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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahauallah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/about/submissions/.

ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is “divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men.” The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is “to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, ‘abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith’” (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from ‘Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the “Glory of God”—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured torture and forty years of imprisonment and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His eldest son, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

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MELEYNA BIGHORN Painting in Honor of the Centenary
of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Message from the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies

It is with joy and gratitude that the Executive Committee introduces this special issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, marking over fifty years since the Association's founding in 1975 under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The occasion of the Association's Fiftieth Annual Conference in Ottawa this August offers an opportunity to reflect on this shared history, and to renew the sense of purpose that carries the work forward.

This special issue brings that reflection together in several parts. It opens with a beautiful letter of felicitation from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, which draws upon an equally inspiring letter it received from the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, together reflecting the warmth with which both Assemblies have accompanied the Association's journey. An executive summary then offers a concise account of its development, followed by a fuller retrospective tracing that same history in greater depth, from the founding conference through the present, building in part on the Ten Year Retrospective published in this *Journal* in 2023. Alongside

these institutional accounts, a series of personal reflections from friends who have been closely engaged with the Association's activities over the years and decades brings a dimension no institutional narrative can fully convey. Next, two companion essays, "Approach to Learning" and "Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives," examine the conceptual framework and evolving experience that have come increasingly to guide the Association's progress since 2013. Finally, two appendices, listing notable plenary speakers at each annual conference and Executive Committee members by year, complete the issue as a resource for those wishing to follow its history in greater detail.

None of this growth would have been possible without the guidance of the Universal House of Justice at every stage along the way, the sustained encouragement and advice of serving and former members of the Universal House of Justice, as well as many Continental Counsellors, and the constant support of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States. It would equally have been impossible without the vision and sacrifice of those who gave the Association its initial impetus, the generosity of its donors, and the devotion of countless collaborators, volunteers, and participants across five decades. We wish especially to thank the members of the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, whose efforts have helped give shape to much of what is described in these pages; the editorial staff, whose care and attention

brought this special issue to completion; a number of reviewers, each of whom has served the Association for many years, for their assistance in ensuring the accuracy of the retrospective or elements of it; and several other close collaborators, including those who have served on other subcommittees—such as the Conference Committee, the JBS Editorial Committee, and the ABS Publishing Committee—and as facilitators of the Association's expanding ecosystem of initiatives, all of whose contributions have been essential to its continued growth.

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Other collaborators are listed in the essay "Learning in Action."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Universal House of Justice has recently emphasized that as the

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

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

Association for Bahá'í Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective: *Executive Summary*

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 had been called into being 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. While 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 the age, and that the time had come to pursue that contribution more systematically and in earnest.

Over fifty years later, this retrospective offers an occasion to reflect on what

those five decades have built and set in motion. It traces the arc from that small gathering in Bolton, Ontario, 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 current developments within the full arc of the Association's history. Two companion essays in this special issue develop some of the recent developments in greater depth: the first, "Approach to Learning," examines the conceptual framework and dispositions that have come 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.

What animates this account is a conviction, shared by those who have served and participated in the Association throughout its history, 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. 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 in 1974. The National Spiritual Assembly of Canada responded by establishing the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith in 1975, with Hossain Danesh as founding Chair and Douglas Martin as Secretary. The founding Executive Committee also included William Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Elizabeth Larin, Michael Rochester, and Don Rogers. René Steiner and Jane Nishi Goldstone joined the committee in 1977.

The annual conference served as the Association's primary vehicle from the start, growing from eighty participants at Cedar Glen in 1976 to 200 at the fourth conference in Toronto in 1979, drawing early collaborators such as David Smith, Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, and Jane Faily, who would continue to serve and speak at Association conferences over the following decades. The *Bahá'í Studies* monograph series launched in 1976, with early volumes—including William Hatcher's *The Science of Religion* and John Hatcher's *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*. William Hatcher also presented at annual conferences and lectured on science and religion and related subjects at several Canadian universities, including Mount Allison and the University of Moncton. Ghadirian, too, contributed to the series, and Peter Morgan became its editor beginning with Volume VI

in 1979. With such contributions, the series demonstrated its capacity to reach outside the Association's own circle. Hossain Danesh's volume on the violence-free society, published in 1979 as a Special United Nations Year of the Child edition with a combined print run of 20,000, was an early sign that the Association's publications could speak to audiences well beyond the academy. 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.

In a letter dated 19 March 1979, the House of Justice commended the Association's publications as one of the very favorable outcomes of the Five-Year Plan, and, at the inception of the Seven-Year Plan, set a further goal of expanding opportunities for teaching in Canadian institutions. This was a clear signal that, with each successive Plan, the Association would be drawn ever more deliberately into the Faith's global institutional strategy.

GROWTH AND CONSOLIDATION, 1980–1990

The early 1980s brought significant institutional growth. The Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture was inaugurated in 1980. Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, Hand of the Cause of God, attended the Sixth Annual Conference in 1981, where she concluded the gathering and opened the International

Bahá'í Conference on Marriage and the Family that followed. That same year, following a recommendation by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada and with the approval of the Universal House of Justice, the Association was renamed the Association for Bahá'í Studies, its mandate extended to cover all of North America—a development the House of Justice described as having international ramifications.

The Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa began operating in 1982, providing the Association with a physical home under the enduring stewardship of Executive Secretary Christine Zerbinis, whose administrative leadership spanned nearly two decades. From this strengthened base, the Association extended its reach into the wider academic world through the First Symposium on the Relationship of the Bahá'í Faith and Islam at McGill University in 1984 and the Bahá'í-Marxist Dialogue at Louhelen in 1986. The Eleventh Annual Conference at the University of Western Ontario in 1986 drew 2,000 participants—the largest in the Association's history so far—centered on the theme of “Creating a New World Order” in the wake of the Universal House of Justice's statement “The Promise of World Peace,” with Hand of the Cause Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum and Hand of the Cause Dr. 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá among the speakers.

Then came what many would regard as the most consequential institutional development of the period. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* launched in 1988 as a

peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary quarterly published trilingually in English, French, and Spanish, giving Bahá'í scholarship a permanent, academically credible home. The House of Justice later expressed appreciation that the Editorial Board had ensured that not only the content of the *Journal* but also its editorial style appropriately reflected the principles of the Faith, observing that this care had greatly contributed to securing for the publication the widespread and well-merited admiration it enjoyed in the Bahá'í world. By 1990, membership stood at over 2,300, and nineteen international affiliates were operating across five continents.

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE, 1991–1999

In a letter dated 25 December 1990, the House of Justice explicitly linked the Association's scholarly work to the community-building and outreach efforts of the broader Bahá'í community. The conferences of the 1990s addressed large structural questions, culminating in the three-year “Anarchy into Order” series (1994–1996), which tackled global governance in Cambridge, San Francisco, and Edmonton. The decade also brought structural challenges: membership declined from a peak of 2,409 in 1989 to 1,754 by 1999, and most regional committees had ceased to function by mid-decade.

Yet the broader picture pointed to an organization of substantial reach—twenty-seven international affiliates worldwide, a journal indexed

in multiple academic databases, and publications that demonstrated the Association's capacity to contribute to urgent public conversations, notably Richard W. Thomas' *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, published the same year as the Fifteenth Annual Conference in Atlanta on "Models of Racial Unity" and later revised and republished in 1993. The decade closed with the publication of June Manning Thomas' *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi* in 1999, a book that was republished twenty-five years later with a new preface, a testament to its enduring relevance.

FOUR STANDOUT THEMES, 1975–1999

Looking back on the founding period, four themes stand out that would continue to shape the Association's development in the years ahead and remain relevant today.

The first is the pattern of guidance from the Universal House of Justice, which constituted the Association's identity. At the outset of each successive Plan, and at many other moments in between, the House of Justice either initiated, confirmed, or expanded the Association's mandate—from the 1979 commendation of its publications as a favorable outcome of the Five Year Plan, to the 1984 description of its North American expansion as having international ramifications, to the 1996 recognition of the *Journal's* editorial standards as contributing to its well-merited admiration. The

Association's work was consistently affirmed as integral to the unfoldment of the Faith's mission.

The second is the significance of the institutional transformation initiated in 1981, when the Association expanded from a Canadian body to a North American and then an internationally connected organization. This shift in scale, accountability, and ambition shaped everything that followed. By 1999, its implications were visible in twenty-seven international affiliates, a trilingual *Journal* indexed in multiple academic databases, and a continental conference program that had drawn participants from across North America and beyond.

The third is the creative tension between serving a broad Bahá'í membership and functioning as a vehicle for rigorous scholarly engagement, compounded by the question of how best to engage the mainstream academic world in a climate largely shaped by materialistic assumptions. The Marxist-Bahá'í Dialogue of 1986, the Princeton conference of 1987, and the Islam-Bahá'í Symposium of 1984 each tested that engagement directly, as did the launch of the *Journal*. The 1999 compilation, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, containing letters of the Universal House of Justice, affirmed that truth in scholarly fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded, while clarifying that the terms "Bahá'í scholarship" and "Bahá'í scholars" should not be used in an exclusive sense that would demarcate

those admitted into this category from those denied entrance to it. Learning to act on this conviction in active collaboration with academics from the wider society, with full attentiveness to the framework of the Covenant, remained central to the work of the Association.

The fourth standout theme is the relationship between scholarship and the Covenant. The Association faced a challenge in the 1990s owing to the emergence of a campaign, conducted largely through internet discussion groups, by certain individuals who sought to secure interpretive authority on the basis of their academic training, and so alter the essential character of the Faith. In response, the House of Justice addressed such fundamental questions as the relationship between scholarly freedom and institutional authority, conscience and its formation, and the proper methods for expressing disagreement, while the Association's leadership engaged deeply with these questions in close consultation with the Continental Board of Counsellors. The same 1999 compilation, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, observed that no segment of humanity was 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.

CONSOLIDATION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS, 2000–2013

The years between 1999 and 2013 were devoted largely to consolidating the Association's understanding of its role and purpose. One constant throughout was a deliberate reconceptualization of Bahá'í Studies, as the Association worked to broaden and redefine its meaning, applying a distinctively Bahá'í perspective to constructively critique the assumptions underlying academic approaches and methodologies—a reminder that the Association was not only for academics, that Bahá'í scholarship is not simply the same as the academic study of the Faith, and that scholarship can and should take many diverse forms. The annual conference remained the Association's most visible activity, regularly drawing over a thousand participants and attracting distinguished contributors from within and beyond the Bahá'í community. The Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies, which at their peak extended to some forty-eight institutions across every Canadian province, continued to cultivate a Bahá'í scholarly presence on campuses through conferences, speaker tours, and study circles. Over three decades, they built a body of activity that laid important foundations for the campus engagement that would follow. Publishing milestones included the 2000 publication of Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* and the 2008 co-publishing partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University Press for Saiedi's *Gate of the Heart*.

A letter dated 24 April 2008, written on behalf of the House of Justice, gave the Association a clear and authoritative answer to those who were uncertain whether rigorous scholarship had a place in a community increasingly focused on the core activities of the Plans. It stated that far from being a distraction from the worldwide effort to advance the growth of the Faith, Bahá'í scholarly activity was a powerful reinforcement of that endeavor. Growing awareness of the coherence among community building, engaging in discourse, and social action made it increasingly apparent that participating in academic and professional discourses was exactly the kind of work the Association existed to foster. The emergence of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity and its seminars for university students and recent graduates from around 2007–08 was a parallel and significant development; ISGP graduates were beginning to flow into Association spaces, bringing a grounding in the conceptual framework that would prove invaluable going forward.

It was in this spirit that the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada sought the guidance of the House of Justice on how the Association could advance participation in the academic and professional discourses to which the friends' fields and vocations gave them access. On 24 July 2013, the reply arrived. It would play a vital role in deepening, focusing, and giving fresh impetus to what had been building across the preceding decades.

WORKING WITHIN THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, 2013–2026

The letter of 24 July 2013 acknowledged the Association's contribution over nearly four decades and reflected on 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, and the reimagining of existing activities, situated the Association's work within the conceptual framework giving shape to the activities of expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society, 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.

The most visible new line of action adopted in response was the development of special interest groups—specialized settings designed to assist individuals from particular professions or academic disciplines in examining aspects of discourse within their fields. At the time, these were referred to as working groups, with the term special interest groups being later re-adopted, in keeping with the language of the 2013 letter itself. Through

experimentation across the 2014, 2015, and 2016 conferences, this model took shape, with eight groups active by the 2016 conference in Montréal and approximately 250 individuals participating in pre-conference sessions. The same conviction animating this expansion—that participation in the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community should be open to all who wish to engage—led in September 2016 to the Executive Committee's decision to discontinue formal membership, reconceiving the Association from a body defined by dues payment to a community of participants defined by engagement. Carrying this work forward has depended throughout on a reliable administrative infrastructure, including the work of staff members such as Parvin Rowhani and Nilufar Gordon, who have each selflessly devoted many years to supporting the Executive Committee and the Association's expanding range of activities.

As the practical work of responding to the 2013 guidance unfolded, four authors made important contributions that helped shed further light on what it means for Bahá'ís to engage seriously, humbly, and effectively with the academic and professional life of society. Drawing on the conceptual framework in complementary ways, Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi each examined questions central to the Association's developing work—among them the relationship between mastery of a field and the light of the Revelation, the nature of an evolving conceptual framework,

the intellectual vocation of the Bahá'í community, and the principles and approaches that bear on participation in public discourse. These four essays are listed in the Works Cited below.

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

In the years since 2013, drawing on the counsel of members of the Universal House of Justice as well as the regular guidance of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States, the Association has progressively clarified its 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.

Central to this work has been the concerted effort to understand and apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted in the July 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. These elements have come to serve as a lens through which the Association examines everything it is striving to achieve.

At the heart of the framework are foundational principles—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. Running through these is a set of related dispositions central to the kind of inquiry Association spaces are working to cultivate: humility and detachment, the capacity to correlate insights, consultation in dynamic interplay with independent investigation, and a resolute orientation toward transcending difference and harmonizing perspectives, all animated by divine love. In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice has given vivid expression to the kind of participants these conditions are working to form. They are enkindled souls committed to the prosperity of all, championing rationality and science, viewing everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, patient and perseverant, pledged to long-term endeavor.

The Association has also identified six objects of learning that now organize its work: how to multiply and develop the settings and processes in which participants can collaborate and generate collective insights; how to enable growing numbers of diverse participants to assist each other to contribute to relevant discourses; how to develop an outward-looking culture actively cultivating a collective learning process with the wider society; how to help young adults view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service; how to assist a growing number of authors to publish work contributing to

the intellectual life of the community; and how to draw on the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding. Running through all six is the aspiration to coherence: the understanding that the Association's different spaces and activities, while retaining a measure of autonomy appropriate to a voluntary scholarly association, are also part of an ecosystem of activity in which the whole generates understanding that no single space could achieve on its own. 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 cultivating the intellectual capacities of a rising generation; 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. Among the publications that have extended this learning into the wider scholarly world is the 2018 volume *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, edited by Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel and published with Wilfrid Laurier University Press, a milestone in collaborative Bahá'í scholarship whose writing process directly inspired the *Journal's* subsequent experiments in collective inquiry.

This aspiration to coherence is itself strengthened by the Association's deepening relationship with the training institute. The Association has been learning how participating in the institute constructively affects its work, and how the prior engagement of young people in the community-building process and ISGP seminars enhances the quality of their participation in Association spaces. Between April and November 2025, multi-seminar gatherings were organized at decentralized locations across North America, bringing together some 160 participants, predominantly youth and young adults, exploring themes related to technology and society, mental health, evolution and consciousness, and economics—the latest manifestation of a campus engagement tradition that extends back to the Association's founding mandate. This experience has already yielded valuable points of learning: the importance of framing such seminars as exploratory rather than prescriptive, the effectiveness of personal invitations over general announcements in attracting participants, and the considerable value of allowing extended time and iterative consultation for ideas to mature.

Two questions now stand at the forefront of consultation with senior institutions: how Association activities can best complement and strengthen the pattern of community action taking shape across North America as the processes by which young people contribute to the world of ideas grow in complexity and become more closely

interwoven with their other arenas of service, and what processes of review would be appropriate for the seminar materials being developed by special interest groups as such offerings multiply at the local level.

Large conferences both reflect and reinforce this emphasis on participation and coherence, serving as the visible point of convergence where the various threads of the Association's work are brought together, reflected upon, and catalyzed for next steps. Their evolution over the past five decades has been considerable, shifting gradually from a model that enabled more passive attendance to working conferences in which participants actively engage in processes relevant to their academic and professional interests. The 2020 virtual conference drew over 3,000 registrants—roughly double the in-person attendance—and introduced programming formats including share-out presentations from reading groups, poster sessions, and roundtables that proved durable well beyond the pandemic. Thematic seminars, growing from nine in 2023 to nineteen in 2025 and spanning themes from artificial intelligence and technology to Indigenous and African ways of knowing, from nutrition and health equity to evolution and consciousness, have created a heightened level of focus and engagement that animates the rest of each conference. The 49th Annual Conference in Calgary in 2025 hosted approximately 2,000 participants—the largest gathering since 1986—with Chief Troy Bossman Knowlton of the

Blackfoot Ancestral Territory opening the proceedings, and 307 individuals participating in pre-conference thematic seminars.

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 dedicated 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 a growing community of inquiry.

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 gave 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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The 1st annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1976, Bolton, Ontario

Standing: Jane Faily and John S. Hatcher.

Seated, left to right: Glen Eyford, Hossain Danesh, Don Rogers



Plenary audience at the 49th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2025, Calgary, Alberta

On the stage, from left to right: Bradley Wilson, Haleh Arbab, Gustavo Correa, and Michael Karlberg

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 Rúhiyyih 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

Reflections

ELHAM AFNAN

I attended my first ABS conference when I was new to Canada, and the Association itself was also new. In the late spring of 1981, five years after it was first established, the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith had just undergone a name change and become the Association for Bahá'í Studies. My parents, both devoted Bahá'í scholars, encouraged me and my brother to read and study the Writings and to take part in conferences. As a high school student, and a fairly diffident one, I did not yet have much to contribute, but I was inspired by the presentations at my first ABS conference and others that followed.

