá’í scholarly engagement across a wide range of disciplines. Wendy Heller led the *Journal* as editor for some six years while simultaneously serving on the Executive Committee—a dual commitment that placed the *Journal*’s editorial direction in close and continuous dialogue with the Association’s broader institutional life. In those years, under the guidance of the Executive Committee’s vision, the *Journal* deepened its identity as a rigorous and distinctive venue for Bahá’í scholarly inquiry, attracting contributions across a widening range of disciplines and establishing the editorial standards on which subsequent editors would build. Early on in this time, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada approved a restructuring of the *Journal*’s editorial committee, and Anne Pearson and John Hatcher served alongside Heller for a period of time on both the Executive Committee and the editorial committee. After Heller had completed this service, the Executive Committee subsequently made various editorial arrangements before John Hatcher was appointed the *Journal*’s full-time editor in October 2013.

A consequential development that had begun in the 1990s and continued to unfold in earnest during these years was a further reconceptualization of the Association’s identity, its direction and activities, including its publications. This reconceptualization moved away from the notion of “Bahá’í Studies” as a minor, niche subsection of Middle

Eastern, Islamic, and Religious studies, characterized by the same scope of subject matter, approaches, and methodologies. In its place, the Association worked to broaden and redefine the meaning of Bahá'í Studies, applying a distinctively Bahá'í perspective to constructively critique the assumptions underlying academic approaches and methodologies, including the traditional divide between theory and application, with its attendant devaluation of applied work. This meant, while still embracing textual and historical scholarship, encouraging work focused on applying the teachings to humanity's needs, and developing approaches and methods that would serve this end.

During this time, the special interest groups system continued to develop during these years while Young Adult Scholarship Conferences were organized at the request of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, the first being held near Chicago in April 2005, followed by a second in Seattle that November, and others in subsequent years. In addition, the Patricia Locke Scholarship was inaugurated at the 2003 conference in memory of the distinguished Indigenous rights advocate. The first recipient was Jordan Bighorn, of Lakota heritage, and the scholarship was awarded for many years, in line with the Association's commitment to Indigenous inclusion.

Furthermore, the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada had, by this period, grown into a national network. At their peak, they

extended to some forty-eight institutions across every province, with twenty to thirty functioning at any given time, organizing conferences, speaker tours, study circles, and public events that brought Bahá'í scholarship into the life of Canadian campuses in a sustained and visible way. From August 2000, this network was supported by a National CABS Coordinating Committee, a subcommittee of the Executive Committee, whose early members included Neil Macmillan, the national CABS coordinator since 1996, and Anne Pearson, a member of the Executive Committee and its liaison to the NCCC. As the Plans evolved and new initiatives emerged to serve the same university population, a range of questions arose about how CABS could best be integrated into the larger pattern of community building, including questions of constitutional governance, clarity of mandate, and coherence with other initiatives serving the same university population. Students navigating these campus associations often faced practical tensions as well, from university requirements governing club elections and membership to occasional uncertainty about which Bahá'í institution or agency held primary responsibility for guiding their work. The national coordinating structure that had supported them was thus gradually reconceived, with responsibility for campus activities devolving toward Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Association focusing its energies on students and young adults more broadly. Over three decades, these

associations had organized a significant body of activity, including conferences, publications, speaker tours, and mentoring relationships, all of which contributed to the development of Bahá'í scholarly engagement on Canadian campuses.

Overall, these were years of vitality but also of unresolved questions, including, as noted above, how to make the annual conference part of an ongoing process of learning rather than an isolated, relatively passive event, and how to effectively relate scholarship to the programs and educational experience of the training institute. The last of these concerns was addressed directly in a letter dated 24 April 2008 written on behalf of the House of Justice, which affirmed that Bahá'í scholarly activity is far from being a distraction from the worldwide effort to advance the growth of the Faith and is instead “a powerful reinforcement to that endeavor and a valuable source of new enquirers.” This affirmation gave the Association a clear answer to those who had been uncertain whether Bahá'í scholarly engagement had a place in a community increasingly focused on the core activities of the Plans.

Two other threads pointed toward opportunities that had not yet been fully realized. Indigenous Bahá'ís had been present at Association conferences from the early years, and the professional interest seminar in Indigenous studies, established in the 1980s, had represented an early and meaningful recognition that Indigenous intellectual perspectives deserved a dedicated

space. The question of how to deepen and sustain that engagement was one the Association was still learning how to answer. Similarly, the Arts special interest group was among the most active of the SIGs, and the 2010 conference saw the appointment of an Arts Task Force to develop a more integrated arts program. This represented a tangible step toward weaving artistic inquiry into the conference's main intellectual program.

The final years of this period brought related clarification. A letter dated 4 January 2009, written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, described participation in the discourses of society as a dimension of Bahá'í community life. The Ridván 2010 message that followed elaborated on this theme, explaining that as the friends are drawn further into the life of society, social action and participation in the discourses of society emerge as “two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity.” This was a clarification with profound implications for the Association, making it increasingly apparent that engaging in discourse at the level of academic and professional fields would include the kind of scholarship the Association existed to foster. The message of 28 December 2010 further developed these two areas, exploring the nature of social action at the grassroots and the conditions under which the friends' capacity to enter into conversation with people of varied backgrounds and interests would grow. Even as this guidance was unfolding,

the Executive Committee proposed a conference theme on participating in the discourses of society, a theme that was ultimately deemed premature at the time, but that nevertheless foreshadowed the path to be followed.

Concurrently, the Association initiated other activities directly related to the theme of participating in discourses of pressing social concern, including sessions on overcoming racism at Louhelen in 2010 and a symposium in Vancouver in 2011 on questions of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The emergence of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) and its seminars for undergraduate and graduate students, which had begun serving university students and recent graduates across North America from around 2007–08, was a complementary and significant step forward. ISGP graduates were beginning to flow into Association spaces, bringing with them a grounding in the conceptual framework that would prove invaluable going forward.

Taken together, these currents brought the Association to a point where it was eager for further guidance on advancing its work in relation to the emerging context of the Plans. It was in this spirit—following consultations with the Executive Committee—that the National Assembly of Canada sought the guidance of the Universal House of Justice on how the Association could advance participation in discourse and on the potentially highly complementary roles of the Association and ISGP.

On 24 July 2013, the reply arrived. It would prove to be one of the most clarifying moments in the Association's development—deepening, focusing, and giving fresh impetus to what it had been building across the preceding decades.

WORKING WITHIN THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, 2013–2026

The letter of 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, arrived shortly before the August 2013 annual conference and just days before the hotel contract for the 2014 conference was to be signed. The Executive Committee immediately turned to studying and consulting on its implications.

The letter opened by acknowledging the Association's contribution over nearly four decades, affirming the value of what had been built and situating its history within the context of the community's evolving pattern of activity and the Plans. It noted that it was timely to reflect on the Association's years of experience, the coherence of its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís are engaged, and the possibilities for the most productive avenues of endeavor going forward. The House of Justice suggested that the Association's endeavors could be conceived as a means to enhance the friends' abilities to explore opportunities related to their scholarly interests, promoting learning among a wide range of believers across disciplines

through the specialized settings it creates. It offered concrete suggestions about seminars, special interest groups (SIGS), and the reimagining of existing activities, and closed with a vision of rising generations entering diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavor, to which arena the Association could offer an important contribution. It further situated the Association's work within the framework that shapes the activities of expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in society's discourses. The Association's evolving effort to understand and apply the elements of this framework to its work is explored in depth in the companion essay "Approach to Learning" in this volume.

Shortly after, a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Assembly, dated 1 August 2013, specifically suggested that "the experience of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), although still in its formative stages, may offer some useful insights for consideration," and noted that Haleh Arbab, Research Director of ISGP, would be at the Irvine conference and would be available for consultation. The Executive Committee met with Haleh Arbab on the day before the 2013 conference, along with Michael Karlberg, a close collaborator with ISGP who had previously served on the ABS Executive Committee. This encounter would prove valuable to the Association's subsequent development. A further pivotal moment came just prior to the 2014 conference, when

the Executive Committee undertook a two-and-a-half-day intensive engagement with the ISGP graduate seminar materials facilitated by Michael Karlberg, deepening the Committee's understanding of the conceptual framework and reinforcing the importance of returning to the guidance as that understanding developed. The Committee also undertook to draft a document that would clarify, in a conscious and progressive manner, the elements of the framework most relevant to the Association's work. Doing so raised questions such as: What does organic development look like in scholarship? What does learning in action mean in an academic context? Such questions would shape the Committee's reflection over the years that followed. These conceptual developments, moreover, unfolded alongside a series of practical institutional changes, described below, as the Association worked to bring its activities into closer alignment with the new guidance.

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

As the practical work of responding to the 2013 guidance unfolded, four authors made important contributions that helped to shed further light on the nature and implications of the conceptual framework, each approaching the central question from a different angle—what it means for Bahá'is to engage seriously, humbly, and effectively with the intellectual life of society. Their

essays, delivered as plenary addresses across the 2014, 2015, and 2016 conferences, helped the Association and its participants see more clearly what they were working toward and why, enriching the conceptual grounding for the practical developments described below.

Haleh Arbab argued for combining full mastery of a field with the capacity to examine its underlying assumptions in light of the Revelation, demonstrating, through an analysis of migration, how the lens of the oneness of humankind reveals dimensions of social reality that purely materialistic frameworks miss. Paul Lample developed the notion of an evolving conceptual framework as a living middle path between rigid proceduralism and the rejection of structure, exploring consultation as the primary instrument for the collective investigation of truth and affirming the complementarity of science and religion as foundations for this framework. Farzam Arbab challenged the prevailing narrative about intellectual life, arguing that the principle of the oneness of humankind demands organic change in the very structures of civilization and identifying three enabling conditions for this intellectual maturation: the courage to challenge reigning orthodoxies, a non-elitist culture that makes knowledge accessible to all, and a rigorous understanding of science and religion as complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice. Shahriar Razavi situated Bahá'í engagement in public discourse as an expression of faith itself, tracing

the arc of institutional engagement from Bahá'u'lláh's Epistles to world leaders to the present, and demonstrating that consultation aims not at compromise but at identifying principles on which genuine agreement can be secured. The "Approach to Learning" essay in this volume offers a fuller treatment of each of these contributions and their implications for the Association's developing work.