The Eleventh Annual Conference in London, Ontario, held in 1986, remains a highlight in my memories of that period of my life. By then, I was a university student. I had been a member of the Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies at McMaster University and gained some experience in trying to promote Bahá'í scholarship on campus. Inspired by *The Promise of World Peace*, which was at the heart of the conference that year, I decided to write my bachelor's thesis on a comparison of modern utopian and dystopian thought with the Bahá'í vision of the destiny of humanity. This marked the beginning of a lifelong interest in utopian thinking, which I was later able to examine more deeply in

my doctoral dissertation. I realized in time that the topic was vaster and more complex than suggested by my initial foray into it, but I considered it a great honor when my paper on the subject was published in the first volume of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 1989.¹ Even more importantly, the project—and the encouragement I received from the *Journal*—awakened in me the joy that comes with the effort to correlate the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought. This joy has been rekindled in me over the years whenever I have made space for it in my life.

Although my involvement with the Association has been regrettably sporadic, it has always been meaningful to me. Among other things, it has enabled me to share some thoughts on the place of literary studies within the field of Bahá'í Studies. This is an area that is undervalued in society generally, and perhaps also within the Bahá'í community. However, I firmly believe that the study of literature offers important insights into human life and the life of society, enabling us to better read our realities. It can also help us acquire knowledge, skills, and approaches that are valuable for the study of the Sacred Writings. At the same time, the vision of the Faith sheds a unique light on the questions with which good literature grapples: the purpose of life, the truth of human nature, the relationship

1 Elham Afnan, "The Good of the World and the Happiness of the Nations: A Study of Modern Utopian and Dystopian Literature." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4.

between the individual and society, the tension between unity and diversity, and many others.

The message of the Universal House of Justice dated 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada was released at a time when I was serving at the Bahá'í World Centre. Through my service, I had the privilege of coming into contact with many friends who were—and still are—actively involved in translating the guidance in that message into action, both in their individual academic endeavors and in their contributions to the Association. I have witnessed the increasing efforts among Bahá'í academics to learn—just as the Bahá'í community more generally is learning—about the relationship between study and action, accompanying one another in service, and finding coherence in different areas of endeavor. It has been encouraging to see how the Association, guided by the message, has brought its work ever closer to the conceptual framework of the global Plans of the Faith, for example through the development of collaborative initiatives such as reading groups and thematic seminars, and the expansion and enhancement of the Association's publications. It is also gratifying, as I reminisce about the start of my own involvement with the Association, to see that an ever-increasing number of young students and scholars of the Faith are contributing to its work. May we all be enabled to fulfill the hope of the House of Justice and “wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls

and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world” (24 July 2013).

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Humble, Patient, Lovingly Accompanied Efforts

JULIA BERGER

Soon after formally joining the Bahá'í community as an undergraduate student in 1994, ABS was one of the first venues where I saw the Bahá'í Faith come alive: so many Bahá'ís in one place, exploring a breadth of social, historical, practical, and professional themes, trying to bring the light of the Revelation to questions emerging from their respective fields of endeavor. Twenty years later, as a PhD student in Religious Studies, ABS continued to be a wellspring of inspiration, where I could learn from others more advanced in their studies and understanding of the Faith; I continued to benefit from caring mentors, colleagues and—at this early stage—the accompaniment of other scholars exploring the implications of an evolving “conceptual framework” that the House of Justice had introduced to the Bahá'í community. I was beginning to grasp, and to experience, what it meant to be a religious community in a humble posture of learning.

Several years later, when I began to serve on the ABS Executive Committee, that mode of learning came into sharp relief. It was reflected in the humility that friends (distinguished

in their respective fields) brought to the consultations, an orientation towards experimentation, a courage to examine long-standing practices and to consider how these needed to evolve in response to needs and exigencies, a sensitivity to how these changes may be received by the Bahá'í community, an unwavering grounding in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice—and, always necessary, a sense of humor to lighten the weighty tasks before us.

During my service with ABS, I witnessed organic development in a way I hadn't seen before, as we grappled with the question: what does it look like for the structures of the Association to evolve as needs and capacities grow? What we see today in the nearly twenty in-depth, interactive, ABS seminars on themes including consciousness, media, health, education, technology, and political science, which are engaging several hundred scholars, professionals, and community leaders, started out some years ago as small “fishbowl conversations” at the ABS conference. In these humble settings, the Association tried to create a space for more dynamic, interactive learning spaces—moving beyond a panelist-audience format to explore how consultation and reflection could catalyze exploration, knowledge-generation and collective learning. From year to year, approaches were refined, ideas were clarified, our understanding of the conceptual framework grew with experience and a larger group of friends were engaged in learning processes. A Committee for Collaborative Initiatives was formed to

systematize learning from these efforts and to accompany a growing body of facilitators.

I recall also the complex task before the Executive Committee of trying to reimagine the Annual ABS Conference. How, we asked ourselves, could we create a learning space that didn't reify the prevailing modes of academic conferences and their approach to knowledge generation—often characterized by passive audiences, a sharp division between “experts” and attendees, one-off encounters, and a prevalence of materialist worldviews, even as much impressive and worthwhile research was being brought to light? How could the practices of consultation, action-reflection, accompaniment, universal participation, organic growth, and collaboration between individuals-communities-institutions all be brought to bear on the role and structure of the Conference? At the same time, how could we engage the Bahá'í community in this evolution? There were many differing views in our consultations about how to proceed as we earnestly, in our own ways, strove to advance our understanding of the guidance and its implications, lovingly and patiently accompanied by the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States.

As I look back at the trajectory of the Association, from my earliest experiences in 1995 to the upcoming 50th anniversary conference, I am amazed by not only the pace and ingenuity of ABS' evolution but perhaps even more so by the processes that have

animated it. Keen attention to growing insights—from Institute processes, from the humble experiences of community-building endeavors, from the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, from the diplomatic efforts of the Bahá'í International Community, and from a growing body of experience of Bahá'ís across diverse professions and academic fields—has been paired with the tireless efforts to advance understanding of the guidance and the application of an evolving framework for collective learning. I would be remiss not to mention the lifelong friendships that have emerged from my experiences, and wonderful memories of shared hotel rooms, late-night consultations, and endless games of salad bowl that brought us to stitches.

Today, I write from the perspective of one serving as a Curriculum Development Specialist at the Wilmette Institute, which earlier this year was awarded accreditation as a higher learning institution with the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) and earned recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). As the Institute's Bahá'í-inspired courses in social transformation are offered to students in a growing number of universities, it is inspiring to look to the trajectory of the Association for Bahá'í Studies to remember how humble, patient, lovingly accompanied efforts—rooted in a vision of human nobility, unity and justice—can guide us to opportunities and capacities we could have scarcely imagined.

To “Hear the Hidden Truths...”— Learning of a Life of a Life of Learning

JORDAN BIGHORN

In August of 2023, surrounded by the sweltering summer heat of Atlanta, Georgia, cooled by the air-conditioned plenary ballroom of the Crowne Plaza, and awe-struck by the coalescence of memory and dream, I found myself on stage, offering greetings and welcome on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, to the participants of the 47th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS).

Just three months prior, I had stood before the delegates of the 73rd National Convention of the Bahá'ís of Canada as a newly elected member of that country's National Assembly, floating in reflection of the many strands of my life-story that, over the past twenty years, had been slowly woven into a pattern of sacrifice, service, and longing for further clarity and understanding of God's divine tapestry. In fact, it could be said that that pattern began to emerge in 2003 at the 27th ABS annual conference.

*glory, and this cannot be attained
save through the knowledge of
His Divine Manifestation.*¹

It is a truly difficult, terribly exciting, and a potentially “unauthorized” endeavor to reflect on a journey whilst the wayfarer is still desperately navigating the path ahead. It calls to mind the tragic tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, two lovers emerging out of the darkness of the underworld into the light of the outer world; I pray that I have journeyed far enough into the light of knowledge so as not to turn my head and slip back into the dark of ignorance.

Fortunately, an immediate feature of my journey has been far more individuals, experiences, blessings and opportunities than one sole Eurydice. In fact, a pre-strand of my life-story began in Atlanta some fifty years prior to the 2023 annual conference, where my mother suffered birth and separation by adoption from my older half-brother, while simultaneously beginning a journey of reunion with her Best Beloved via a fortuitous meeting with local Bahá'ís. Unlike the conclusion of most Greek tragedies, she turned back, only to see her first born fade into his adoptive family, but she then turned forward and fixed her gaze on Bahá'u'lláh, such that she eventually reunited with her son, as all things return to oneness on His path.

*The source of all learning is the
knowledge of God, exalted be His*

1 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:19.

*True loss is for him whose days
have been spent in utter ignorance
of his self.*²

My parents, Jacob and Deloria Bighorn, are true educators. My father followed a path of academic teaching to support students in classroom settings, and my mother followed a path of relational teaching to support students in counselling sessions. With Masters degrees and an unruly rivalry between their interstate undergraduate alma maters, my parents established a foundation, horizon, and skyline of learning metrics, objectives, and expectations of the power of education. They taught from their heart and soul, leaving the mind and body to discover hidden meaning, interconnect with the environment, ultimately offering true accompaniment for students to determine their own reading of reality.

The methodology they employed to maintain balance between the spiritual coherence and material contrast of the self as it develops knowledge and identity was the symphonic harmonization between Indigenous Knowledge Systems of creation and the Written Word of God. To draw on the 2013 Universal House of Justice letter to ABS, the interplay between a ceremonial approach to lesson planning while finding flickers of reflection throughout the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, is akin to “a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities...which

becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates.”³ For an Indigenous people and culture whose learning environment for millennia moved, breathed, lived, and died in direct relationship with its students, it is little wonder that after being mandated for the past 150 years to learn while sitting in chairs behind desks, separated from the matrix of creation in the form of industrialized education, the most natural recourse would be to shift that learning environment towards the realm of relationship between human beings, as the world's people continued to arrive on the shores of North America.

*The essence of all that We have
revealed for thee is Justice, is for
man to free himself from idle fancy
and imitation, discern with the
eye of oneness His glorious handi-
work, and look into all things with
a searching eye.*⁴

In the years leading up to the 2003 ABS annual conference, it could be said that I did not seek to free myself from idle fancy and imitation. Rather, pursuing a university degree and employment still presented a solid path forward. I was not aware of the Association, its history, activities, let alone annual conferences, but thanks to shifts and alignment in the environment, an opportunity would arise to both apply and be awarded the inaugural Tawacin Waste

2 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:22.

3 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

4 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:23.

Win Indigenous scholarship in honor of Patricia Locke. I was also invited to present on a topic of interest. My mother still delights in recounting how, during my preparations, I called her in a flurry with the question, “Mom! I need you to tell me everything you know about the Covenant.”

The beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, spoke of “the power of the Holy Spirit which is manifest and quickening”⁵ humanity. One experience that certainly facilitated such movement was the scholarship award ceremony orchestrated, fought for, maintained, and delivered by Indigenous Bahá’í matriarchs, including my mother. While the women pronounced to the audience the ceremonial aspects of the scholarship and an Indigenous methodology of honoring, other notable men provided support, with Mr. Stephen Birkland, then Continental Counsellor, presenting the award. In that moment, placed between representatives of true spiritual mothers and fathers, it was as though I was born again. I may never fully understand what happened that weekend in 2003, but by the time I arrived back at my apartment in Seattle, Washington, I knew I had lost all interest in imitation and seemingly had no time for idleness.

*True remembrance is to make mention of the Lord, the All-Praised, and forget aught else beside Him.*⁶

5 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *The Power of Divine Assistance* ¶ 84.

6 Bahá’u’lláh, in *Bahá’í Sacred Writings* 8:7.

By the time the 2004 annual conference arrived—after a year of reading, reflecting, searching, and serving—I was ready to share what I had learned. Oddly enough, that conference proved to be the occasion for a different kind of ceremonial birth: a chance meeting between sessions with a former schoolmate who would ultimately become my wife. In keeping with non-imitation and anti-idleness, prior to attending the conference I had concluded that I no longer needed to seek a helpmate, and that were it to ever happen, that it would be she who would initiate the process. I found strength and certitude to later accept her proposal, thanks to factors including our meeting at ABS, which to date had endeavored to follow a strict path of learning in its own right, seeking those similar horizons and skylines as guided by the Universal House of Justice and supported by the two National Assemblies of Canada and the United States. Between the two conferences, I found a personal means to transform a learning “conceptual framework” into a matrix of knowledge generation to “systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions.”⁷ Consequently, Meleyna and I married in 2006.

As one might expect, refocusing on a new growing family, burgeoning career, and other opportunities of service demanded attention and action which kept me away from ABS for almost

7 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

ten years—which brings me back to 2023. To look back, once again, invites analogy to Orpheus and Eurydice. Even at this stage, I am unsure how and what to describe when surveying the extraordinary chain of events that has continued to provide a deep sense of certainty and calm throughout my life since the 2003 ABS conference in San Francisco. Truly, however, I can find no sure step but to begin with my mother.

Every human being is preceded by their mother. She is the portal between one matrix and another, and in my experience not only has my mother provided that in body, but more so in spirit. From her attachment to the Faith in her youth, to her long-suffering journey to find her first born, to her constant preparation of places, opportunities, and experiences for me to learn and grow from far beyond my childhood and public education, she has always been there when I would “take my first steps.”

Leading up to Ridván 2023, my mother requested resignation from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada due to advanced age and the impacts of health on her capacity to fully carry out her service. That same year, Mr. Stephen Birkland also requested resignation from the Universal House of Justice. Both requests were granted, and a few short months after the Universal House of Justice was elected in April 2023 followed by National Assembly in May, there we all were, stage side in Atlanta for the 47th ABS annual conference, some twenty years after my mother

and Mr. Birkland accompanied me from one plane of existence to another on that same conference stage in 2003.

*O Lord, help Thou Thy loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created beings. Make them to hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded in the heart of all that is. Make them to be ensigns of guidance amongst all creatures, and piercing rays of the mind shedding forth their light in this, the “first life”. Make them to be leaders unto Thee, guides unto Thy path, runners urging men on to Thy Kingdom.*⁸

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A Vision of What a Bahá'í Life Could Encompass

GEOFFREY CAMERON

I attended my first ABS conferences with my father when I was in high school and in the early years of university. What I remember most clearly was being inspired by presenters who shared a unique perspective on their fields of study. I could see that they were applying Bahá'í principles to the issues, questions, and approaches of their areas of expertise, and this allowed them to say something interesting and distinctive. They were psychologists, political theorists, and lawyers, and the annual conference provided a venue for others to learn how they were correlating ideas from the Bahá'í teachings to their research and professional lives. Attending these conferences expanded my vision of what a Bahá'í life could encompass: not only service to my community, but a way of thinking about and relating to a body of knowledge.

As an undergraduate, I began to view my university as a place where I could do something similar. The ABS, at that time, supported Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada, and I was eager to help create a student group that could promote the study of the history, teachings, and philosophy of the Bahá'í Faith. There were a handful

of Bahá'í students on campus, and we established a student organization that could promote Bahá'í scholarship alongside campus-based devotional gatherings and study circles. We began by inviting guest speakers who would share a Bahá'í perspective on social issues, and this would attract dozens of our classmates. Eventually, we took turns organizing discussions where we tried to apply Bahá'í principles to the questions of our disciplines, sharing our insights with other members of the student club. One summer we even organized a weekend-long Bahá'í studies conference at the university where we invited Bahá'í academics to give talks and presentations. The support and encouragement of ABS helped us to develop these initiatives, and they formed a central part of my undergraduate education.

During this time, the framework for action was in its early stages of development in Canada, and it helped to root me in the life of the local community where I studied. However, the ABS and our Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies fostered another level of coherence by helping me to guard against fragmenting the ideas I was studying from the beliefs that shaped the rest of my life. Undergraduate studies can be exhilarating and confusing, both socially and intellectually. There are powerful forces competing for the attention and allegiance of young people, and my exposure to and engagement with Bahá'í scholarship helped to guide my thinking and choices throughout university—at a

time when the undergraduate seminars of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) were not yet offered.

Indeed, today there are an expanding number of agencies and initiatives that are helping to enrich the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. The development of the institute process, the seminars offered by ISGP, the content generated by Offices of External Affairs, materials created by Bahá'í-inspired organizations and more have dramatically expanded the ideas and resources available to those participating in academic and public discourses.

However, the Association for Bahá'í Studies continues to pursue a unique and essential mission, as described by the Universal House of Justice: to create “specialized settings” to “promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines” (24 July 2013). This is the kind of work that ABS has been pursuing since its inception. It has created spaces – ranging from conferences and seminars to workshops and reading groups—that allow people to explore the relationship of the Bahá'í teachings to a wide range of interests. Several years ago, I collaborated with several friends to organize a seminar before the annual conference where we could discuss an emerging academic and public discourse around liberalism and post-liberalism. Some of us were academics, others were not, some were political philosophers by training, others were not; however, we were able to spend two days together trying to sift through some of the ideas published by prominent thinkers and weigh them

against the principles of the Faith. This kind of activity has become more central to the work of ABS and I think it has proven to be deeply enriching to those who have participated in it. ABS continues to help people of all ages encounter the ideas that shape our world in a context where the Bahá'í teachings can illuminate their value and application.

At some point during my undergraduate studies, someone gave me a box of old ABS publications – including what was called the *Bahá'í Studies Notebook*, a predecessor publication to *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. I found a copy that included an article written by my father on “The Role of Nutrition in Health and Disease,” published in 1985. He was a young doctor who was trying to correlate the Bahá'í teachings on health and healing with a public discourse on nutrition, in light of scientific and medical evidence. The publication was his attempt to seek out an intellectual coherence between science and religion, and between his profession and his beliefs. More than forty years later, I have made my own efforts to do something similar in relation to my own field of study. What connects us is a long-standing institution, built through the devoted efforts of countless people and guided over the decades by the Universal House of Justice and two National Spiritual Assemblies. The ABS remains, after these many years, a unique and valuable agency that welcomes every inquiring mind into an examination of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and the fields of human knowledge and endeavor.