WORKING GROUPS

The most visible new line of action adopted in response to the 2013 guidance and these further articulations of what it means to advance the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community was the development of working groups, conceived as specialized settings designed to assist individuals from particular professions or academic disciplines in examining aspects of the discourses in their fields. This built directly on what the special interest groups had begun to cultivate, but was now pursued with greater focus on sustaining year-round continuity. It is worth noting that the 2013 letter itself used the language of "special interest groups," and the Association has recently returned to that term in part to distinguish these collaborative structures from the broader use of "working group" in other contexts. However, at that time, the working group concept took shape through experimentation across the 2014, 2015, and 2016 conferences.

In early 2014, fourteen subject-area consultations replaced one morning

plenary slot at the annual conference, inviting all participants to meet in smaller groups organized by academic and professional fields. Facilitators were oriented in advance through teleconferences and tasked with introducing the 2013 guidance and stimulating conversations about contributing to academic and professional discourses. While the response at the conference was encouraging, these groups did not establish ongoing processes, as the diversity of participants' interests and experiences proved too broad for ongoing inquiry. Simultaneously, four breakout sessions were organized on contributing to discourses in Education, Economics, Religion in Society, and Primary Health Care. These sessions proved more generative, with all four yielding ongoing activity.

Building on this experience, the 2015 annual conference formally introduced working groups, with six groups meeting on the Thursday before the conference in the fields of Economics, Health, Religion and Society, Law, Education, and Technology. Participation was initially by invitation, drawing primarily on graduates of ISGP seminars, with the conscious intention of fostering a sustained and focused process of inquiry. A reflection meeting with Shahriar Razavi, member of the Universal House of Justice, and National Assembly members, following these sessions, identified the importance of balancing individual and collective learning and creating room for growing participation across a spectrum of engagement. Of the six groups,

five maintained activities throughout the following year, including four that organized in-person gatherings. This was a promising early indication that the working group model could generate year-round momentum.

In a letter dated 7 September 2015 written on its behalf to the National Assembly of Canada, the House of Justice warmly acknowledged the efforts to reorient the work of the Association, affirmed that the initiative to create mechanisms for individuals from similar disciplines to interact held greater promise than had thus far been realized, and invited the Association to contemplate further opportunities beyond the annual conference for interested individuals to meet, reflect together, and present their conclusions. It noted that the guidance on special interest groups contained in the 24 July 2013 letter held particular significance in this context. The letter also noted that engagement of Bahá'ís in academia should remain an objective to be strengthened over time. This guidance was understood to confirm that the working group model was on the right track, albeit still in its early stages of development.

By the 2016 conference in Montréal, the working group process had expanded to eight groups, adding Indigenous Studies and Media Studies to the original six. Approximately 250 individuals participated in the Thursday working group sessions, up from approximately 100 the previous year. The working group on Africana Studies, which emerged in subsequent years, brought

together scholars and practitioners to explore connections between Africana intellectual traditions and Bahá'í insights into the reciprocal principles of oneness and justice, culminating in collaborative plenary presentations at the Forty-Sixth conference on questions of reparations and social transformation.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

In line with this emerging vision, the 2013 conference, "Learning in Action: Scholarship and the Generation of Knowledge," was held that August in Irvine. Counsellor Borna Nouredin's plenary reflection on the "Generation of Knowledge and Collective Learning in Action" directly addressed the conference's central theme, while Shabnam Koirala-Azad explored participatory research as a democratic practice attentive to power dynamics in the research process, drawing on youth-led projects in Nepal, the US, and Iran to illustrate how collective participation and inquiry could serve as instruments of social change.

The 2014 conference, held in Toronto, introduced plenary panels reimagined to address big questions across the Social Sciences, Natural and Life Sciences, and Humanities, alongside pre-conference Thursday sessions including a workshop on the 2013 guidance. Paul Lample delivered the opening plenary talk on learning processes and the framework for action in the Bahá'í community, while Haleh Arbab spoke on "Learning to Read Social Reality in the Light of Revelation," as noted above. Both

talks emphasized the outward-oriented engagement the Association sought to cultivate consistent with the conceptual framework. The Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture that year was delivered by Vahid Rafati, whose presentation explored the evolving role of Bahá'í scholarship. The conference also offered a notable moment when Roshan Danesh, who was speaking about the meaning of reconciliation in Canada from a perspective rooted in the example of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, invited Nacho Nyak Dun storyteller and cultural educator Louise Profeit-LeBlanc to take over the proceedings to present her reconciliation blanket and speak to the legacy of colonization and the residential school system. The presentation reinforced the necessity of centering Indigenous voices, knowledge, and experience in the proceedings and activities of the Association.

The 2015 conference in Orange County built on these foundations by organizing panels around fundamental conceptual themes—"Role of Religion in Society," "From Self Interest to Altruism," and "From Oppression to Empowerment"—rather than broad disciplinary areas. Universal House of Justice member Shahriar Razavi delivered the opening plenary talk, "Bahá'í Participation in the Public Sphere: Considerations Related to History, Concepts, and Approaches," as discussed previously. The Balyuzi Lecture was delivered by Nazila Ghanea, a human rights scholar at Oxford University, on striving for human rights in an age of religious extremism, illustrating

the growing emphasis on connecting Bahá'í scholarship directly to contemporary public discourse.

The 2016 conference in Montréal carried this evolution yet further, with panels on Social Justice and Education, Citizenship and Participation, Technologies and Values, Art and the Human Spirit, and, powerfully, a panel on “From Truth to Reconciliation” featuring Marie Wilson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, whose mandate was to inform Canadians about what happened in residential schools. Coming one year after the Commission’s release of its ninety-four Calls to Action, and at a moment when Canadian institutions of every kind were being asked what their response would be, the decision to place this theme at the center of its conference was both timely and deliberate. Moreover, the Balyuzi Lecture that year, delivered by member of the Universal House of Justice Farzam Arbab, as noted above, addressed the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and articulated a vision of a non-elitist culture of knowledge, which resonated directly with the participatory spirit the conference was working to foster. Consistent with this vision, the Association organized a Thursday pre-conference session consisting of a two-hour study of a compilation on participating in academic and professional discourses, with some 300 people meeting in small circle groups led by facilitators.

The arts, meanwhile, had been operating as something of a parallel track in

the conference’s programming. While present and valued, they were not yet fully woven into its intellectual fabric. Beginning with the 2017 Orange County conference, the Executive Committee made a deliberate commitment to change this, ensuring that artistic contributions were coherent with, rather than merely adjacent to, the conference’s central themes and the scholarly questions it was pursuing. This integration of the arts into the conference’s programming remains an ongoing area of learning.

That same conference took up two further themes of note, among others. Ruha Benjamin’s plenary address, “The Beautiful Struggle: Understanding Racism and Transforming Words into Deeds,” spoke to the Association’s growing engagement with race as a subject of scholarly and spiritual inquiry, a concern echoed in the conference’s plenary panel on race, justice, and oneness that immediately followed her talk. And as the year of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the conference closed with Hooper Dunbar’s reflection, “Recognizing Bahá'u'lláh on the Bi-Centenary of His Birth,” marking the occasion with a talk on the progressive stages in the rise of the Sun of Truth and the significance of the bicentenary for the Bahá'í community’s collective life.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESTRUCTURING

In September 2017, the Executive Committee made a significant structural decision: to discontinue formal

membership in the Association. The reasoning behind this shift included the high cost of printing and mailing the *Journal* in hard copy, the movement of academic journals toward open online publication, the value of making the *Journal* freely available as a means of broad dissemination, and the recognition that the distinction between members and non-members risked creating an in-group/out-group dynamic contrary to the Association's inclusive ethos. This direction had begun to take shape several years earlier: a webinar series launched in 2011 had already opened a channel for year-round engagement beyond the annual conference, reflecting the same underlying commitment that would animate the 2017 decision. In practical terms, the *Journal*, with John Hatcher now as editor, would move toward becoming a free online publication; the existing membership fee structure would be discontinued; all conference attendees would pay the same registration fee; and Life Members and Three-Year Members would receive conference discounts honoring their prior commitments. This decision was a structural expression of the conviction that participation in the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community should be accessible to all, reframing the Association from a group that one joins to an organization inviting and supporting a wide spectrum of participation and engagement, while remaining focused on advancing the capacity to contribute to academic and professional discourses.

Looking back, these years were,

in a real sense, continuous with the learning process that the Executive Committee and the Association more broadly had been pursuing for many years prior. The search for coherence, the growing engagement with ISGP, and the deepening understanding that Bahá'í scholarship is directly tied to participation in academic and professional discourses had all been pointing in the direction that the 2013 letter clarified. What followed was further organic development, energized by this message, which affirmed the trajectory already being pursued while providing a clearer framework for advancing it further. The working group initiative, meanwhile, built on the foundation the special interest groups had laid and placed additional emphasis on the importance of collective inquiry in a format designed to sustain momentum throughout the year rather than concentrating it in a single annual event.

All told, the Association had markedly evolved from the organization that had received the July 2013 letter with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. The working group model was taking shape, the annual conference was slowly being reimaged, the groundwork for a freely accessible *Journal* was being laid, and the Association itself was opening to broader participation. None of this would have been possible without the sacrificial efforts of the Executive Committee members who shepherded the Association both in the years leading up to the 2013 message and in the years that followed its receipt. There are far too many of them

to name individually, and so the reader is referred once again to Appendix B. However, particular mention is given to its longest-serving members during this time, each of whom served on the committee between ten and twenty years: Mehran Kiai, Martha Schweitz, Kim Naqvi, and Shabnam Koirala-Azad, the last of whom joined the committee in 2016 and continues to serve at the time of this writing. Other individuals have likewise contributed ten or more years of service during these years, having served on the Executive Committee as well as other committees, including Roshan Danesh, who served on the JBS Editorial Committee; Lisa Dufrainmont, who presently serves on the JBS Editorial Committee; John Hatcher, who served as the *Journal's* editor from 2013 and continues on the Publications Committee at the time of this writing; Pierre-Yves Mocquais, whose service to the Association was noted earlier and continues on the JBS Editorial Committee at the time of this writing; and Michael Karlberg, who has been a member of the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives for many years, a body discussed further later on. Much remained unresolved, but the lines of development were becoming visible, and the Association was discovering, step by step, how to follow them.