Fostering a Practice of Accompaniment in the Social Sciences

CHARLES V. CARNEGIE

I started attending ABS conferences in the 1990s as a junior faculty member, happy to be in a place where one could meet and freely converse with other up and coming and more seasoned Bahá'í scholars about the Faith and about correlating its teachings with contemporary thought. In my experience, ABS gatherings fostered an environment of encouragement that offered a refreshing contrast from that of so many academic conferences where people of faith are made to feel muzzled by a mandatory secularism that rules talk of religion out of bounds, and where snide and sometimes unkind speech and an ever-present spirit of competition among scholars-on-the-make tend to create an all-pervasive sense of anxiety.

Of course, a primary aim of the Association from its inception has been to establish Bahá'í Studies as a legitimate and worthwhile field of academic inquiry. Considering this, ABS conferences have in some respects been modeled on their academic disciplinary counterparts and shared several of the features and aims of other academic conferences. Like them, the annual ABS conference was structured around simultaneous, themed breakout panel

sessions; there were literature displays featuring the Association's journal and other recent scholarly publications; and the meetings offered opportunities for social networking and gathering outside of the formal program. The annual conference sought to highlight the various areas of inquiry within the broad field of Bahá'í studies, and to recognize distinguished scholarship through the keynote Hasan Baluzi Lecture and various plenary panels.

As supportive and encouraging as the annual conferences were, their episodic, discontinuous character did not adequately allow for the sustained development of collaborative scholarly projects or the systematic nurturing over time of young Bahá'í scholars. One way in which the Association attempted, back then, to meet these needs was to encourage and support the formation of specialized working groups around particular disciplinary or applied areas of interest. And, in the ensuing decades at the level of the international Bahá'í community, the development of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity has contributed considerably towards nurturing and building a community of discourse among undergraduate and graduate students.

Part of the challenge facing the development of new traditions of scholarship deeply informed by Bahá'í principles and ideas is that certain common processes and practices embedded in the formative scholarly traditions dominant in the world are so strikingly at variance with Bahá'í ideals. Whereas

dominant modes of scholarly practice are often infused with the spirit of competition, structured around controversy, and propelled by advocates grouped into opposing camps, Bahá'ís—guided by the overarching and urgent aim of contributing to the oneness and betterment of mankind—are motivated and more inclined to seek points of unity and to strive to arrive at shared understandings.

In the social sciences and in my own field of sociocultural anthropology, the training of graduate students has tended to be more individualized than collaborative, as have professional research and publication. Ironically, scholarship is perhaps more individually centered in these disciplines whose focus is the study of human society, than it is in the natural sciences, where researchers often work together in teams across different institutions or in a single lab, and publications frequently have several authors. Moreover, as in other fields of study, the social sciences have encouraged and been advanced through disciplinary specialization and sub-specialization. Undoubtedly, this paradigmatic emphasis on specialization and individuated knowledge production has shifted somewhat in anthropology in recent decades, in response to insights from feminism and other influences. Anthropologists and other social scientists are now actively involved in several of the areas of interdisciplinary inquiry that have emerged and taken center stage in the academy, and many employ more collaborative methods, such as participatory action

research. However, the dominant model persists.

It has been especially heartening, then, to see the varied ways in which ABS has sought systematically over the past decade or so to nurture a collaborative process of learning both within and beyond the annual conference. Among the ways in which it is doing so are through reading groups that focus on particular texts or topics over an extended period, and seminars that bring together specialists from within a discipline and adjacent fields as well as other interested non-specialists to inquire more intensively into a given question or theme over two or three days. These settings provide opportunities and a context for scholars who have been trained in particular fields and pursued research along narrow corridors of specialization to accompany each other and those from other fields to (re)examine foundational texts and consider their implications—in light of Bahá'í ideas—for urgent questions affecting contemporary society. And with the technological capacity to have people join such discussions from locations across the globe, the reach of some of these online forums now allows for far more diverse participation. Happily, these efforts are preparing growing numbers of participants from the Association's broader membership to engage more confidently in the discourses of society, and they are also bearing fruit in jointly authored publications, some of which can be seen in recent issues of *The Journal for Bahá'í Studies*.

Every Moment Is a Fresh Beginning

ROSHAN DANESH

I first heard of the ABS long before knowing what it was.

I was three years old when the ABS was founded in 1975. From those early childhood years I recall hearing the words “Association for Bahá’í Studies” as part of the adult conversations that would take place around me at home. My father, Hossain Danesh, and my uncle, William Hatcher, along with many others, were involved in the founding of the ABS. They often engaged in, sometimes loud, frequently dynamic conversations about any number of Bahá’í-related topics. I remember Bahá’í studies coming up a lot, though I had no idea what that meant.

As I got older, the ABS remained one of the two integral Bahá’í-related venues that structured my life. The other was Ballet Shayda, my mother Michele’s dance company, which was being built up at the same time as the ABS. Bahá’í life involved being around dance studios and performances, or on the periphery of talks, symposiums or conferences related to Bahá’í studies.

When I was seven or eight I distinctly remember being dragged around the campus of the University of Ottawa by Dad, in frigid winter conditions, looking at possible offices for the ABS. In 1981, the ABS headquarters

on the campus was purchased by the Canadian Bahá’í community, where it remains today.

I share these memory fragments only as a reminder that, as is attributed to T.S. Eliot, “every moment is a fresh beginning.” As the Bahá’í community formed the ABS in the 1970s it was, as is the case with so many Bahá’í endeavors, an audacious act, made in full expectancy that the ABS would change, evolve, and look very different in the future. Just as we know the Bahá’í Administrative Order at one time was “rudimentary” and “embryonic” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 314) and remains in the midst of ongoing evolution, Bahá’í studies, and entities such as ABS that foster and support it, are never static.

I have experienced this inevitability of change in my own interaction with ABS since those childhood days, which has included serving on and off over two decades as the Editor of *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, as a member of the *Journal’s* Editorial Board, and on the Executive Committee of the ABS. While there have been ebbs and flows, and frustrations, struggles and successes, certain directions of change are clear.

One of the most pronounced changes I have observed has been an exploration of the ways in which the progressive evolution of ideas is an embedded phenomenon—that knowledge generation occurs through particular forms of interaction with, and not in separation from, community, social, and cultural forces.

This change is expressed in many visible ways: a growing focus on more experiential and participatory learning in conferences and symposiums; greater methodological experimentation in how research and knowledge generation may occur in group settings and collective ways; and a greater focus on scholarship that explores the intersection of Bahá'í ideas with social discourses and processes of change.

But, of course, being committed to the inevitability of change, as the Bahá'í Faith is, means always striving to look around the corner at what comes next.

In a world in deepening crisis, where the forces of both pulling together and pulling apart are daily intensifying, a challenge for Bahá'í studies, and the Bahá'í community, will be to increasingly research and provide knowledge of how to translate the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh into tangible solutions to the daily suffering, conflicts, and instability suffered by the mass of humanity. To further and more holistically embrace the ideal that the pursuit of knowledge is a moral obligation to humanity and that “scientific thought and its creation is the common and shared heritage of mankind” (Salam).

In practice, this will involve the ABS building upon the shifts that are already occurring through the exploration of the embedded nature of scholarship. This will include evolving approaches to the study of the Bahá'í Faith that are increasingly layered, plural, and able to be applied by peoples and communities in an active way that

addresses the fissures and flailing embroiling humanity.

In doing this, we must remember always that our efforts at any moment in time are just that—efforts at a moment in time. As we continue to evolve the ABS in the years and decades ahead, we must do so with the humility of knowing that today's ABS will not be tomorrow's; just as the embryonic ABS I naively observed as a child is not the same as the ABS of today.

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Growing Up in the Shadow of the Bomb

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG

I grew up, almost literally, in the shadow of the bomb. Trinity Site—where the world's first atomic device was detonated—lay just thirty miles from where I lived at New Mexico Tech in Socorro. Neighbors of ours had worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory, some 150 miles to the north, contributing to the construction of that first device. Sandia Base in Albuquerque stockpiled nuclear weapons inside a hollowed-out mountain, a fact that made us acutely aware of our status as a potential first-strike target. Warplanes routinely traced the length of the Rio Grande valley overhead, a steady reminder of the age we lived in.

It was not the bomb, however, that first drew me toward physics—it was lightning. The desert storms near my home were powerful and close, and a young person caught outdoors before a thunderstorm had good reason to be cautious. The physicists studying those same storms from purpose-built structures on campus and in the mountains did not share that vulnerability. Science, I came to appreciate, offered something genuinely useful: understanding, protection, and control.

A complicating question arose during the Vietnam War years. Physics

was big science, and big science was entangled with weapons development—including weapons of the kind tested not far from where I had grown up. To pursue physics, it seemed to me then, was to accept some degree of involvement with the military-industrial complex. That prospect weighed on me considerably. It put my intended path in doubt and left me uncertain about which direction to take.

What followed was a period of exploration. I looked seriously into the world's major religions, spent time in a mountain cave, attended yoga classes, read Nietzsche, and hitchhiked across the country. In time, I came across Bahá'ís and declared my belief. I found in the Bahá'í Faith a perspective I had not anticipated: that work carried out in a spirit of service is itself a form of worship, and that science and religion are not in conflict but naturally harmonious. I returned to school—and to physics.

The culture of science that I grew up in and was privileged to participate in was, in many ways, the fullest flowering of Western European culture. In it, men and increasingly women pursued truth in ways that honored the Enlightenment's ideals of knowledge and rational endeavor. Truth obtained through the clash of differing opinions, and the hard-won knowledge derived from rigorous experimentation, were the bedrock of scientific practice. And it worked whatever your culture, age, or sex. It was a force that unified people across the world. And it gave rise to the technologies that have reconfigured the

way most of us live. To be a scientist in the second half of the 20th century was truly delightful.

While “big physics”—as embodied by nuclear bomb development at Los Alamos National Laboratory—was a dominant force in science when I was beginning my career, there were other emerging trends. One was the exploration of spiritual and philosophical perspectives within science exemplified by books like *The Tao of Physics*. Published in 1975, this bestseller challenged the materialist assumptions of Western thought. Two others were the emergence of semiconductor technologies and the development of personal computers. Another was the growth of laser research and interest in photonic quantum effects—a field where I worked. In New Mexico and elsewhere, there was growing interest in solar energy. In the Bahá'í world, William Hatcher wrote important articles, beginning in 1969, on the harmony of science and religion.

ABS was a wonderful venue to explore this kind of thinking. Having grown up on a campus where discussion of religion was frowned upon and science was the standard of inquiry, I found the Association for Bahá'í Studies to be not only a place to meet like-minded people and exchange ideas, but also a “life support system” for those of us from a secular background. Special Interest Groups formed under the aegis of ABS were especially valuable from that and other perspectives. As was the case in science, opportunities for discussion, shared dinners,

and question-and-answer sessions advanced the formation of communities of similarly interested people—a necessary component of the generation of new knowledge. Plenary talks at ABS Conferences—often by members of the Continental Board of Counsellors or of the Universal House of Justice—were widely anticipated and well attended.

My own contributions to ABS have been varied. I had the privilege of joining William Hatcher and several others to start the ABS Science and Religion Special Interest Group (SIG), which held its first session at the 12th Annual ABS Conference in 1987 at Princeton University. After finishing a postdoc at Bell Labs in New Jersey, I started a research career in 1989 at Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT), one of Japan's largest companies. In 1991, with assistance from Hossain Danesh, then chairman of the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America (ABS-NA), I helped found the Association for Bahá'í Studies–Japan. The Association was an affiliate, proceeding along the same lines as ABS-NA but on a reduced scale. Like ABS-NA, it held annual conferences, featured invited speakers and talks by distinguished visitors, and presented music and arts programs (including a Bahá'í tea ceremony and a memorable *koto* performance by a concert-hall artist). Like ABS-NA, ABS-Japan provided a way for members of the Japanese Bahá'í community and others to come together, establishing a sense of togetherness and fostering an exchange of ideas.

Back in North America, I also served as a member of the ABS Executive Committee for several years, received the ABS-NA Award for Excellence in 2006, and have worked with several colleagues to teach the Science, Religion, and the Bahá'í Faith course at the Wilmette Institute (and now at the Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History) for the past fourteen years—an experience informed by, and informing, my ongoing participation in ABS spaces devoted to exploring the topic of science and religion.

THE PURSUIT OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

I would like to close by sharing several thoughts and conclusions arrived at over many years and offered here in no particular order.

One conclusion, which I think of as having particular relevance now, is the need to advance the process of attracting increasing numbers of speakers and participants who are not Bahá'ís in our activities. This is both to provide opportunities for discourse and to better “read reality” in these challenging times. We tried to have non-Bahá'í speakers and participants in North America in the 2000s and the 2010s and achieved some success in that regard, but it didn't last. The Association of the Friends of Persian Culture conference, now in its thirty-sixth year, is a successful example of bringing together Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í speakers and participants. Much could be learned from their experience.

One historic limitation of the ABS that we are increasingly moving past is that it was mainly a single annual conference. There was a time when there were regional ABS conferences—we had some delightful ones in the Northern California Bay Area after the turn of the century—but they were discontinued when their supporting personnel were needed for large North American conferences. For a long time, putting on a single major annual conference seemed to preclude other activities. Fortunately, that is no longer the case.

The nature of ABS and its conferences began to shift following the 24 July 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This letter sparked widespread reflection on the role of the ABS in developing an evolving conceptual framework for engaging in social action, public discourse, and the promotion of learning. Much of the highly laudable work now undertaken under the auspices of the ABS stems from a continued and dedicated engagement with the guidance set forth in this letter.

One particular change stands out. For a long time, much of the content of the annual conferences was provided by talks presented by Special Interest Groups (SIGs). These SIGs contributed much of the vitality of ABS conferences, but too often they were abandoned to their own devices. The signs now are that this is no longer the

case: the Association has dedicated itself to systematically learning how to support groups that share specific interests, with new approaches being actively explored.

A small but notable sign of evolution in the conference is worth mentioning: poster sessions—long neglected but especially valuable for students—seem at last to be gaining ground.

Another big win is the continuing vitality of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. Kudos are certainly in order for the growing richness of the conversations and scholarly discourse that is being nourished within its pages.

Finally, the role of the affiliates, and the need for their support and nourishment, remains an aspect of the ABS endeavor little known in North America. Fresh thinking about the relationship between the affiliates and ABS-NA is in order.

The question of the relationship between science and religion that captivated me in my youth continues to do so. ABS continues to be a most useful forum for building on the richness of that relationship.



Kevin Locke presenting, accompanied by his flute, at the 15th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990, Atlanta, Georgia

Tapping into a Need

ABDU'L-MISSAGH
GHADIRIAN

It was 1976. The CN Tower had just opened in Toronto. Montreal was hosting the Summer Olympics. South of the border, Jimmy Carter was elected president. A 7.3 magnitude earthquake rocked Turkey. The movie *Rocky* was released. Israel carried out the Entebbe Raid, rescuing hostages in Uganda. In China, Mao Tse Tung died and there was a massive earthquake in Tangshan. The Bahá'í Faith was in the midst of a Five-Year Plan whose focus was massive expansion, consolidation of local communities and developing the distinctive character of Bahá'í life. And in that same year, several young researchers, including myself, determined to found an association to further a goal articulated by the Guardian: that the friends should acquire a deep, intellectual understanding of the teachings to address the needs of the modern world.

With the blessing of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, we established the "Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith." Our areas of interest were diverse. A glance at the titles of articles in the first volume of "Bahá'í Studies" (in 1976) reveals that diversity: "Apathy and Violence" by Hossein Danesh, "La réalité du monde extérieur et l'existence de Dieu" by Luc Dion, "Auguste

Forel: His Life and Enlightenment" by myself, "Science and the Bahá'í Faith" by William Hatcher, "The Missionary as Historian" by Douglas Martin, and "The Function of Revelation in Artistic Expression" by Otto Donald Rogers.

Our goal was twofold: to support those already engaged in research by providing a platform to share their work with the generality of the Bahá'í population and other like-minded friends, and to encourage others, especially the younger generations, to engage in research that combined spirituality and science/the arts. The Association's conferences grew in popularity over the years, attracting friends from all over North America and beyond. Not long after the Association was founded, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States joined Canada's in sponsoring this endeavor. Eventually, independent branches appeared in many parts of the world. It was clear that this Association had tapped into a need.

At the outset, this need was met by providing opportunities for scholars and students to speak and publish their work. The existence of the conference and the *Journal* encouraged the Bahá'í friends to do research with the aim of correlating the beliefs of the Faith "with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation on Scholarship*, 21 October 1943 to an individual believer). Administrative structures were created to enable both platforms to develop, and they evolved as time went on. Conferences gradually included

workshops where more scholars and researchers could present, and prizes were given in various categories. Since the landmark letter of the Universal House of Justice in 2013 regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies, not only have conferences developed much further, but other spaces have been created to enable all those involved in various fields of research to collaborate and share throughout the year. As to *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the format we know today is the result of much experimentation including eclectic volumes like the first one described above as well as single topic or single author issues.

Contributing to content, both as a conference presenter and as a writer, has enabled many budding scholars to sharpen their skills and to go on to produce noteworthy fruits in their chosen fields. I use my own path as an example. From the article mentioned above and another, "Count Leo Tolstoy and His Appreciation of the Baha'í Faith" published in 1979, about historical figures whose ideas aligned with the Faith, I went on to focus on matters pertaining to the relationship between medicine and spirituality. An article entitled "Alzheimer's Disease: Eclipse before Sunset" published in 1989 in the *Journal* eventually grew into a book by the same name. Some twenty-five years later, in 2015, I explored depression, including its spiritual aspects, in "Depression: Biological, Psychosocial and Spiritual Dimensions." I remember that in 2014 at an ABS conference, still a researcher at heart, I presented the results to date from a course on Spirituality and Ethics in Medicine which I developed at McGill University. An expanded discourse on that subject is also about to be published in book form.

Briefly, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has been a part of my professional and Bahá'í activity for most of my life and I owe so much to it. For, after all, where else can one find such a topnotch venue or journal in which one can present ideas that link science and spirituality?