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

In the thirteen years since the 24 July 2013 message, the Association has progressively learned how to translate

this guidance into action, drawing on the insights of Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, Shahriar Razavi, and many others; the counsel of members of the Universal House of Justice, including Firaydoun Javaheri and Stephen Birkland; and the regular encouragement and guidance of the Counsellors and of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States. Study and reflection on action in light of the 2013 letter has led to the progressive clarification of the Association's mandate: to foster the intellectual life of the community by helping to build the capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions, in a manner that enriches the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission. The approach to learning that has increasingly guided this work, the dispositions the Association is striving to cultivate, and the objects of learning that now organize its activities are explored in depth in the two companion essays in this volume. Below is a brief overview.

Central to advancing these objectives has been the Association's emphasis on building its capacity to operate within "an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates" (24 July 2013). At the heart of this framework are foundational principles, including the oneness of humanity, the nobility of every person, the interdependence of all created

things, and a consciousness of history that situates every act of scholarship within a larger story of humanity's collective journey toward maturity. These principles provide a benchmark against which the assumptions informing different academic and professional discourses can be scrutinized for their strengths and limitations.

The Association has been engaged in a sustained effort to understand and apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted in the 2013 message: the relationship between study and action, focus, capacity building and accompaniment, organic growth, institutional arrangements, coherence among endeavors, sound relations among individuals and institutions, and learning in action. Sustained engagement with these elements gives rise to related dispositions—among them humility and detachment, the faithful correlation of insights, and an orientation toward transcending difference and harmonizing perspectives—that are taken up more fully in the companion essay “Approach to Learning.” In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice vividly describes the kind of participant these conditions are working to form: souls committed to the prosperity of all, championing rationality and science, viewing everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, patient and perseverant, and pledged to long-term endeavor.

This conceptual and dispositional work has depended, throughout, on sustained institutional and administrative

infrastructure. Of vital importance to the Association's growth and development across much of this period has been the work of its administrative staff. Parvin Rowhani selflessly served in this capacity for many years, diligently working on conference management, editorial assistance, public relations, and other administrative matters, and also served as a member of the Executive Committee. Nilufar Gordon has continued in this role more recently, with a sixteen-year overlap between them. Their responsibilities have encompassed support to the Executive Committee and its various sub-committees, logistical coordination of the annual conference and seminars, book-keeping, correspondence, systems development, site maintenance, and the many other tasks that sustain an organization of continental scope—a contribution without which the Association could not function at the level it does. Nilufar Gordon has also contributed to the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* as an editor and manuscript reviewer, bringing careful judgment and scholarly discernment to that work over many years. This contribution has been integral to the development of both the *Journal* and the culture of learning the Association has sought to cultivate.

With such administrative support at its disposal, and in an effort to further organize its work, the Association has also identified six objects of learning, which have emerged gradually from years of action and reflection, the accumulated experience of special interest groups, seminars, conferences,

and publications, and from sustained consultation with the senior institutions. They represent the Association's current best understanding of where its energies should be focused, serving as reference points against which to measure progress.

The first object of learning concerns the multiplication and development of the settings and processes in which participants can collaborate, generate collective insights, and share learning about how to explicate the principles the Bahá'í community advocates and demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. These include reading groups, writing groups, seminars, and other short- or long-term collaborative spaces. The Committee for Collaborative Initiatives and its coordinators, which have for the last decade served as the primary learning arm of the Executive Committee, have been central to the growth that has taken place and to accompanying these initiatives. Reading groups, which are small consultative spaces in which participants engage thoughtfully with important literature from their fields in relation to the Writings of the Faith, have grown substantially from around twenty groups in the early years of the pandemic to seventy-one by 2025, with approximately 500 participants engaging across a widening range of themes. The number of seminars has also grown substantially, while special interest groups in various fields are strengthening their capacity to coordinate and accompany their own reading groups and seminars. Some SIGS have built momentum over

many years, while others have emerged recently and are gaining strength.

The second object of learning is how to enable growing numbers of diverse participants, intent on transcending differences and harmonizing perspectives, to assist one another in contributing to the discourses that influence the direction of spiritual and material progress. Advances in diversity have come through reading groups and seminars on overcoming racism, the role of women in society, Indigenous studies, Africana studies, and many other themes, all aimed at inviting participation from communities whose voices have historically been underrepresented. The experience of such groups has shown that making scholarship accessible to all, regardless of formal academic background, requires not only structural openness but a deliberate cultivation of humility, attentiveness, and the willingness to be transformed through shared inquiry.

The third object of learning is how to develop an outward-looking culture in which participants understand themselves to be actively cultivating a collective learning process with the wider society, concurrently aligned with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan. Facilitators and participants have been gaining experience in inviting colleagues from the wider academic and professional community to participate in reading groups, seminars, and conference sessions. Groups in public health, social justice, organizational life, and environmental sustainability have each found that the most

meaningful contributions to discourse arise from deliberate dialogue that brings professional and other forms of experience, scientific knowledge, and an understanding of the teachings into fruitful exchange.