Panel by the Bahá'í International Health Agency, Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 1985.
Standing: Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian

Reflections on My Forty-year Association with the Association

DUNCAN HANKS

After completing my undergraduate degree from Western University in the spring of 1984, I drove non-stop to my family home in Winnipeg. I arrived in the wee hours of the morning. The following day my father woke me up saying the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly was calling. I wasn't sure I knew what a National Spiritual Assembly was, and knew nothing of its Secretary. The Secretary apologized, saying he had hoped to speak with me before I left London, Ontario to drive to Winnipeg, but had missed his opportunity. He then explained that I was supposed to report to the Centre for Bahá'í Studies at 34 Copernicus Street, in Ottawa, to offer a year or two of service at the Association for Bahá'í Studies. I didn't know enough to question. So, as I hadn't unpacked my car, I borrowed my father's Esso credit card and drove to Ottawa. I reported to the Centre for Bahá'í Studies where they knew nothing about me, or my year of service. And thus, a year of service began, a stepping stone to a life of service.

By the time I arrived at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa, the Association had ten years of

experience. During my period of service, I had the privilege to be mentored by many keen and enthusiastic Bahá'í academics, including members of the executive committee. I also had the privilege of serving with several other young Bahá'ís whose dedication and commitment to their service established a pattern that still inspires me today. And while none of the youth serving at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies at that time were engaged in anything academic or scholarly themselves, the trust given them and the demands and expectations placed upon their shoulders inspired a belief that they had a role to play in shaping this emerging Bahá'í organization.

At the start of the Five Year Plan in 1974, the Universal House of Justice called upon Canada to "cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning." In 1975, the National Spiritual Assembly created the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith. In 1981, its mandate was refreshed "to expand and intensify the teaching of the Faith in Canadian Institutions of higher learning" and its name was changed to the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This was the orientation I was given when I arrived.

Among my first assignments was to research campus club constitutions from universities and colleges across Canada and draft what became the first template for the constitution of a Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies

(CABS). I was also asked to follow the learning and development of CABS across the country for many years. The CABS model was never formally adopted in the United States, where Bahá'í clubs continued to be the primary approach. In 1984, ten CABS were established and within a decade that number grew to forty-eight. As changes in the landscape and orientation of university policies towards campus clubs and their membership shifted, so did the understanding of the Association with regards to CABS. Moving away from a centralized model to align with the emerging framework for action and devolution of responsibility towards the grassroots in the context of building vibrant communities, CABS across Canada started to operate differently. Students on campuses across North America continued to organize Bahá'í clubs on campus, operating with an increasingly outward looking orientation that welcomed students and faculty of all or no Faiths to participate.

Over the decades, Bahá'í Clubs at universities organized a wide range of teaching and proclamation activities designed to increase the visibility of the Bahá'í Faith and to relate its teachings to important issues on campus and in the wider society. This has included the organization of presentations, lectures, symposia, forums, and firesides, as well as directly supporting local, regional, and national conferences. CABS and Bahá'í clubs support community building activities through the promotion of devotional gatherings and study circles on campus, galvanizing support

for the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), and assisting with national speaker tours called for by the Association or National Assembly. Historically, they have also supported many external affairs campaigns—such as those advocating for human rights and the right to education in Iran. Beyond public engagement, CABS and Bahá'í clubs integrated their work into university environments by gifting Bahá'í literature to libraries, engaging in academic course and curriculum development, and running mentorship programs. Many CABS sustained outreach through electronic newsletters, websites, social events, and sports or cultural activities, alongside periodic deepening sessions and social action. My understanding is that the learning of Bahá'í campus clubs continues to evolve. This advancement includes their engagement with collaborative inquiry through the Association's thematic seminars and reading groups that help connect students with each other and with professional and academic mentors in their respective fields. Increased collaboration with the ISGP is also reframing the efforts of Bahá'ís on campus. The challenge of introducing Bahá'í content and encouraging the creation of university courses related to studies on the Bahá'í Faith is ongoing.

Another aspect of my service was to provide support to a growing number of international affiliates of the Association. During the early years, the Association's executive committee accompanied the establishment of Associations for Bahá'í Studies

in five continents. It also established professional interest seminars creating unique learning opportunities in various disciplines. Eventually, the geographic mandate of the Association was defined as North America, allowing affiliates to operate with a greater degree of autonomy. And the professional interest seminars matured into thematic seminars that foster more collaborative inquiry.

While serving at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies, I was supervised by an extraordinarily gifted editor-in-chief, who taught me how to help edit proceedings from the first Symposium on the Bahá'í Faith and Islam (1984) and the Marxist-Bahá'í Dialogue (1986). I became an in-house specialist on diacritics using Unicode characters to represent Arabic script in Latin Letters. These academic seminars were early efforts by the Association to establish the Bahá'í Faith as an important area of academic inquiry, exploring and clarifying the Bahá'í position and understanding, and differentiating it from other religions and traditional belief systems or ideologies. This learning, and that of producing the Bahá'í Studies series—the precursor to the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (1988)—required a continuous effort to solicit content for publication. This area of the Association's learning continues to evolve, with the engagement of academics, scholars and practitioners from the wider society in all of the Association's areas of work. A natural next step for publishing came about in the 1990s through the Association's partnership with Wilfred Laurier

University Press to publish the *Bahá'í Studies* series of monographs on the study of the Sacred Texts, the principles and history of the Bahá'í religion, the development of the Bahá'í community, and the application of Bahá'í teachings to the contemporary needs of humanity.

Among the prominent features of the Association for Bahá'ís Studies is its annual conference. These too continue to undergo transformation. I helped organize five annual conferences on a wide diversity of themes. I was expected to travel and negotiate with venues, sign contracts, facilitate all conference logistics, set up and advise local teams to assist with planning and volunteers, prepare promotional materials, draft correspondence, and speak with Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í presenters to accurately relay the vision and objectives of the conference. And of course, it was understood that the conferences needed to be delivered on time and on budget.

Like most initiatives of the Association, over the years the annual conferences have steadily evolved. They have gradually moved away from a forum for independent Bahá'í academics to present scholarly works or areas of investigation, to approaches that support and sustain collaborative research and learning. In essence, the Association's annual conference and professional interest groups have been learning about moving away from Bahá'í scholarship as the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith where scholars and academic present their findings, towards a more deliberate process of collective learning around the application

of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in practice. Along this journey, the Association has continued to strengthen its practice of inviting non-Bahá'í scholars, academics, thinkers and practitioners to enrich the community's understanding of various themes. While the executive committee and conference program committees ensure the coherence of the program, the Association's executive committee and senior staff truly empower its staff and volunteers to assume complex responsibilities. And while many mistakes are made—and I know this from personal experience—capacity is built. The capacities I developed coordinating the annual conferences of the Association enabled my service to countless other conferences and learning events as an organizer, producer, presenter, and advisor.

The Association itself operates within the ecosystem of learning of the global Bahá'í Community. As such, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and national institutions has continuously shaped and informed the work of the Association. In its 23 July 2013 letter about the Association, the Universal House of Justice challenged the Association to reimagine its role. One simple illustration of this process involves how the Association reimaged the protagonists engaged in Bahá'ís studies. From its inception, the Association was a membership organization open to academics and professionals. For many years, the Association managed various categories of membership, charging fees. I had a role in maintaining these

membership categories, promoting membership campaigns and ensuring annual subscription goals were met. While this approach provided necessary financial resources, it was met with confusion by many friends who felt that the Association was somehow restricting its membership to formal academics or professionals. By removing the concept of membership, the Association began operating more as a cooperative effort wherein anyone aspiring to translate the Revelation into action was involved in Bahá'í scholarship. By removing the concept of paid tiers each with its own benefits, the Association freed itself from an operational obligation that required it to deliver some perceived benefit to its members on a regular basis, such as a regular newsletter or a quarterly publication of the *Bahá'í Studies* or *Journal for Bahá'í Studies*. The shift taking place was about moving the understanding of Bahá'í studies and scholarship away from something that a privileged or elite group of people were involved with, to an appreciation that every person has a role to play in the generation of knowledge and the betterment of the world, through service. As such, participatory or collaborative learning approaches have been introduced to the Association, entirely coherent with the global process of learning of the Bahá'í community.

There were many other functions and roles youth on a period of service provided the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This included being active members in their local communities.

The range of work-related tasks included cleaning and maintaining the Centre for Bahá'í Studies, drafting correspondence, assisting with publications, writing newsletters, shipping, logistical and secretarial support, and representation at meetings and conferences. But among the most enjoyable aspects was the privilege to meet and be mentored by so many truly gifted friends including many Hands of the Cause of God, members of senior elected and appointed Institutions, academics from around the world, and friends from coast to coast to coast.

The Association brings people together and creates a unique environment within which to learn and serve. In my case, I could never have imagined that the fateful call in 1984 inviting me to render a year or two of service starting at the Association for Bahá'í Studies heralded a rite of passage to a life of service. For the past four decades, I have had the bounty of serving the Faith and its Institutions internationally, continentally, nationally and locally. Much of the capacity developed early in my path of service enabled me to serve in countless spaces and in many representational and logistical roles. Many of those early mentors I met became my friends and colleagues, and continued to provide loving support and constant encouragement over the years. I am eternally grateful for how I was inspired to answer that first phone call to serve the Association for Bahá'í Studies, for it forever impacted my path of service.



Panel by the Bahá'í Institute for Environmental Design at the 12th annual conference, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987.

Sitting on the far left: Architect Fariborz Sahba

Divine Tension

MEREDITH B. FOLLEY

Not mechanistic, but divine,
 these harp strings taut with tension,
 sing with the Harpist's touch,
 straining from low to high and back again,
 stroking our yearning upward,
 stilling in our sinking downward.

For, physicality demands a base from which to rise,
 some challenge, rooted deep in soil or bone,
 and some ethereal point by which to guide
 compulsions of desire and despair.

Drowning in muck, we rise for air
 even as green tips reach for sky.

Here, from lowly, broken seeds,
 emerge the cells that anchor down,
 and strive, like neurons groping blind
 within the confines of the heart,
 to inch their way toward light.

And so, the unseen Harpist grasps
 tightens, tries and sounds
 tendrils, tendons, nerves, resolve,
 and with infinities of love,
 evokes from us our songs.

*This poem touches on how spiritual longing necessitates
physical existence and vice versa.*

A Responsibility that All Must Shoulder

HOLLY HANSON

An increasingly collective approach to the generation of knowledge has emerged over the decades in which I have had the gift of participating in the Association for Bahá'í Studies, and this advance has brought new challenges into focus. The vectors of learning have changed from mostly lecturers informing listeners to also including groups exploring questions together. This has happened both at the annual conference and in groups that met online and sometimes in person. Thinking with others at ABS venues—as listener, lecturer, and group participant—has sharpened my history research and deepened my contributions to communities, and I am confident that many others have had the same experience. Even though we are at the beginning of a path of discovering how Bahá'u'lláh intends for a future civilization to generate knowledge, the efforts made by participants in the spaces created by the ABS have already yielded results. Trying things out and learning from our actions, which the Universal House of Justice emphasized in its 2013 letter to the Association, has been essential, because the goal—a pattern of knowledge-generation characterized by universal participation that recognizes the

synergies of religion and science—is so far from the way our world is currently organized. In one group in which I have been involved, that path of learning has required finding ways to focus the members of a group who bring a wide range of experiences to the enquiry, and discovering how to identify and then to rigorously pursue truly productive questions.

What does the generation of knowledge look like when everyone is involved in it, but some areas of enquiry require decades of training? This is one of the fundamental, unsolved questions of modernity: the spread of schooling and the popularization of the scientific method yielded the innovations that started the industrial revolution, but the threat to the existing social order posed by educated masses led to the separation of theoretical and applied knowledge, and experts began to dominate knowledge generation. A path towards the resolution of this problem is inherent in the call of the Universal House of Justice that knowledge generation is “a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization” (27 December 2017). The worldwide endeavor of community-building provides an example of very large numbers participating, making observations and reaching conclusions based on experience, asking intentional questions and learning from the results.

A key element of what makes this work is shared experience: hundreds of thousands of people are pursuing common objectives using a common

set of tools.” Citizen science” is the name for large scale collective generation of knowledge built on shared experience in the natural sciences. In the humanities it is sometimes called “digital public humanities.” Tens of thousands of people making environmental observations, or hundreds correcting AI generated typescripts of medieval manuscripts show the synergies that can emerge when both human-scale observation and sophisticated forms of measurement are valued. This kind of endeavor requires a shared experience to study and ways to study it together.

One ABS group enquiry that I was involved in for several years emerged from an online group that read Thomas Piketty’s *Capitalism in the 21st Century* and then other works on economic inequality. From this shared beginning the group evolved in several directions. One strand of that group eventually focused on something that was a shared experience for the participants and others to whom they hoped to be useful: the contents of a first-year economics course. Another strand created a common experience by bringing people together to read descriptions—not analyses—of functioning economies. Reading books and articles together had allowed us to deepen our bonds as a group, but we needed to find further arenas for shared observation to move toward the possibility of knowledge generation.

The strand that began to read descriptions of economies yielded one of the most profound experiences of intellectual enquiry of my life. We realized,

in one of the periodic reflections of the economic inequality reading group, that no common vocabulary existed for capturing the social reality we were trying to understand. Neo-classical economists used one set of terms to perceive what they thought was important, Marxist economists used a different set of terms and a different set of concepts, and when we read ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the economy, we used a whole different set of terms and concepts. We decided to try to begin at the beginning of science, by making observations using a structured set of questions. In the document we prepared we explained our aspiration: “we are striving for a common language that will allow us to think with one mind, using words that all of us understand, and do not have assumptions about economic processes encoded in them.” There is not enough space to describe this language here, though perhaps it can be said that the language helped us to clearly see the conspicuous elements—such as actors, objects and places—as well as the tacit forces and spaces that shape economic systems. Through it we were able to see how economic forces coincide or conflict with spiritual forces, leading to an analytical framework and method we could all share. We thought of it as an evolving heuristic that would allow us to build a shared understanding of the nature of economy in all its relevant dimensions.

The materials we read over two days at the 2016 ABS conference were all chosen because they were rich descriptions of economic exchange, which

would allow us to do the very basic scientific step of observation alluded to above. In later meetings we continued to search for, and analyze, similar materials. The conversations could be dynamic and profound, although not everyone's cup of tea. Identifying a set of useful, open questions, asking them systematically, and reflecting on the results led the group who stayed with the enquiry towards questions beyond the landscape of our disciplinary training. For example, do patterns of economic exchange that give human beings agency need to operate at a scale at which people have real social relationships? Could it be that the spiritual energy and moral discipline that come from faith are necessary for economies to function in a way that fosters vital communities? If so, how much of our perceptions of economies are actually observations concerning the consequences of irreligion? The experience of this group was that the advice of the Universal House of Justice—to ask questions, to act systematically, and to reflect—led us in a quite productive direction.

Finally, when I look back at a quarter-century of participation in the activities of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, I think of the kindness, generosity, and very real sacrifice of the staff and the members of the Executive Committee. You prepared the intellectual/spiritual feast, we came and were nourished. Thank you for all you have done that has enabled us to learn and to grow. We are grateful.



Holly Hanson (left) and Kim Naqvi (right) facilitate a workshop on contributing to academic and professional discourses, 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012

Terraces by Night – Laylah bahá'í

Bologna, 8-9 October 2025

JULIO SAVI

Enthroned on the holy
mountain, crowned
with gold, girdled with
emeralds, the Queen of
Carmel has opened her
Court to all people tonight.

Joyous echoes of
hope in their ears
resound from the
Mountain of the Lord:

in the industrious
scattered vineyards
of towns and cities,
faithful husbandmen
work in a quiet, steady,
and peaceful effort

to distill delicious wines
from simple local grapes
and by that dispel bitterness
of discord, silliness
of ignorance, and embers
of conflicts and wars

from minds and hearts
through sweetness
of unity, savoriness
of justice, and freshness
of an abiding peace.

The Effects of the Association for Bahá'í Studies on My Academic Career

JOHN SOUTHALL HATCHER

Because the individuals who initiated the Canadian Association for Studies in the Bahá'í Faith (CASBF, the precursor of the Association for Bahá'í Studies) were dear friends—my brother William Hatcher, Hossain Danesh, Doug Martin—I was well aware of the effort that went into the creation of a scholarly institution devoted to cultivating intellectual and academic pursuits, as requested by a call from the Universal House of Justice. It was at this same time, in the summer of 1975, that I was inspired to apply the scholarly tools I had spent virtually a decade and three degrees developing to a subject that, since becoming a Bahá'í in 1960, had become most dear to my heart and mind.

The inspiration came to me as suddenly as Paul's experience of enlightenment on the road to Damascus. I paused outside the library as I realized that, should I desire it, I could now study and write about whatever was most dear to me and possibly useful to others as well. For me, that subject was the Bahá'í Faith, but not in any ordinary sense. It struck me that rather than

following the dictates and demands of others, I could apply all the tools and discipline I had acquired in writing scholarly articles while acquiring my BA, MA, and PhD degrees to studying the Bahá'í teachings, theories, and texts.

Underlying the impetus for this sudden transformation was my awareness that now there existed an institution and a publication that just might find value in such work. For example, in addition to the annual conferences held in Canada, CASBF had begun publishing monographs, the second of which had been my brother's work *The Science of Religion*.

And so it was that without expectation of any reward from the university, I began that summer what would be the first major work among the twenty-seven books I would go on to write about Bahá'í studies. The course I set that summer would also lead to service on the CASBF Executive Committee, to some thirteen years as editor of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and now to service as editor of ABSP (Association for Bahá'í Studies Publishing, a division of ABS dedicated to publishing books related to Bahá'í studies).

Not that the sheer number of works or years of service were what I had aspired to or envisioned in the summer of 1976. That precious summer I spent every morning (I'm a morning writer) at the keyboard alone (except for my cat who enjoyed the warmth and hum of the electric typewriter). But the driving force for this endeavor was the realization, the sudden certitude and

conviction that, like Paul, I could ask whatever question occurred to me, and if I searched the Bahá'í Writings and with sufficient creativity and focus, the answer would inevitably become clear to me.

This realization never, ever waned. And it was but the first step in my ongoing journey to becoming an avid student of Bahá'í Studies, for so it can now be designated after a half century of scholars, like myself, devoting their time to investigating the theology, ontology, history, and framework of the Bahá'í Faith. And even so has my confidence grown that Bahá'í Studies, as a body of learning unto itself, will continue to evolve in the future.

But what was the result of that first step? For days and more, I pondered what was the question I might ask for which I needed an answer. It had to be a query that was not patently obvious; since I had first approached the Bahá'í Writings in 1958, I had tested their logic, assaulted their theories and doctrines, and not once had I found them wanting. So the question had to be something challenging and different.

Finally, the question appeared to me one night as I lay on my bed studying the Writings. And once it occurred to me, I could think of nothing else, even though it was so obvious I found it strange it had not occurred to me before. It went something like this: If we are essentially spiritual beings and destined to end up transitioning to the placeless realm of pure spirit after this mortal coil, why had God in all His purposeful creation decided it would

be beneficial for us to begin our lives with the distracting illusion that we are physical beings? Or asked more simply, why did the Creator deem it needful to create a physical dimension to reality at all?

And that's how I spent the summer of 1976. And when it was done, I submitted my fifty-page reflection to CASBF that it might possibly qualify for presentation at the Second Annual Conference, which was to be held during that Christmas break in Bolton, Ontario. The talk, entitled "The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality," was accepted, was presented, and—I don't mind saying—was a hit! The talk became Volume 3 (1977) of the annual monographs and my life has never been the same since, though CASBF has changed remarkably in the half century since then. The name has changed to befit its expanded audience. Where the third conference had about 150 attendees, over 2,000 people attended the most recent conference in 2025. Instead of a monograph once a year, the Association for Bahá'í Studies publishes a widely respected quarterly, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and the organization supports and fosters a number of other important endeavors.

But this reflection is hardly about a single summer, however life-changing that work turned out to be. It seemed whatever question I dared pose to the Bahá'í texts only begot more questions. And I now realize that questions about God and His plan for us—individually and collectively—are endless. I also realized that I have found

no greater joy in my life than studying these questions, combing through the Bahá'í Writings for answers, and sharing what I discover with other equally curious souls.

Yet an article or two was hardly all that the Association for Bahá'í Studies inspired in my life. Since its inception fifty years ago, it has been the inspiration for some of my most creative writing and thinking. Beginning with that summer's transformative experience, in addition to the aforementioned twenty-seven books (several of which have been translated into other languages), I have written tens of articles, a multitude of poems, and given numerous talks and other presentations on the Bahá'í Faith.

But my participation in this stellar organization consisted of more than contributing books, articles, poems and such. The opportunity to serve as editor of the *Journal* and of ABSP—helping to provide an outlet for the creative scholarly work of Bahá'í scholars—is not only a wonderful culmination of all the opportunities to serve that this organization has offered me. For it is my belief that in the fifty years since the Universal House of Justice inspired three Canadian scholars to undertake this venture, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has, more than anything else, helped in a most impactful manner to establish Bahá'í Studies as a field of study unto itself.

The importance of this accomplishment—which is and will continue to be an ongoing effort—has to do with the fact that until the emergence of Bahá'í

Studies as a global academic field of endeavor, most Bahá'í scholars were faced with having to disguise their work in the field of Bahá'í thought in order for their work to become accepted, recognized, and published.

Or if they dared find a non-Bahá'í publisher to accept their work, they had to approach Bahá'í theories of reality, of history, and of human purpose, not as fact, not as if the author actually believed all this to be true and valid, but from a distance, as if to avow the legitimacy of the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings would characterize them and their work as belonging to the field of religious polemics rather than scholarship. And if they were aspiring to succeed in academia, such a label was lethal, an almost certain path to obscurity.

There is still much that needs to be done to advance Bahá'í Studies in the minds of scholars and academics so that this attitude can be completely uprooted and discarded. But before such a desired destiny can take place in the minds and scholarship of those who are not Bahá'ís, it must first take firm hold in the hearts and minds of Bahá'í scholars themselves who must show the same sort of daring and fearlessness in their own way that the Dawn-Breakers demonstrated so dramatically with their own life's blood during the heroic age of the Bahá'í Faith.

That summer when I decided where I wanted to focus my own academic work, I did not yet have tenure. I had a contract with the University of Oklahoma Press to devise a three-volume compendium of Old and Middle

English literature. But after two years of working day and night on this project, I realized that completing this work would require every spare minute of my life for years to come. What I also realized was that even were I successful, I would in some distant future possibly acquire the accolades of a relatively small cadre of medievalists, whose company, I had discovered at the various conferences I had attended, offered me but little joy. Thus I would have spent the better part of my academic career, in preparation for which I had spent years and degrees accomplishing what I thought I was supposed to (according to objectives others had established without consulting me).

But education, study, enlightenment, and really hard work should bring joy and, most important of all, freedom—freedom of thought, freedom to dare, and freedom to share the pearls of wisdom by diving deep and prying open those rough, crude shells of foreclosure. Yet the path I chose that summer has—through hard work and a great deal of good fortune—blessed me with jewels I treasure and the opportunity to set my mind free to meander wheresoever the Holy Spirit might inspire me to go. And thus far, I have found delight in each foray into the unknown, the placeless, the limpid streams of untrammelled imagination. So, as I approach the end of my life's journey, why should I cease now just when the world is quickly beginning to understand the wisdom in Bahá'u'lláh's framework for a global polity?



John S. Hatcher delivering the Balyuzi Lecture at the 29th annual conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005

Mutual Accompaniment on an Academic Path

MICHAEL KARLBERG and
DERIK SMITH

Over the past decade, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has been fostering processes of collaborative learning, mutual accompaniment, and capacity building among academics and professionals seeking to make distinctive contributions to the evolution of thought and practice in their fields. In the brief essay that follows, we reflect on how the Association has supported our own development in this regard, and how we have woven our involvement with the Association into the fabric of our engagement with colleagues from the wider society and our contributions to prevalent academic discourses.

We completed our doctoral studies in 2000 and 2004, respectively. This was before training institutes were well established across North America, before the current framework for action had crystallized around the Bahá'í world, and before the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) began offering seminars to university students and graduates. As Bahá'ís, trying to embark on an academic career at that time felt like wandering alone in the wilderness.

The Association for Bahá'í Studies existed then, but it was not yet able to foster robust processes of collective learning and mutual accompaniment. This was, in part, because these capacities had not yet been systematically developed across the North American Bahá'í community. In the decade that followed, however, the community was strengthening these capacities through training institutes, community building endeavors, and the first ISGP seminars.

On 24 July 2013, the Universal House of Justice offered guidance about the next stage in the development of the Association—guidance that accounted for the emergent capacities alluded to above. In the decade that followed, the Association began systematically learning how to foster collective efforts to read the discourse in a given academic or professional field, to analyze prevalent conceptions and underlying assumptions in a discourse, to consult about potential contributions to it, to test those contributions in various academic and professional spaces, to reflect on insights gained, and to sustain this approach over time.

One early effort to adopt this approach began in the months leading up to the Association's annual conference in 2017. One of us organized a panel exploring the academic implications of a concept—*constructive resilience*—that the Universal House of Justice had employed in a number of recent letters. This panel set in motion a process of collective learning involving a growing number of people, which continues to this day. The first steps on this path

of learning were a series of seminars on this theme. Early fruits of that process were shared in a special issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 2020 (vol. 30, no. 3).

As this process continued to unfold, substantive contributions to discourse were shared at several academic conferences, at a United Nations symposium, and in other academic and professional spaces concerned with processes of social change. New relationships were thus formed, and conversations advanced with actors from the wider society. Content that was emerging from these processes was also being tested in university classes on a number of campuses. And all of this occurred in parallel with additional ABS reading groups and seminars, which were enriched by growing numbers of participants who were experienced with the training institute process and the ISGP seminars.

In 2022, an article that emerged from this process was published online in *The Bahá'í World*, titled “The Pursuit of Social Justice.” The same year, a co-authored chapter was also published in a Routledge volume. The chapter’s title was “Responding to Injustice with Constructive Agency.” And this set us on a course to co-author a book in the hope of making an even more substantive contribution to the prevailing discourse on social justice.

That book—titled *Rethinking Social Justice*—has been accepted for publication in 2026 by a leading academic press. In it we trace the evolution of modern thought regarding the *ends* of

social justice and the *means* for pursuing it, and we offer a fresh perspective on both that is informed by the decade-long process alluded to above.

On the question of *ends*, we advance the thesis that diverse aspirations for social justice all orient toward the common horizon of *contributive justice*. We conceptualize contributive justice as a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Stated another way, contributive justice is achieved through social conditions that enable every soul to actualize their two-fold moral purpose. Some of these conditions may manifest differently in different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, such conditions can be understood as latent social possibilities—or affordances—that can be collectively discerned and acted upon through processes of moral empowerment, in efforts to advance toward them.

On the question of *means*, we advance the thesis that, though contentious means may still have a role to play in the pursuit of social justice, they have reached a point of diminishing returns. Therefore, within the broad ecology of movements for social justice across the planet, we need to begin centering radical forms of constructive agency as a primary means. We use the word *radical* according to its original meaning, which pertains to *root* causes. *Radical constructive agency* thus refers to the collective work of building new social

realities capable of supplanting anachronistic ones—new social realities that address the root causes of injustice and oppression. Stated another way, radical constructive agency is a means of releasing those society-building powers that are latent in the human spirit.

The reasoning and evidence we offer in support of these arguments are impossible to summarize in this brief essay. Suffice it to say that in the process leading up to the manuscript we were able to test and hone aspects of these arguments, and the language we were using to advance them, by workshopping ideas with hundreds of people over a number of years. This occurred through spaces within the Association for Bahá'í Studies, from conference panels to reading groups to seminars. It also occurred through spaces in the wider society, from academic conference presentations to university classroom discussions.

Once we had a draft of the manuscript, a number of individuals offered generous and valuable feedback on specific parts of it. A complete draft was then the focus of a two-day lab space held at the Association's 2025 annual conference. A further refined version of the manuscript was subsequently explored at a two-day outward-oriented colloquia hosted by the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego, which was attended by prominent scholars of social movement studies and nonviolent social change. And we have plans to continue engaging others with these ideas once the book is published.

We have tried to narrate salient features of this process not to draw attention to ourselves, but to illustrate the capacities for collaborative learning, mutual accompaniment, and capacity building that are steadily being strengthened within the Association and across the broader ecosystem of learning that includes training institutes, ISGP seminars, external affairs efforts, and other related endeavors. Perhaps the most significant feature of this process is the way our efforts within the Association and other arenas of learning have been woven together seamlessly with our professional efforts to contribute to prevalent academic discourses in the wider society. Participating in the Association and these other arenas of activity is not a retreat from our responsibilities to contribute to the evolution of thought in the wider society. On the contrary, the processes now being fostered across this entire ecosystem of learning are increasingly supporting the development and refinement of our contributions to prevalent discourses.

A growing number of people are beginning to understand and engage the Association with this understanding. We hope our brief narrative will inspire others to do the same. But a word of caution is in order. The Association is not an administrative entity that will do this work for us. It is a voluntary association of individuals learning to take purposeful initiative within a gradually emerging framework. This framework builds on habits of mind and collective practices fostered by our

training institutes and reinforced by ISGP seminars and other endeavors. And it beckons us—especially those who have been trained in these ways and are now entering academic fields and professions—to advance together on a path of learning and capacity building. Thus, in the aforementioned letter, we read that

The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution. (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013)

Theory and Practice in an Age of Transition. Open Book Publishing, 2026.

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In Quest of Polaris

NAVA KAVELIN

Most of us are searching for a guiding light to orient and illuminate our way. What will become the North Star of our lives? Which lodestar will orient the direction of our careers? For many Bahá'ís, the answer can feel pre-determined: service. We know from the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the voluminous scriptures in our Revelation, that the purpose of our lives—to know and to worship God—cannot be fulfilled without service. What may be less clear is what particular form our service will take—whether it will unfold mostly in the family, professional, or community arena. And how to achieve coherence among the three may feel like the most challenging question of all.

For most of my twenties and thirties, I was committed to a career path that was, in itself, an obvious form of service. I began my professional life with a four-year period of full-time service at the Bahá'í World Centre, followed by a period of pioneering in China, and when I eventually made my way back to the Western hemisphere, it was as a teacher.

When the opportunity to serve full time in the United States, at the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office, presented itself, I did not hesitate to apply. The true North on my life's compass had always been service.

But as a child, I loved to perform. I had secret dreams of becoming an actress—so secret that if any member of my family were to read this, it would come as a revelation to them. I guarded that aspiration and eventually buried it in middle school, deciding it wasn't "servicey" enough. After that, I began to daydream about what it might be like to be a broadcast journalist, a way to "perform" while doing something that seemed more obviously laudable to my fourteen-year old brain. I held onto that aspiration throughout all of high school and then changed my mind during senior year, deciding that teaching was the most noble path of service I could pursue, and one that I would probably enjoy.

I got a Bachelors Degree in English with a focus on Creative Writing and a Masters of Arts in Teaching. But the period of full-time service in the Holy Land that followed, which included eighteen months with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, began to shake up some of my thinking. While it was true that teaching was in and of itself a service-oriented profession, the state of education in our country (in most countries, perhaps) was grave. Segregation was somehow more alive now than it had been in the late 1960s—not enforced by law anymore, but by zip codes, district lines, housing prices, and the quiet machinery of de facto separation.

And so the question before me began to change, from the relative simplicity of "Which profession is most clearly a form of service?" to "How

does one read the needs of a particular field, discern its possibilities and distortions, and then learn to contribute to its transformation?" I did not yet have language for that question, but I had begun to sense that service was not only a matter of choosing the "right" arena. It was also a matter of learning how to think, act, and collaborate within *any* arena in light of a larger vision.

These new questions also left me in search of a new North Star. *Service* was simply too broad.

In my quest for my own personal Polaris, I traveled many paths. *Perhaps I could have more influence on my field as a school administrator.* I got a job as a middle school director. The politics and bureaucracy of the position were so personally crushing to me that I quit not one but two jobs in the same twelve-month period. *Ok, school administration is not for me.*

I prayed fervently one night asking the Blessed Beauty to literally "pluck me out of my current arena and plant me somewhere new. I know I'm on the wrong path." The next day I got a phone call inviting me to apply for the role of Senior Researcher and Writer at the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations office. Someone at the World Centre had recommended me. I knew with certainty I would get the job; it was an answered prayer. Besides, wouldn't I have an even greater influence on the field of education by contributing to the discourse about it?

While the job was in itself a dream come true—one I had never known to dream—it wasn't permanent. The

role had a term limit, and as mine approached I wondered curiously (sometimes anxiously) what I would do next. I still hadn't quite found my Polaris, though I knew I really loved contributing to discourse. A bonus of my role at the BIC was that it included a field research component that allowed me to participate in several of the professional working group seminars organized by the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

I did not arrive at these seminars and working groups looking for a new vocation. But I sure found one.

At first, I understood these spaces as an extension of the work I was already doing: participating in discourses, refining thought, learning how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh could come to bear on the many questions facing humanity. But over time, I began to see that these seminars were not merely places where ideas were exchanged. They were environments in which a distinct culture of learning was being built.

Across the variety of spaces I attended, certain hallmarks were unmistakable. People sat in circles, not as a formality, but because the arrangement reflected a shared ownership over the investigation at hand. Expertise was present, but rarely performed. Even those who carried deep knowledge in a particular field seemed to offer it with humility, aware that no one person possessed the whole picture. Participants came not simply to be intellectually stimulated, but to ask how their work, their professions, their capacities, and their lives might contribute to the

constructive forces of society. There was an emerging willingness to band together—to test whether the emergent powers of a team thinking and working in lockstep could become transformative in a field.

This atmosphere was unlike most professional or academic spaces I had previously encountered. It was also distinct from the Bahá'í spaces I was used to. We were drawing on the Revelation, but we were also drawing on the body of scholarship and knowledge from our fields. To see the practical marriage of the two was thrilling. It was also more demanding: a disciplined attempt to bring knowledge and practice into closer relationship. It asked of us not only what we thought, but how we were applying insights into our field. Were we inviting collaborators into our circles of trust? Were we mapping our fields to identify the forces shaping them—the assumptions, incentives, narratives, and structures that either advanced or hindered the well-being of humanity? Were we learning to speak in the language of our professions while remaining rooted in the logic of the Revelation? Were we content to critique society from a distance, or were we willing to enter its spaces, build capacity, and contribute, however modestly, to their transformation?

Among the many working groups I encountered, one began to draw my attention with unexpected force: media.

This surprised me. I had no formal background in the field. My work at the BIC was grounded in writing, research, and engagement with a variety

of discourses unfolding in the hallowed halls of the United Nations. But Providence has a way of opening a door before we are even aware we are walking through it. Around that same time, the BIC began considering how it might use the medium of film to translate some of its conceptual contributions into a more accessible and emotionally resonant form. I became part of a team learning about short film, and eventually, a feature film.

A creative energy I had never quite accessed before began to emerge, and I found myself ravenous to learn everything I could about filmmaking, screenwriting, directing, and producing. It was not simply the excitement of discovering a new craft. It was the sense that media—so often treated as entertainment, distraction, or commerce—could also become a profound instrument for discourse. Through story, image, character, and tone, one could ask questions and offer insights into the human condition that might never be reached through argument alone.

The ABS seminar spaces became the soil in which this passion could grow. Exclusively through relationships formed in those spaces, I found collaborators for the BIC's film projects. I began to see how a field as powerful and fraught as media might be approached through the same conceptual framework I had experienced in other working groups.

One memory stands out with particular clarity.

I was on a long drive from Brooklyn, New York, to Eliot, Maine, to attend

an ABS Media Professional Working Group seminar at Green Acre Baha'i School. Over the course of that seven-hour drive, a conversation unfolded that would eventually alter the direction of my life. A fellow traveler spoke candidly about his frustrations with his career in media, his aspirations, and his longing to have the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh bear more profoundly on his work. He, too, was in quest of a North Star. I shared, in turn, some of the heavy and often depressing insights I had been encountering about the undeniable impact of much contemporary media on women and girls. We spoke not abstractly, but personally: about conscience, responsibility, possibility, and the longing to build something different.