The fourth object of learning is how to help young adults—in particular, university students and recent graduates—view participation in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service, coherent with the imperatives of community-building and social action, and with the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. A significant development has been the offering of seminars at decentralized locations across North America, building on the broad foundation laid by ISGP seminars while providing more discipline-specific spaces where students can further advance their understanding. Between April and November 2025, multi-seminar gatherings were organized in numerous locations across North America, bringing together some 160 participants, predominantly youth and young adults, to explore themes related to technology and society, mental health, evolution and consciousness, and economics.

The fifth object of learning is how to assist an increasing number of authors to publish articles and books, thereby increasing the volume of high-quality literature that fosters the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. The editorial process for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has evolved considerably, becoming more rigorous, collaborative,

and characterized by a spirit of accompaniment. The *Journal's* development across this period was shaped in part by the editorships of John Hatcher and, subsequently, Michael Sabet, whose ongoing tenure has helped to advance the *Journal's* standards, reach, and culture of learning. As noted earlier, Hatcher's editorship coincided with the transition to online publication, echoing the same conviction that animated the membership decision: that the fruits of Bahá'í scholarship should be as widely accessible as possible. In a 2018 editorial dedicated to the challenge of consciously and progressively clarifying the conceptual framework for Bahá'í scholarship, Hatcher posed the questions the Association was actively wrestling with: how does Bahá'í scholarly activity serve the advancement of civilization, what elements of the conceptual framework does it share with expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society, and how does the cultivation of the intellectual life of the community serve all of these endeavors? These questions, and the spirit in which they were posed, helped to define the *Journal's* work in this period.

On the publications side, more broadly, an early milestone in developing a collaborative scholarly culture was the 2018 publication of *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, edited by Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel, and co-published with Wilfrid Laurier University Press. The development of this volume entailed a collaborative writing process

that has directly inspired the *Journal's* subsequent experiments in collective scholarship. These include writing groups, thematic issues, and collaborative publishing projects emerging from special interest groups that have contributed to a scholarly culture in which participants consult with and support one another in their respective fields of expertise. More recent publications and publishing initiatives are discussed in the companion essay "Learning in Action" in this volume.

The sixth object of learning is how to draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding, recognizing that artistic expressions enable participants to engage with ideas through aesthetic and experiential modes that deepen and enliven understanding in ways complementary to more analytical discussions. The arts have been present in the Association's work from the beginning, and what is evolving in various settings is a growing understanding of how they can be further integrated into the Association's core intellectual work. The essay "Learning in Action" in this volume provides further discussion on this subject.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE: FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Drawing on the guidance of the House of Justice, the Association identified a clear vision for the conference, stating that its overarching objective is to serve as an uplifting, welcoming space

for participants to explore how to contribute to academic and professional discourses that are essential to the generation of knowledge and the progress of humanity. As one among a growing constellation of Association activities concerned with promoting the intellectual life of the community, it aims to foster an animated conversation among diverse participants about how to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigor and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds. Three objectives flow from this vision: the conference serves as a space of convergence where participants in various collective initiatives share the fruits of their learning with one another and with a wider community; as an accessible portal that enables growing numbers of participants with a range of backgrounds and interests to become acquainted with and benefit from various Association capacity-building endeavors; and as a setting where scholars and professionals contributing substantially to discourses of pressing concern can share their work and strengthen connections with others engaged in similar fields.

These objectives are increasingly informing the conference's programming and plenary addresses. Firaydoun Javaheri, a former member of the Universal House of Justice by the time of his 2018 presentation on constructive resilience at the Forty-Second conference in Atlanta, went on to address the Nine Year Plan and the intellectual life of the community at the Forty-Sixth

conference in 2022. He then returned at the Forty-Eighth in 2024 with “The Nine Year Plan and the 28 November 2023 Message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World.” Stephen Birkland, then a member of the Universal House of Justice, offered some thoughts on the community’s intellectual life at the Forty-Third conference in 2019 in Ottawa; four years later, as a former member of the Universal House of Justice, he opened the Forty-Seventh conference in 2023 with a keynote address. Member of the House of Justice Paul Lample first addressed the conference at the Forty-Fifth conference in 2021, held online, with the keynote “Reflections on the Challenge of Our Time,” delivered as the community approached the centenary of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. At the Forty-Eighth conference in 2024 in Atlanta, Lample reflected on “a still more superb mission,” invoking ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of the oneness of humanity—the community’s most vital and demanding charge—and calling on participants to confront the scourge of racism as one of its most urgent imperatives. Also at the Forty-Eighth conference, a plenary presentation by Naisohn Arfai explored the evolution of the *Bahá’í World* volumes as a body of scholarship. Counsellor Nwandi Lawson, whose engagement with the conference spanned the Forty-Second conference in 2018 in Atlanta and the Forty-Fifth conference in 2021 online, took up the theme of a community’s intellectual life at the Forty-Seventh in 2023. Other presentations also turned

to race and social transformation, with contributions at the Forty-Fourth conference in 2020 and the Forty-Sixth in 2022 drawing on African American scholarship and community experience to bring depth and lived insight to the discussion. Derik Smith was the first presenter at the Association’s inaugural online conference in 2020, with “New Black Power: Constructive Resilience and the Efforts of African American Bahá'ís,” returning to the Forty-Sixth conference in 2022 for a further panel presentation on the subject.

The arts and Indigenous ways of knowing have been ongoing areas of exploration throughout this period, both serving as genuine epistemological resources for the correlative work the Association is pursuing. Their fuller integration into the conference’s main intellectual program—through plenary presentations and thematic seminars—has taken several concrete forms. Arts programming across these years has ranged from Masud Olufani’s multidisciplinary presentations linking sculpture and memory to the African American experience and Kevin Locke’s interactive session on Hoop Dance and the Northern Plains flute, both at the Forty-Second conference in 2018, to explorations of art as a vehicle for devotional and spiritual inquiry, to community and storytelling work by Black artists and musicians, to a session at the Forty-Eighth conference in 2024 built around Kim MacQueen’s *Visions of the Sacred*, reflecting directly on the relationship between art and the development of culture. The

virtual conferences of 2020, 2021, and 2022 featured particularly substantive moments of Indigenous engagement, addressing the legacy of colonization of Indigenous peoples, including the residential school system in Canada and American Indian Boarding schools in the United States, and offering perspectives from prominent Indigenous scholars, including Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows, to explore questions of pedagogy, reconciliation, and the relationship between spiritual principles and the natural world.

The intellectual aims of the conference have been progressively clarified through the Association's evolving call-for-proposals process. Presentations are sought that share learning about how to participate in relevant academic and professional discourses in the light of the teachings and in view of the provisions of the Nine Year Plan; how to explicate the principles the Bahá'í community advocates and demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity; and how to advance an outward-looking culture by participating in collaborative learning processes with scholars and professionals in the wider society. Related considerations include whether proposals engage with relevant discourses and literature in a given field, correlate Bahá'í concepts and community experience with insights and questions in that field, offer solutions in an exploratory manner, and identify questions for further inquiry. Thematic diversity is actively sought—spanning the natural sciences, social sciences,

humanities, history, exegesis, and methodology—as is diversity of presenters, with collaborative projects, first-time presenters, faculty, and undergraduate and graduate students all specifically encouraged.

The evolution of the conference over the past decade has been considerable, moving gradually from a model oriented around passive attendance toward a working conference in which participants actively engage in processes relevant to their academic and professional interests. This shift was accelerated by an unexpected catalyst: the 2020 virtual conference, organized in roughly three and a half months rather than the usual eleven, drew over 3,000 registrants—roughly double the typical in-person attendance to that point—and introduced forms of programming including share-out presentations from reading groups, poster sessions, round-tables, and film screenings. The Forty-Fifth and Forty-Sixth conferences in 2021 and 2022 continued to reach large numbers of participants. Moreover, the largest cohort of attendees across the virtual years was between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, a demographic that had been persistently underrepresented at in-person gatherings. This experience permanently broadened the Association's understanding of who the conference could reach and how.

The introduction of thematic seminars as part of the conference has also been particularly significant in the evolution toward more active participation. Growing from two seminars in

2019, nine in 2023, to eleven in 2024 and nineteen in 2025, these one- and two-day gatherings, held immediately before the opening of general sessions, have created a heightened level of focus and engagement that animates the rest of the conference. The range of themes—from artificial intelligence and technology to Indigenous and African ways of knowing, from nutrition and health equity to evolution and consciousness, from the arts and organizations to participatory action research, pedagogy, and science and religion—represent the breadth of fields in which Association participants are working to contribute to prevalent discourses.

Additional structural developments include encouraging breakout-session presenters to allow sufficient time for discussion and to provide pre-readings in advance; disciplinary streams that allow participants from similar fields to gather and consult; a two-step registration process that helps to foster commitment to different sessions; and, beginning with the Forty-Ninth conference in Calgary in 2025, the use of a convention center rather than a hotel, a change that appears to have enhanced focus and reinforced the expectation of active engagement. In addition, a special youth program for participants ages fifteen to twenty-one, designed in collaboration with coordinators of ISGP and focused on the May 2024 message of the House of Justice on service in conditions of conflict and crisis, was offered for the first time in Calgary and has been

identified as a feature to continue and build upon.

Finally, this conference in Calgary hosted approximately 2,000 participants—the largest in-person conference since 1986. Chief Troy Bossman Knowlton of the Blackfoot Ancestral Territory opened the proceedings, leading into plenary sessions that covered a number of intellectual concerns. Over the course of the weekend, Jordan Bighorn drew on Lakota ways of knowing in relationship to the Faith to reframe fundamental questions about learning and formation; Counsellor Borna Nouredin called for new frameworks for technological innovation grounded in spiritual principles; and former member of the Universal House of Justice Gustavo Correa led a panel that explored fifty years of learning from FUNDAEC, a Colombian educational organization whose work on rural development and capacity-building has informed Bahá'í approaches to social action, examining how the interplay of thought and action builds capacity for a civilization in transition. The opening plenary took the form of a panel discussion including Kenneth Bowers and Saphira Rameshfar, secretary and assistant secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, reflecting on a century of Bahá'í administration in North America and marking the hundredth anniversary of the original, joint Assembly's formation, which in 1948 evolved into two separate national bodies.