At the time, it was only a conversation. But in retrospect, I can see that a seed was planted on that drive. Years later, that seed would blossom into Ninth Mode, the production company I co-founded with Penn Badgley.

On our visit to a second media seminar in Santa Cruz, California, we met Chelsea Allen. She became the third partner in our company.

Since establishing Ninth Mode, we have drawn heavily on the concepts and questions first encountered in those early seminar spaces. We have been learning, haltingly and imperfectly, what it means to be a production company oriented toward contributing to the discourses of society through media. We are also trying to understand what it means to be actors within the discourse on media itself—to offer

our best, however modest, contribution to the shaping of an industry whose influence on human consciousness is difficult to overstate.

This has required experimentation and creativity. It has also required detachment from results. The habits of the entertainment industry often pull in the direction of urgency, ego, competition, and outcome. The habits of a Bahá'í learning environment pull in another direction: toward process, consultation, coherence, service, and humility. Trying to hold those two realities together has become one of the central tensions and opportunities of my professional life.

At Ninth Mode, our efforts have taken different forms. We have held short-term seminars for Bahá'ís looking to hone in on particular questions in media, such as whether it is possible to tell a compelling story that does not center conflict. We have gathered hybrid groups of Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í media professionals to think about the future of media and our role in constructing it. We have attempted to create ongoing, long-term spaces where people can think, learn, and eventually act together.

We have not mastered this. Maintaining momentum in these groups has proven challenging. The demands of professional life are real. The culture of the industry is powerful. The translation of aspiration into sustained collective practice is difficult. But the effort continues, and perhaps that is part of the point. The working group model did not teach me to expect

instant transformation. It taught me to value disciplined, patient, collective learning over time.

Even now, we are pursuing this work through a two-pronged approach. One member of our company will be spearheading a local media effort for Bahá'ís in Los Angeles, while another will be helping to develop a national, interfaith effort focused on the role of faith in media. These efforts are still emerging, still fragile, and in need of refinement. But they are animated by the same question that first took root for me in ABS spaces: what would it mean to approach media as a contribution to discourse?

That question has become a kind of guiding light.

Whatever projects we develop, whatever conversations we convene, whatever experiments we undertake, we return to the question. Media as contribution to discourse. Not media as moralizing. Not media as propaganda. Not media as a vehicle for self-expression alone. But media as a way of participating in humanity's search for meaning, justice, beauty, and collective maturity.

The ABS seminars and working groups did not simply give me ideas. They offered a pattern. They showed me what it can look like when people gather around a field of human endeavor with seriousness, humility, and hope.

More than any single professional shift, what remains with me is the experience of a learning environment in which thought and action, individual

capacity and collective endeavor, excellence and humility, could all be brought into relationship.

The working group seminars also helped me find the Polaris on my life's compass.



Derik Smith presenting as part of the young scholar plenary panel,
27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Ruha Benjamin presenting as part of the young scholar plenary panel,
27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003

Living Forwards, Understanding Backwards

NEIL MACMILLAN

The Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, a contemporary of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, famously said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”

Thus, in response to a request to contribute a personal reflection to this special commemorative issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, I gladly accepted because much of my life from 1996 to 2004 involved helping to coordinate the activities of the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies (CABS).

Although this involvement became increasingly onerous in the context of other life obligations and I was very relieved when the ABS Executive Committee eventually released me from this service, I have very positive memories of those times, especially since, as a would-be philosopher of knowledge, I am very much at home on university and college campuses and really enjoyed getting to know Bahá'í students across Canada.

During the time I was involved with the CABS, our most ambitious undertaking was to organize a cross-Canada tour by William Hatcher on the theme of logical proofs of the existence of God. This tour was extremely

successful, entailing visits to perhaps as many as thirty university campuses.

In those years what became a four-member National CABS Coordinating Committee worked with enthusiastic and highly motivated Bahá'í students at campuses across the country, many of whom earned their spurs as CABS members before going on to distinguished service in other spheres of Bahá'í administration. Indeed, the students attending CABS activities at the time included a young man, who joined the Bahá'í community in Ottawa in the late 1990s and is now a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for the Americas!

One particular challenge in our work was the prescription in the model CABS Constitution that each campus association operate under the jurisdiction of the Local Spiritual Assembly in the city where its university was located, while at the same time operating under the student association guidelines of its university—a requirement that entailed extensive communication with these jurisdictional assemblies, some of which did not fully grasp the niceties of CABS functioning as opposed to teaching the Bahá'í Faith on university campuses.

A second challenge arose as CABS members grappled with the relationship between the longstanding focus on Bahá'í scholarship and a new focus on the training institute. This differentiation was alluded to by the Universal House of Justice to in its letter of 24 July 2013 about ABS to the National

Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada:

In 1996, the Bahá'í world began to focus on a prodigious effort to better understand and systematize its work of expansion and consolidation, of growth and community building . . . The Association for Bahá'í Studies, meanwhile, continued to address certain areas that are complementary to the activities unfolding within the recent series of Plans.

Another challenge was that the ABS Executive Committee, which included members from Alaska and the United States was charged with supervising and fostering Canadian campus associations, whereas Bahá'í campus clubs in the US operated under the National Spiritual Assembly's National Youth Committee.

I do not know how these conflicts were eventually resolved, but it now seems that only a few CABS are still functioning in Canada with ABS no longer playing a coordinating role.

Nonetheless, as ABS continues to learn how to foster Bahá'í scholarship through collaborative groups centered on shared areas of interest and scholarship, it may be that its new approach will infuse new energy into Bahá'ís on campus, leading to new forms of association in what are still important centres of social and intellectual life.

Although no longer involved with Bahá'í or Bahá'í-inspired activities on university or college campuses, I

continue to be happily connected with ABS, especially in terms of its role, as formulated by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 letter, in empowering Bahá'ís to contribute to “the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present.”

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At Fifty: Toward an Outward-Facing Vision for Bahá'í Studies

HODA MAHMOUDI

The Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) has played a vital role in the development of Bahá'í scholarship and in shaping the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. For five decades, the Association has helped cultivate an internal framework through which the community could reflect on the nature, purpose, and methods of Bahá'í studies. This foundational work has been essential. It strengthened intellectual life within the community and clarified how scholarship can serve the Cause.

Yet the present moment calls for more.

As the worldwide Bahá'í community advances the Nine-Year Plan, the House of Justice reminds us that the current Plan is part of a “series of Plans comprising a challenge, spanning no less than a generation, that will carry the Bahá'í world across the threshold of its third century” (28 November 2023). That third century begins in 2044. The scope of this generational undertaking demands that Bahá'í scholarship rise to a new level of responsibility and engagement.

To grasp both the opportunities and the challenges before the Bahá'í world, and the specific role of ABS

in advancing the Plan, it is essential to situate the Bahá'í teachings within a broader framework of social change and historical process. This perspective situates Bahá'í action within a dynamic understanding of spiritual and social transformation, one that operates across multiple levels of human experience and shapes individual character, patterns of community life, and the evolution of institutions and nations. Responding to this call requires attention not only to internal Bahá'í community processes, but also to the broader forces shaping the world today. To illuminate both the extent of this effort and the challenges facing the worldwide Bahá'í community, the House of Justice explains:

The determined efforts to gain a fuller understanding of, and to live in accordance with, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings take place within the larger context of the twofold process of disintegration and integration described by Shoghi Effendi. Attaining the objective of the current series of Plans—the release of ever-increasing measures of the society-building power of the Faith—calls for an ability to read the reality of society as it responds to, and is shaped by, these twin processes. (28 November 2023)

Developments within ABS over the past decade reflect the Association's understanding that this task cannot be fulfilled through inward-looking discourse alone. It requires Bahá'í

scholarship to interpret contemporary crises—moral fragmentation, systemic inequality, racism, the inequality of women and men, environmental degradation, failures of governance, and the urgent search for peace—by drawing upon both the spiritual resources of the Faith and the best insights of contemporary academic and professional thought. The challenges facing humanity demand rigorous, sustained engagement with scholars, practitioners, and institutions across disciplines and cultures.

At this stage in its development, Bahá'í studies must function as a bridge. It must connect the principles of Bahá'u'lláh with the strongest currents of contemporary scholarship and practice. And, of course, this bridge is not one-directional. Bahá'í ideas are not merely to be “applied” to external debates. They must enter into genuine intellectual exchange—tested, refined, clarified, and deepened through serious engagement with the best available knowledge across fields.

This outward-facing orientation has required a decisive shift in posture. Bahá'í scholarship cannot appear self-contained, self-validating, or prematurely confident in possessing ready-made answers to humanity's most complex problems. Such an approach would undermine credibility and limit influence. Instead, scholarship must be marked by intellectual humility, methodological rigor, conceptual clarity, and a disciplined willingness to grapple with complexity. In any academic publication that draws

on Bahá'í ideas and principles, authors should assume that their audience is largely unfamiliar with the Bahá'í perspective, the teachings, and the far-reaching vision of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation. This requires language, tone, and arguments that are accessible to readers who may not yet understand why the Bahá'í Faith advances the vision it does. Likewise, by tapping into the best knowledge generated by outside scholars, Bahá'í studies can more fully understand Bahá'í principles and how they must be applied in order to advance positive social change, such as achieving the equality of women, eliminating racial and other forms of prejudice, a different approach to global governance and leadership, and promoting economic well-being and other social concerns. The aim is not to impose a framework, but to illuminate pathways for shared inquiry and collective problem-solving.

A central requirement of this new phase is the development of a genuinely hybrid model of scholarship. This model integrates the internal rigor of Bahá'í study with the insights, methods, empirical findings, and theoretical advances of broader academic and professional communities. Hybrid scholarship does more than defend Bahá'í principles; it demonstrates their explanatory power and practical relevance in dialogue with contemporary knowledge. It shows how Bahá'í concepts—such as the oneness of humanity, the harmony of science and religion, consultative governance, and the moral foundations of unity—offer integrative

lenses capable of clarifying both the limitations and possibilities of existing approaches.

Importantly, this model requires recognizing that many scholars who do not identify as Bahá'í are producing work that powerfully illuminates principles central to the Bahá'í teachings—sometimes with greater analytical precision and empirical grounding than is found within explicitly Bahá'í discourse. Their contributions are not peripheral. They are indispensable partners in the generation of knowledge. Intellectual integrity demands that Bahá'í scholars learn from them, collaborate with them, and allow their own assumptions to be challenged in the process.

For outward engagement to be credible, Bahá'í scholarship must resist reducing the teachings to slogans, formulaic solutions, or abstract ideals detached from lived reality. Serious scholarship demands careful attention to evidence, historical context, competing interpretations, and practical consequences. It requires openness to critique, readiness to revise assumptions, and the discipline to follow arguments wherever they lead. Only through such rigor can Bahá'í studies contribute meaningfully to addressing deep-rooted social problems.

Participation in global intellectual life also requires writing with broader audiences in mind. To contribute effectively to major discourses shaping contemporary society, Bahá'í scholars must engage prevailing debates in their own terms—demonstrating familiarity with disciplinary norms, conceptual

frameworks, and cultural contexts. This includes the humility to allow ideas inspired by the Bahá'í teachings to circulate within wider scholarly and professional arenas without always being explicitly labeled as “Bahá'í.” The goal is not attribution for its own sake, but the genuine diffusion of insights that advance collective understanding and social progress.

The first fifty years of the Association for Bahá'í Studies testify to the importance of careful internal reflection, but has also laid a strong foundation for outward engagement. My own experience within ABS offers a small illustration of how this formative role has unfolded in practice. During my early years as a young academic in the early 1980s, ABS served as a proving ground for learning how to correlate the Bahá'í teachings with contemporary thought. It provided an environment where questions could be explored openly and where emerging scholars could test ideas, refine approaches, and learn how to think across intellectual and spiritual traditions. For many of us, ABS was not simply a conference; it was a laboratory for developing habits of inquiry, consultation, and collaboration that would shape our scholarly paths for decades.

Over the years, my involvement deepened through opportunities to contribute to the life of the Association. I presented numerous papers and participated in sessions that explored complex and sensitive issues. Many of them are published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. For several years, I

organized workshops on the equality of women and men. Another year, I organized a panel discussion on mixed marriages from the lens of academic literature and the Bahá'í writings. For a number of years, I also had the privilege of coordinating special sessions on the equality of women and men. These gatherings brought together diverse voices and perspectives and exposed me to many insightful presentations that helped expand my understanding of how Bahá'í principles could inform scholarly and social discourse.

Experiences such as these illustrate the vital role ABS has played in nurturing intellectual capacity within the Bahá'í community. They also underscore why the present moment represents a natural next step. The habits of inquiry, collaboration, and reflection cultivated over decades are proving to be a solid foundation for a more outward-facing engagement with the wider world of scholarship and practice, building on a shift that has already been underway and developing over time. Increasingly, individuals and groups are learning to engage thoughtfully with existing academic discourses in their respective fields and to invite participation from those outside the Bahá'í community into ABS spaces, thereby broadening the scope and impact of these efforts.

The next fifty years require a widening of horizons: a decisive turn toward rigorous global engagement, sustained interdisciplinary collaboration, and confident participation in the world's most consequential intellectual

conversations. Rooted firmly in the teachings yet fully conversant with contemporary knowledge, Bahá'í studies can help release ever-greater measures of the society-building power of the Faith.

The task ahead is demanding. It calls for discipline, sustained effort, humility, and courage—the courage to enter conversations where Bahá'í perspectives are one voice among many. Yet it is precisely through such engagement that Bahá'í scholarship fulfills its highest purpose: not merely deepening understanding within the community but contributing meaningfully to humanity's collective effort to generate knowledge, confront injustice, and advance the well-being and peace of the world.

Finding Our Own Voice

YMASUMAC

MARAÑON DAVIS

I remember being fifteen years old, seeking to understand my role in the world: What would be my contribution? I could feel myself on a quest as my capacity to express myself continued to grow. Somehow an issue of the *Journal of the Association of Bahá'í Studies* made its way to my hands. I remember perusing it and feeling drawn to participate in this way, to share understandings growing within me, to offer ideas to a collective where others leaned in and desired to learn with me. My father, of Quechua Indigenous ancestry from Bolivia in the Andes mountains, impressed upon me the importance of offering gratitude for my ancestors—mis abuelas—for the sacrifices they made, by the work and efforts I would engage in during my time in this world. On Sundays, my mother, of English and Irish ancestry, would take me to the Bahá'í Youth Workshop led by Oscar DeGruy and Renee Dixon where we would spend our time learning about our spiritual ancestry through *The Dawn-Breakers*, and about the “most challenging issue” through study of *The Advent of Divine Justice*. We would then apply the spiritual principles we were learning about through artistic expression, which we

would share with others. I didn't know it then, but I was in search of being with others in thinking deeply about our reality. The deep-layered thinking of ABS and the Bahá'í Youth Workshop were attractive to me and would prove foundational to the development of my voice.

I grew up feeling in-between, learning to stand between the strength and beauty of both my father's Indigenous understandings that grounded me in relationships and my mother's adventurous spirit coming from her hardy New England pilgrim culture. The Bahá'í Faith anchored me in spiritual principles that allowed me to stand within the powerful forces swirling in each of my inherited cultural understandings and history. I sought two spaces to ground these principles: the grassroots and academia. ABS provided me with an important learning space in my academic journey, a space where I could directly engage Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and bring in meaningful experiences I was having at the grassroots. In many ways ABS and I were coming of age in our learning together.

My first presentation with ABS would be years later when I was working in education, primarily (at the time) in educational technology. During this time in my life and career I was deeply concerned with the voice and role of Indigenous and Latine communities in the field of educational technology. I saw their ability to create strong learning spaces through their collaborative capacities and their history of justice-oriented efforts and longed

to see education learn from them in meaningful ways. At the same time, the Universal House of Justice was guiding the Bahá'í community towards a new understanding of learning through the framework of collective action and learning as a mode of operation. ABS gave me an opportunity to practice bringing these two parts of my life more closely in relationship. One of my first presentations at an ABS conference was titled "Creating Active Agents of Change,"¹ where I was able to share what I was learning in educational technology, the inequities I saw, and the deeper call to humanity to engage all knowledge systems to make the world anew. As we were recognizing in the Bahá'í community, "every individual will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving" (Bahá'í International Community 2014), I longed to find a way to integrate this more thoughtfully into my learning in educational technology. Being able to present at ABS gave me an opportunity to engage the teachings and learnings from the Bahá'í community with my professional and academic discourses. However, like me, ABS was also trying to find its own voice among the powerful changes the Universal House of Justice was guiding through the framework for collective action. This first presentation was at a conference very

much like all other conferences—some keynote speakers elevated for the understandings they brought, followed by breakout sessions. The cultural tempo and experience of the conference reflected that of the dominant culture of the United States, with other knowledge systems marginalized, unintentionally in ABS' case.

Over the next few years ABS and I would undergo some profound changes, remaining at a bit of a distance from each other, again unintentionally. I was remaking myself in a way as I left working in K12 after twenty years and began a new road of growth both professionally and personally as an educational consultant. I was deeply engaged in the learning processes of community building locally in my cluster, serving on the area teaching committee and actively learning how to learn with my community and our friends in our neighborhoods and community-wide. ABS stayed on my radar, though I wasn't sure how to re-engage in this new "mode of learning." ABS would soon prove once again to be an important place to learn about that integration, with Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation casting its powerful light through which I would thread new understandings.

An important experience I had with ABS came shortly before I began my doctoral studies. I attended an ABS conference where my soul sister, Ruha Benjamin, was the keynote speaker. Seeing Ruha on stage as a keynote, speaking of the most challenging issue, threading her academic studies with Bahá'í teachings and grassroots

1 Association for Bahá'í Studies 41st Annual Conference, 11 August 2017, Orange County, California.

understandings, was deeply impactful for me. I felt the important voice of my elders from the Black community through Ruha finally take a central role in a conference that represented Bahá'í studies. It was empowering. While the rest of the conference was much the same, I left feeling like maybe a change was possible. I left feeling proud of ABS. I knew something beautiful was coming, and I was ready.