ASPIRATION TO COHERENCE

Running through all six objects of learning and the conference itself is the aspiration to coherence—the understanding that the different spaces and activities of the Association, while retaining a measure of autonomy appropriate to a voluntary scholarly association with individuals and groups having varying interests, are also part of an ecosystem of activity in which the whole generates understanding that no single space could achieve on its own. Creating coherence among these various endeavors involves integrating reading groups, special interest groups, seminars, conferences, publications, and individual research around shared objects of learning while respecting and encouraging the distinctive roles each space and line of inquiry serves. This alignment unfolds through a systematic approach to learning, which involves the need, as the House of Justice described in its message of 19 April 2007, to examine the dynamics of growth on a regular basis and analyze the way in which these elements are working together in order to identify gaps and determine what adjustments need to be made.

This attentiveness to coherence has given rise to a methodical effort to address vital questions, such as those concerning methodology, pedagogy, and disciplinary assumptions. The Association has organized seminars for graduate students, faculty, and other participants to explore such questions within their respective fields

and to discuss the implications of the Revelation for this dimension of scholarship. Such spaces have helped participants to consolidate and share insights both within and across disciplinary groups, giving rise to collaborative writing projects and other initiatives that continue to develop. Reading groups have further extended this work, bringing together, for example, social scientists and others to share learning about how their disciplines can be constructively shaped by ennobling assumptions, values, and dispositions.

In general, what is thus gradually emerging is an organic web of activity in which reading groups cultivate the habits of mind and collaborative relationships that deepen seminar conversations; seminars generate insights that find expression in writing groups and conference presentations; publications extend the reach of this learning into the wider scholarly world; young adult seminars complement ISGP processes while helping to cultivate the intellectual capacities of a rising generation of contributors; outward-looking initiatives connect all of this to the broader currents of academic and professional life; and the arts enrich the epistemological foundations on which the entire enterprise rests. Each of these spaces retains its own character and pursues its own lines of inquiry, yet each is strengthened by its connections to the others. The annual conference serves as the visible point of convergence where these various threads are brought together, reflected upon, and catalyzed

for the year ahead. The Association is learning, step by step, how to tend to the connections among these spaces so that together they function not merely as a set of activities but as a genuine learning system, one whose generative power depends on the quality and coherence of the relationships among its parts, and which is still very much in the process of being built.

NEXT STEPS AND ESSENTIAL LINK TO THE INSTITUTE PROCESS

Towards the end of the 24 July 2013 message, the Universal House of Justice stressed the pivotal role of the training institute, and went on to explain that “whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge.” As noted above, this message concludes with a vision of rising generations entering diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavor, addressing a wide range of intellectual challenges, and with the confident assertion that the Association can offer an important contribution to this arena. The thirteen years since the July 2013 letter have been, in large measure, the Association’s effort to realize that vision—one pursued with fifty-one years of accumulated momentum behind it.

Specifically, the Association has been learning how participating in

the institute constructively affects its work and how immersing in the institute’s methods and approaches propels it forward. The training institute’s courses further attune participants to the elements of the framework that directly promote the intellectual life of the community and the mandate of the Association itself. Moreover, the participation of young people in the community-building process and ISGP seminars enhances the quality of their participation in Association spaces, boding well for the Association as it seeks to build on the approaches and content of the institute to further prepare participants to carry the Bahá’í teachings into their academic and professional fields and to speak to the concerns facing humanity today.

Two questions now stand at the forefront of this vital connection between the Association and the institute process. The first concerns how Association activities can best complement and strengthen the pattern of community action taking shape across North America, particularly as the processes by which young people contribute to the world of ideas alongside their many arenas of service grow in complexity. The second concerns the seminar materials being developed by special interest groups: how these unofficial documents can be further multiplied and refined to help participants engage with field-specific discourses in light of the Teachings in ways that complement the more general content of ISGP. These questions are addressed in more detail in the essay “Learning in Action.”

IN CLOSING

Fifty years is a significant threshold, and this retrospective is offered in part as an act of institutional gratitude—for the guidance that called the Association into being and sustained it through five decades of searching and building, for the loving, continuous encouragement and support of the Counsellors and of the National Spiritual Assemblies of both Canada and the United States, for the visionary souls who gave the Association its initial impetus and direction, for the generosity of donors whose support has helped to make its work possible over the years, and for the many devoted collaborators and participants over the decades. Together, these have given its work its meaning and enduring momentum. The vision that has been progressively articulated—of an approach to scholarship that integrates the spiritual and the material dimensions of life, advances through consultation rather than contention, draws on the complementary contributions of science and religion, and serves the transformation of civilization rather than the prestige of the few—is slowly crystallizing in the collaborative spaces, the written scholarship, and the capacity building of this community of inquiry as it grows.

Part of what sustains this community is the historical consciousness at the heart of all Bahá'í activity: the dual conviction that humanity is on a collective journey toward oneness whose destination is assured, and that every act of serious, humble, and loving

scholarship undertaken in the company of others is a vital contribution to that journey. As early as 1977, the House of Justice offered its vision of where such evolution leads: “As the Bahá'í community grows, it will acquire experts in numerous fields—both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered.” That vision, articulated nearly half a century ago, powerfully describes what the Association continues to pursue with an ever-widening circle of participants learning alongside one another.

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Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum
and member of the Universal House of Justice, Mr. Glenford Mitchell
attend the 6th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1981, Ottawa, Ontario



Gordi Munro and the Tahirih Choir perform during the gala concert
at the 9th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1984, Ottawa, Ontario