I had an opportunity to serve as part of the Wilmette Institute's (WI) curriculum development team at a time when it too was re-envisioning itself in light of the learning happening globally with the Ruhi Institute, and the guiding light of the Universal House of Justice. Drawing from the community building efforts, the WI team desired to learn how to design a pedagogy that was centered in the framework for collective learning, and with learning as its mode of operation as defined by the Universal House of Justice. After a year and a half we had developed and implemented a pedagogy through a few courses we created. The WI team decided it was time to share what we were learning. Once again, ABS became that important space for sharing what I was learning at the grassroots through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and academia. What I didn't expect was how this conference would also be distinctly different. ABS was undergoing its own transformative processes. This conference was held in Atlanta and the strength of the Black Bahá'í community was present. It was powerful. The devotional opening of the conference,

the evening artistic renditions, all centered and reflected the knowledge and understandings most especially of the Black community. It was beautiful. I also felt that in my workshop I was sharing something grounded in a deep, systematic process of learning gifted to us by the Universal House of Justice through the framework for collective learning. I was grateful.

ABS and I were coming of age. Whereas before I would struggle, straddling both sides of who I was, I now felt I was finding a more coherent voice that could sit back on principles I was exploring within specific contexts. I also didn't have to sacrifice any of my Indigenous-Latine understandings; they were a part of the coherent whole I was sharing. This conference felt similar. ABS was also responding to the call to integrate all knowledge systems within a process of learning, and the conference felt like it showcased a coherent effort of this learning. We, ABS and I, continued in our own spheres to deepen our learning processes within our own contexts. My doctoral studies in Education for Social Justice confirmed so much of the efforts and struggles of my life. Indigenous scholars, through their careful, meaningful and sacrificial work, upheld Indigenous Knowledge Systems as valid understandings which could stand on their own. Indigenous scholars recognized that learning and knowledge for Indigenous people is deeply related to and interconnected with the spirit realm and our ancestors, affirming my father's teachings to me.

Most impactful were the understandings advanced by Indigenous scholars, to name only a few: Hunkapa Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Muscogee scholar Daniel Wildcat, who along with other scholars recognized Spirit as the power moving through specific land contexts giving them their own personality (Deloria and Wildcat). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who recognized that knowledge was lovingly given to us by our ancestors from the spirit realm (Simpson). In this in-between space I continually draw from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, an Aymara scholar from the Andes mountains who identified Ch'ixi, as a powerful place where two distinct entities meet, intermingle and yet never lose their individual essence (Cusicanqui). These scholarly confirmations gave language and clarity to what I had always known. I was no longer straddling between worlds, I was connecting points into a coherent whole.

Our learning at the Wilmette Institute with our Bahá'í inspired pedagogy continued to strengthen and we decided to once again bring our learning to ABS. This time the call from ABS encouraged creative presentations where, as with the last conference, we saw ourselves more in conversation with participants as opposed to the traditional format of presenter and attendees. This was an important shift for ABS and one that I deeply appreciated as it reflected what I was also learning through my grassroots engagement and continued affirmation in my way of being as an Indigenous Latine scholar.

While I never felt the Bahá'í Writings denied my Indigenous understandings or ways of being, I didn't have a way before to learn with others collectively through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation while standing fully within them. The Universal House of Justice and the sacrifices of Indigenous scholars changed that for me. ABS gave me a space to share this learning with others, while maintaining a continued posture of learning, as they too were reflecting on the same framework for collective action through their own transformative processes. With encouragement from ABS and our director, the curriculum development team decided to present within our pedagogy through experiential learning. It stretched us as a team to trust our pedagogical process, inviting ABS to do the same. They did. It was an affirming experience, one that we could see impacted participants, us as a team, and—we hoped—ABS. At this same conference in Calgary, Canada, ABS sat closer in relationship with the Indigenous community through the welcome by Chief Troy Bossman Knowlton of the Blackfoot Ancestral Territory, to one of the keynote addresses by my Indigenous brother Jordan Bighorn. During his address, in which he centered Indigenous Knowledge Systems, an Indigenous sister from Greenland and I were sitting in the same row. While we didn't "know" each other, we held hands and cried throughout Jordan's talk. We felt seen and heard.

I sit back reflecting on the journey of that intense and purposeful

fifteen-year-old who never gave up on standing in-between, something I felt called to do rather than to “choose” one side. How could I choose only one of my ancestors, when they all made efforts? I am grateful institutions like ABS exist which, while responding to the transformative call from the Universal House of Justice, gave space for folks like me to practice sharing the insights from my own response as I learn to contribute more effectively in academic and professional discourses. I imagine we will continue to grow together, becoming two old friends worn through with the beautiful and intense processes of transformation, hoping to become something new.

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Jacqueline Left-Hand Bull during her plenary presentation at the 34th annual conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, 2010



Pierre-Yves Mocquais facilitates a workshop on contributing to academic and professional discourses, 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012

Strengthening the Intellectual Life of the Bahá'í Community

PIERRE-YVES MOCQUAIS

My growth as a Bahá'í and my career as an academic are inseparable from my association with the Association for Bahá'í Studies over the past nearly forty years. What the ABS at fifty means to me can only be expressed in the context of my early personal spiritual and intellectual evolution and how it has contributed to what I am today.

The late 1960s and 1970s were a period of great intellectual fermentation in France as the post second world war generation came of age, attempted to make sense of its angst and searched for meaning. It was a period of creativity and renewal, but also of fragmentation and incoherence. In part as a product of these concurrent movements I remained for many years in a state of intellectual dichotomy. As the events of May 1968 erupted, as students in Paris built barricades with cobblestones, occupied La Sorbonne, belatedly “Never work” and proclaimed that education led to idiocy, I was finishing high school in a small backwater city of eastern France and preparing myself to enter university. For the past three years I had been a boarder at a college whose very progressive values of education and learning were largely

influenced by the Jesuits. It was the off-the-beaten-path ideals of that Catholic institution and its reputation for intellectual dauntlessness that had led my father, a staunch atheist, to enroll me in it. Philosophy—taught by a cassock-wearing professor who insisted that all religions conveyed basically identical messages that humanity took great pain to distort—occupied a central place in my learning. The works of Montaigne, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot as well as Kant and Spinoza shaped my initial thinking, and my idea of God, at the very time that I was desperately trying to become a Marxist. Not because I particularly believed in Marxism, but because it was the thing to do then if you wanted to fit in—even in a Catholic school! But, then, how do you reconcile venturing on to such an intellectual path while holding, as I did, a deep-seated belief in God?

For me, the answer lay for a time in simultaneously rejecting religious practice and embracing structuralism (that of Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault or Lacan); then I attempted to reconcile my own views and belief system with the renewal of Marxist philosophy by the likes of Althusser or Deleuze or the postmodernist thinking of Lyotard as they seem to offer a reassuring framework and to give some order and meaning to the prevailing chaos. Not that I ever fully adopted the principles of their thinking. There was always something off, so to speak, which stopped me halfway through my investigation—hence the ongoing dichotomy! There were many seductive

concepts and ideas, no doubt, such as the centrality of language as a unique human phenomenon and semiotic system or the concepts of textual analysis proposed by Kristeva, Todorov or Genette that excitedly captured my attention. But then, irremediably, something happened that destabilized the entire shaky intellectual edifice I thought I was starting to construct and shattered whatever intellectual certainties I had developed. Derrida's "deconstructionism," for instance, provided an initial fascination, but then made me lose my bearings because it meant that one could not hold on to any truth or absolute. I hung on to Foucault, though, throughout, because there was in the evolution of his thought process something that touched me, or troubled me—that is, when I understood him! But he seemed to be able to navigate the intellectual quagmire in a way that appealed to me. Later, as I advanced in my university studies in France and then in Canada and obtained my first university appointment at the University of Regina, I would start to drift toward intellectuals who had developed a thinking anchored in an ontology of human history—Levinas of course, and then especially Paul Ricoeur whose writing touched on the spiritual and moved me deeply.

Then, in 1984, I became a Bahá'í in Regina, Saskatchewan, somehow as far removed geographically as possible from what I thought was the world center of intellectual life—and everything fell into place. Spiritually first, with the illumination provided by the

idea of progressive revelation, and then intellectually, when I attended the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies held at Princeton in 1987. For the first time I felt a sense of personal harmony! The conference was entitled "Converging Realities" and purported to bring together science, humanities and religion—a correlation which, since my teens, I had confusedly been struggling to make without success. It was as if my mind was being rearranged, my intellectual hypotheses swept and dusted, and as I was listening to Hossain Danesh, June Thomas, Ervin Laszlo, Karl Pribram, Douglas Martin, Farzam Arbab, Otto Donald Rogers, William Hatcher and others, my spiritual and intellectual yearnings were being united. Little did I know! I was about to embark on a journey that would leave me largely breathless.

Within a year, I was appointed to the Executive Committee of the ABS and to the Editorial Committee of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the latter of which, to my great puzzlement, I still serve on thirty-eight years later. Then, as I was serving the Auxiliary Board for Protection starting in 1993 and becoming quickly acquainted with the complex and fraught interactions between scholarship and the Covenant in some parts of the North American Bahá'í community, I was asked to provide support and help guide the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies (CABS). This were probably the most fulfilling aspect of my service with the ABS. As I met and interacted with groups of Bahá'í university students

and their friends across Canada, I remember feeling a sense of awe. They were focused on serving the Cause and were determined to contribute to the progress of human civilization by allowing their relationship to the Covenant and a deep sense of service to direct and shape their lives and professional endeavors. They did struggle, though, in their attempts to reconcile the prevalent academic narratives and the nascent discourses associated with their understanding of the Revelation and its impact on the advancement of human civilization and on their own spiritual and intellectual life. The programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity would contribute to settling their disquiet in much more effective ways than I ever did.

As annual conferences of the ABS took place along established academic patterns, as *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* struggled to garner enough material to respect its publication schedule, the Executive Committee was straining to redefine the mission of ABS and, by extension, of JBS. The paradigm shift created by the Universal House of Justice with the launch of the Institute process in 1996 and, by the end of the 1990s, the struggles confronting some in the exercise of Bahá'í scholarship in this new context, had led to a deep questioning of the model so far espoused by the ABS. In 2007, after a hiatus of a few years in the early 2000s while I served my third term as a Member of the Auxiliary Board, I had been reappointed to the Executive Committee of the ABS and to serve as

its Academic Director. The Executive Committee embarked on a process of reflection and consultation that resulted in a request to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada to seek guidance from the Universal House of Justice. The guidance came in a letter from the Supreme Body dated 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada that not only allowed the ABS to move beyond the anxious questioning of its role, but started a process of reconciliation, with itself and with the place of the ABS in the transformative processes engineered by the Universal House of Justice. The ABS needed to actively play its part in the prosecution of the Plans.

In that letter, the retrospective that the Universal House of Justice gave on what had been the work of the ABS since its establishment in 1975 provided the Executive Committee with a welcome reassurance that the ABS had not been idle and had not erred, that it had fostered “appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, [and] defending the Cause.” On a personal level, it set my mind at rest that, in my specific responsibilities with Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies, I had contributed to “encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits,” to protecting their efforts and to raising capacity. However, it also confirmed that the issue facing the ABS was the need to move beyond “providing a forum for Bahá'í academics

to collaborate with one another,” that it was not a question of choosing between existing academic models and a prototype of Bahá'í scholarship that had yet to be defined, but to engage in a new process of development of ABS that would contribute to the reinforcement of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community in the context of the core objectives of expansion and consolidation.

Central to the Executive Committee's newfound ability to shift toward a process of renewal was the enlightening appreciation of “the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” through which “the generation and application of knowledge” could take place. Up to this time, the ABS had been struggling with what it increasingly perceived as the generation of discreet finite products, whether annual conferences or *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* issues, disconnected from a real developmental intellectual process. The “notion of an evolving conceptual framework” allowed the Executive Committee to start shifting its understanding of the role of the ABS in the overall perspective of the society building process of expansion and consolidation. By calling on a “unity of thought around essential concepts” and the exploration of “fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity” by providing specific dynamic components and mechanisms of the “evolving conceptual framework,”

the letter actually liberated the ABS from patterns of thought that, heretofore, limited the scope of its action.

In 2014, the time had come for a fresh team to guide the evolution of ABS and, from somewhat of a distance, I have followed with growing admiration how, through reading and working groups and seminars, with an annual conference fully integrated in the process, it is strengthening the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community.

Bridging Worlds: Indigenous Bahá'í Perspectives and the Expanding Discourse of the Association for Bahá'í Studies

MICHAEL A. ORONA

There is a particular kind of intellectual homecoming that occurs when a scholar finds a community that does not merely tolerate the full range of their commitments but actively invites them into conversation with one another. For me, sustained engagement with the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) has been precisely that: a space where my Indigenous ancestry, professional formation as a diplomat and international relations scholar, and my spiritual orientation as a Bahá'í have not been compartmentalized or sequenced but can operate simultaneously and in mutual reinforcement—in a word, flourish. The contributions this engagement has helped me develop are, I believe, both substantive and structural: substantive in that ABS has provided a platform and an intellectually engaged audience welcoming perspectives that remain underrepresented in both Bahá'í and secular academic discourse, and structural in that the Association's

evolving culture has helped me understand how to bridge communities of knowledge that rarely speak to one another.

My academic and professional work has long sat at the intersection of Indigenous agency, international relations, and what might be called the ethics of encounter—the question of how peoples, legal systems, spirituality, and epistemology meet and transform one another. For most of my career at the U.S. Department of State, including my tenure as the first Senior Advisor for International Indigenous Issues, that work necessarily operated within frameworks not of my own design: international law, multilateral diplomacy, and the procedural architecture of institutions like the United Nations. Those frameworks are valuable, but they carry embedded assumptions—about who constitutes a legitimate actor, what forms of knowledge are admissible as evidence, and what counts as progress—that frequently render Indigenous experience peripheral or legible only through translation. ABS has been one of the rare spaces that invited me to probe the boundaries of those assumptions rather than labor within their constraints.

The Bahá'í Faith's core commitments—to the oneness of humanity, to the harmony of science and religion, to the elimination of prejudice—provide not merely a spiritual foundation but an epistemological one. They invite a mode of inquiry that takes seriously the full range of human experience as a source of insight, including the

experiential and spiritual knowledge that Indigenous communities have developed and transmitted across generations. What ABS has helped me to do, over years of engagement, is to articulate that invitation with greater precision and to test it against the realities of Indigenous life in the twenty-first century. The Association's scholarly community has provided a forum in which the question of what Bahá'í principles mean *for* and *within* Indigenous contexts is not merely tolerated as a niche concern but treated as genuinely generative—a question that illuminates the principles themselves, not merely their application.

This is important to name explicitly, because it has not always been the default posture of scholarly discourse. The history of religious communities' engagement with Indigenous peoples globally is, like most history at that intersection, complicated. One of the most meaningful aspects of ABS's evolution over the past five years has been a growing institutional willingness to recognize that Indigenous voices within the Bahá'í community bring not just demographic diversity but epistemic distinctiveness, spiritual perspectives shaped by relationships to land, community, and time that challenge and enrich society.

My presentation at the 2024 ABS annual conference in Atlanta was, for me, a distillation of much of this work. The presentation examined "A Shared Humanity between African Americans and Indigenous Peoples"—a history of convergence, solidarity, and

sometimes painful complexity that mainstream historiography has consistently underexamined. Drawing on archival sources, Indigenous oral tradition, and the Baha'i framework for unity underscored that the relational and spiritual dimensions of Black and Indigenous engagement offer unique resources and perspectives that we are only beginning to understand. The Bahá'í principles, intertwined with the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, were not a decorative frame for the presentation—they were the foundation, helping to articulate why the recovery of this shared history matters and what it reveals about the conditions under which genuine unity and lasting change becomes possible.

The reaction to that presentation within the ABS community reflected something important about the Association's growth. The questions that followed were the kind of cross-disciplinary exchange, and intergenerational dialogue, that rarely occur in academic settings where these types of presentations and discussions are siloed. ABS provided the architecture for that exchange, and it is increasingly providing it with intention. That represents a genuine institutional achievement, one that has direct implications for the quality and reach of what ABS members, including myself, can produce.

The broader contribution I believe Indigenous Bahá'í perspectives are positioned to make—and that ABS is increasingly positioned to amplify—is to the question of what a just

and sustainable global order requires. The dominant frameworks of international relations, international law, and establishment of multinational organizations were established without Indigenous peoples as authors, and they carry the marks of that exclusion in their foundational assumptions. ABS has been, and continues to be, one of the spaces where that case can be made with full intellectual seriousness and received by an audience genuinely equipped to engage with its spiritual as well as analytical dimensions. It has also been, increasingly, a space where Indigenous Bahá'ís themselves are present as contributors, shaping the questions that get asked rather than simply answering those posed by others. That shift is among the most significant developments in the Association's recent evolution, and it is one I intend to continue supporting through sustained engagement, future presentations, and collaborative work with ABS members.

The convergence of Indigenous traditional knowledge, Bahá'í principles, and rigorous scholarship is not easily institutionalized. It demands a certain tolerance for methodological plurality and for the humility of recognizing that the frameworks we bring to inquiry are themselves in need of continual examination. ABS, at its best, preserves and animates that space. My engagement with the Association represents one dimension of a broader commitment to contribute, however modestly, to the scholarship and genuine dialogue that positions the relationship between

Indigenous spiritual wisdom and global discourse not as supplementary but as indispensable.



Young scholars panel at the 28th annual conference, Calgary, Alberta, 2004.
From left to right: Laura Samaroo, Cindy Poitras-Farahani, Lisa Dufraimont, and Shahla Ali



Red Grammer and John Davey-Hatcher lead the children classes in a musical devotional
on the plenary stage at the close of the 30th annual conference.
San Francisco, California, 2006

Reflections on My Association with ABS

MICHAEL L. PENN

My association with ABS began during my doctoral training in clinical and experimental psychopathology nearly forty years ago. At that time, I was a newly declared Bahá'í and one of only a handful of African-American men being trained in this field. In the early years I felt isolated and alone in the classrooms, labs, and clinical spaces where I worked. The cause of my isolation was not race, but a radical difference in worldview that had been awakened and nurtured by my encounter with ABS-related scholars who were beginning to articulate the teachings of the Faith—not so much in the form of religious exegesis or apologetics, but in a manner consistent with contemporary theory and research in psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience and the emerging field of philosophy of mind. My most recent book, *Our Common Humanity: Reflections on the Reclamation of the Human Spirit* (George Ronald, 2023), which seeks to give a rational, Bahá'í-inspired account of what might be meant by the human spirit, represents a kind of flourishing of these newly awakened capacities that have been nurtured by ABS over the years.

I should note that I entered the study and treatment of psychopathology

because I had been interested in exploring the dynamic relationship between the human brain and nervous system and what the philosophers had long referred to as the human mind and spirit. My feeling was that an integration of these epistemic systems would render clinicians better able to treat the trauma-related disorders that we were seeing in the clinic.

Having been oriented to the field using mammalian animal models that served as analogues of the human nervous system, my peers and I were being trained in the deployment of tightly controlled experiments in the hope of identifying some of the necessary and sufficient causes of non-organic depression and hopelessness in humans. My specific work sought to specify those conditions that tend to transform stressful experiences into traumatic ones and are thus most likely to contribute to the development of depression, demoralization, anhedonia or hopelessness. In the early 1990s, when my studies were moving out of the lab and into the everyday lives of human beings, research was beginning to show that stress is paradoxical. On one hand exposure to it can render sufferers anxious, angry, hopeless and depressed, and on the other hand, such exposure can contribute to the development of resilience, mental alertness, compassion, and radical transformations in one's values and aspirations. It was becoming clear that among the factors that seemed to make a difference in determining whether stress would be pathogenic or growth-inducing were

deeply held beliefs about the wisdom, meaningfulness or purposefulness of any suffering that is perceived to be beyond the sufferer's control. This work thus led to explorations into the role of cognitive schemas, interpretive frameworks, and worldviews on mental health under conditions of acute and/or chronic stress. Bahá'í-inspired psychiatrists, such as Dr. Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, had been writing about these things in a variety of outlets from a spiritual point of view and discourse of this sort was also present in the work and lectures of some of the founders of ABS, such as Dr. Hossain Danesh.

In addition to reading the work of others whose training had prepared them to integrate various systems of thought with the insights contained in the Bahá'í writings, I began to work alongside Bahá'í-inspired researchers and theorists in a variety of fields who were endeavoring to expand understanding of the guidance coming from the Universal House of Justice designed to empower the friends of Iran to not only endure suffering, but also to translate their suffering into opportunities to be of service to the society that sought their destruction. The scholarship undertaken as part of an ABS working group that included Michael Karlberg, Elizabeth De Souza, Derik Smith, Layli Maparyan, Sahar Sattarzadeh, Caitlyn Bolton, Bradley Wilson, and Holly Hanson led to the publication of a special edition of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in the Fall of 2020 dedicated to the notion of "constructive resilience" which had appeared in many letters

written by the Universal House of Justice addressed to the long suffering friends of Iran—many of whom had endured more than decades of relentless persecution without giving in to despair. In that volume, each of us set out to try to say something about the nature and transformative power of constructive resilience from the perspective of our distinct disciplines. In this way we sought to introduce the concept into the broader discourse on non-adversarial processes of social change.

In addition to its impact on my own intellectual and spiritual development, association with ABS has enriched my ability to see the relevance of the work that I had been carrying out in the lab to the processes of community development that have begun to emerge in Bahá'í communities around the world. Indeed, during the 47th Annual Conference of the Association, I was given the opportunity to share remarks on a project that I have been working on that explores what it might mean for a human life to matter. This work seeks to better understand how young people might come to the belief that their lives matter and is designed to explore the impact of such a belief on young peoples' psychological, behavioral, and spiritual health. The hope was to bring this work into closer alignment with the vision that animates the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programs that flourish under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in many parts of the world.

In summary, the opportunities to learn and contribute as a member of the

Association of Bahá'í Studies have been integral to my development as a student of psychology and a practitioner of the Bahá'í Faith. I am thus grateful to the founders of ABS, as well as to those who have labored so assiduously over the past fifty years to ensure that the Association will not only survive but will continue to expand the reach and influence of its important work. As it looks to the future, I would like to encourage ABS to continue to provide an important and sustained place for the arts at its annual conferences—insofar as the blending of academic discourse with artist expression that nurtures and sustains aesthetic sensibilities renders the atmosphere that permeates the ABS conference truly unique. We might even invite the arts to play important roles in the beginning of many of the workshops that follow the plenary talks. In this way, ABS can nurture artistic talent and demonstrate its confidence in the role of the artist in promoting the advancement of knowledge and learning during this new cycle of growth.



Professor Michael Penn presenting as part of the
Bahá'í Association of Mental Health Professionals
at the 27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Marvin "Doc" Holladay (far right) and his jazz ensemble perform at the gala concert during the 15th annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 1990



Hip-hop duo Nabil & Karim performing at the 33rd annual conference in Washington, District of Columbia, 2009

My Experience with ABS

ANNE GORDON PERRY

It is hard to put into words what ABS has meant to me, as it has played a generative and profound role in my life since its early years; I have attended at least forty-six of the conferences held in its fifty-year history and been involved with it in various ways between conferences. As a presenter, I gained experience with public speaking and performance arts; as a writer, had works published in its journal. As the coordinator of the Arts SIG (Special Interest Group) for several decades, I planned seminars, exhibits, helped with devotions, created slides to be projected during conferences, sponsored late-night open mic sessions, edited and published an arts journal, *ORISON*, and maintained connection with people around the world. As an audience member and reader, I imbibed many stellar presentations, performances, and publications.

During my graduate school years, college teaching years, and research projects, ABS served as an encouraging institution fostering academic rigor—a motivator. I helped plan smaller ABS-affiliated conferences at Green Acre and in Texas. In the last few years, I have served the Arts Working Group by hosting seminars and reading groups and offering presentations, both online and at conferences. I cannot

imagine my life without the presence of ABS or overstate its effect upon me.

I found the work of ABS enticing because it embraced three primary interests and passions: scholarship in general, a platform for the arts and for artists, and studies related to the Bahá'í Faith, particularly its history. Early on, I recognized that ABS viewed scholarship broadly and included various modes of learning, including those represented by Indigenous cultures. I witnessed how the arts provided connective tissue as well as content, as we collectively explored and experienced different avenues of expression. I appreciated the diversity and inclusion ABS embraced, reflecting elements and stages of growth essential for human evolution and parallel with aims of the Bahá'í Faith.

It would be impossible to think about ABS without remembering the Canadian poet, Roger White. One of Roger's greatest hopes was to see the arts utilized in the service of the Faith and the Faith's increased respect for the artist in society. One of my personal highlights occurred when Roger and I performed his works together on the main stage and received a standing ovation. Another highlight was when I performed my monologue on Sarah Farmer. A third was showing our film, *Luminous Journey: 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America, 1912*, to an ABS audience. In some years, a group of us collaborated to present poetry and dramatic biographical tributes. All of these experiences represent victories and moments of fulfillment.

I have been continually grateful for ABS' inclusion of the arts. It is not a superficial relationship, but one built on vision and depth, from the earliest days of the first conferences in Ottawa. Some years have been more arts-inclusive than others, depending on the local organizing committee, with the high point being the conference in Edmonton when Andrew Pemberton Piggot and others coordinated an arts aspect before every session, including all of the breakouts. We artists were treated royally from the moment of initial correspondence, and upon arrival were greeted and led to a special room where we could meet, rehearse, and store our equipment. That was the year the conference participants physically got up and danced through the ballroom in a conga line at the end of one evening, to the astonishment of many long-time ABS members. In general, I found that Canada, especially, has proved a hospitable ground for the flourishing of the arts.

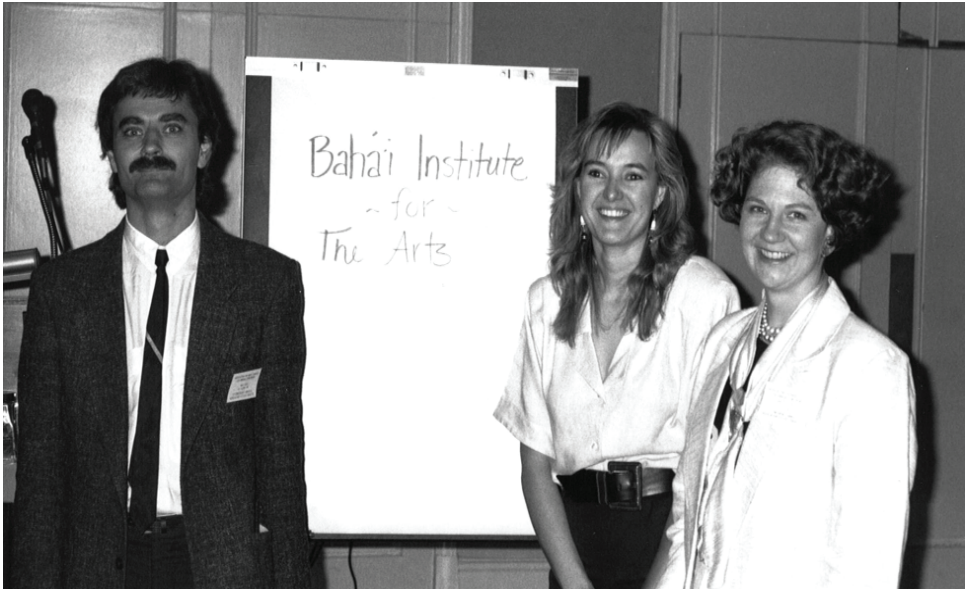
Through ABS, I have witnessed creative Bahá'ís developing and sharing their talents in numerous genres. This takes courage, but the significance extends way beyond the personal, for it foreshadows a time, as the Guardian predicts, when the Faith will spread like wildfire through the arts.

One less positive memory is worth mentioning—not to be critical, but to draw an instructive contrast with the Association's overall warm and understanding attitude towards the arts. At this conference, conversely, the MC announced, "The conference

is over for the day. But anyone wishing to be entertained by some music may come back for the evening." No introduction of the MC or performers for the evening. Few arts-related offerings. No special greeting for the artists. Unconscious marginalization. This stood out to me precisely because it was more typical of attitudes toward the arts in wider society—the arts as entertainment, as extra, as that which happens in the after-hour, the artist as loafer or fool—than of the culture that has been built at ABS conferences. Yet out of this experience, I wrote the following:

But the history of culture proves this attitude flawed—artistic achievements reflecting the human experience through art mediums are central to our evolution. Arts take us across borders, carry us beyond the boundaries of our selves, enriching our souls, transforming our lives. Think of the poverty of a world without music. . . . The arts and artists need strategies for their protection and development. They can produce extraordinary results, but this requires extraordinary efforts and means. It takes teamwork; it takes respect for people gifted in creativity and insight. Art facilitates emotive and spiritual depth, which, when combined with the high-mindedness that the Bahá'í Faith naturally fosters, will do much to change our hearts and effect change in the world. We have only to gain from our growth and development in this arena.

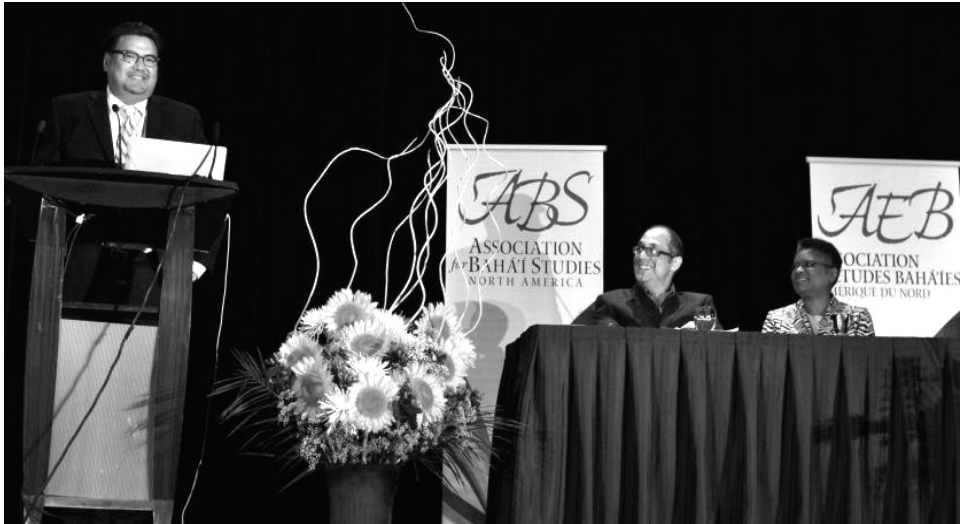
Even my challenges through ABS have led to affirmations and a recommitment to excellence, to striving, to persevering. Having joined ABS as a “life” member, I intend to continue my association, for life.



Representatives of the Bahá'í Institute for the Arts at the 13th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1988. Far right: Anne Perry



Jordan Bighorn (foreground) receives the Tawacin Waste Win Patricia Locke Scholarship Award at the 27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Plenary panel on social action for social change at the 36th annual conference,
Montreal, Quebec, 2012.

Left to right: Chief Douglas White III, Kwulasultun, Roshan Danesh, June Manning Thomas



Nanabah Bulman presenting as part of the plenary panel "From Oppression to Empowerment"
at the 39th annual conference, Anaheim, California, 2015.

Co-panelists are Marilyn Calderon, Eric Dozier, Louis Venters, and Payam Akhavan

Personal Reflection

MARTHA SCHWEITZ

Looking back on my service on the Executive Committee from 2001 to 2020, my most cherished memories are of the intense collaboration with dear souls—fellow members of the EC and of the felicitously-named Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, Parvin and Nilufar, and so many others. We shared aspirations, hopes and dreams, challenges and roadblocks, new adventures, and visions of what *might* be possible *if only* The intensity of weekend-long consultations and of the conferences themselves seemed to weld us into something that was hard to describe to others. I was in awe of the palpable loving care and concern and generosity of spirit of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada as an institution, and of the members themselves, and overwhelmed with gratitude for the wisdom and guidance of the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 letter and other communications. I cannot overstate how much I value this gift of experience, these relationships forged in trials of heart and mind as well as profound confirmations, and all I discovered in those years.

That first decade was one of a fair amount of tumult, along with important progress and consolidation, all as so profoundly described and analyzed in the ABS 50th Anniversary Retrospective. We were still dealing

with the fallout from the challenges in Bahá'í Studies that seemed to come to a head in the '90s. The compilations on *Scholarship* and on *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith* were our guiding light. The series of global Plans of the Faith launched in 1996 was still young, and the understanding of, and experience with, the rapidly developing framework of the Plans and the institute process itself were highly uneven across North America. This impacted (read: buffeted) ABS in various ways. We heard it all: from “Now that we have the Ruhi courses, why are we still talking about scholarship?” to “Those Plans have nothing to do with ABS—full steam ahead, same as always!” And everything in-between. In time, and with constant reassurance and guidance from the National Spiritual Assembly, we all learned. Things were changing. Change is hard. But also full of promise that eventually the sun will break through.

The sunlight started to appear with early conversations and seminars on “coherence” among community building, engaging in discourse, and social action, followed by the Universal House of Justice letter of 4 January 2009 regarding the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Australia, the seminal Riḍván Message of 2010 introducing into the Plans “social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society,” and then the letter of 28 December 2010. “Engaging in discourse”: ABS would have a home, a mission, a way to understand its role within the larger picture of the Bahá'í

community's purpose and development. When the 2013 letter arrived, we were exhilarated and not a little bit overwhelmed. But with continual support and direction from the National Spiritual Assembly, from ever-so-kind visiting House of Justice members and other wise souls, and more letters of guidance, good stuff happened and ABS took a quantum leap forward. Do read the Retrospective!

I will close with a story, because it has a moral. My ABS journey began in 1993 when my family was pioneering in Japan and I was serving as a professor of international law at a university in Kyushu. Dear Bahá'í friends had just inaugurated ABS Japan and were starting to hold annual conferences in Tokyo. Having just read Holly Hanson's book, *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*, and thrilled to see the connections with what I was teaching and researching, I presented a (clearly entry-level) paper at the ABS Japan conference on Bahá'í communities in relation to development theory. The next day Pierre-Yves Mocquais, who was attending as a keynote speaker, asked if I would prepare a paper on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, just recently first published in English, to present at the forthcoming ABS symposium on the Aqdas in Montreal, in place of Udo Schaefer who for some reason had to cancel. Say WHAT?!

I will never know what angel with a sense of humor moved Pierre-Yves to suggest this, but I will be forever grateful to both of them. Pierre-Yves wisely placed some guardrails around

this endeavor, arranging for me to send drafts for review to Amin Banani, bless his soul. After some months of reading and falling in love with the Aqdas, a paper was finally born, presented in Montreal, and eventually published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.¹ And I was hooked. On ABS and everything it stands for and strives for. I presented at a couple of other North American ABS conferences and then, upon moving back from Japan, was appointed to the Executive Committee.

The moral is this: If you see someone trying to take even a little bit of initiative, give them the benefit of the doubt and give them a challenge. Accompany them. Ask them to do something they may think is outrageous. Hopefully you won't be sorry—and they will discover a cherished path of service.

1 Martha Schweitz, "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy and World Order." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1994, pp. 35–39. doi: 10.31581/jbs-6.1.3(1994).

A Reflection

DAVID SMITH

As it happens, Meim and I were at the inaugural ABS policy conference held in late January 1976 in Ottawa, called for by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in order to discuss a response to the call, in a letter from the Universal House of Justice, to cultivate “opportunities for formal presentation, courses and lectureships on the Bahá’í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning” (qtd. in Filson 194). There were twenty or so participants at the meeting being chaired by Alex Frame. Among them were Hossain Danesh, William S. Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Douglas Martin, Gerald Filson, Peter Morgan and many others excited to explore the letter and submit to the National Spiritual Assembly a recommendation for an implementation plan. The consultation was free flowing, lively, and inspiring. None of us could have known what the future would hold but there were eagerness and excitement to provide a response—and to act—as soon as feasible. The Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá’í Faith was then born, to later be renamed as the Association for Bahá’í Studies—North America.

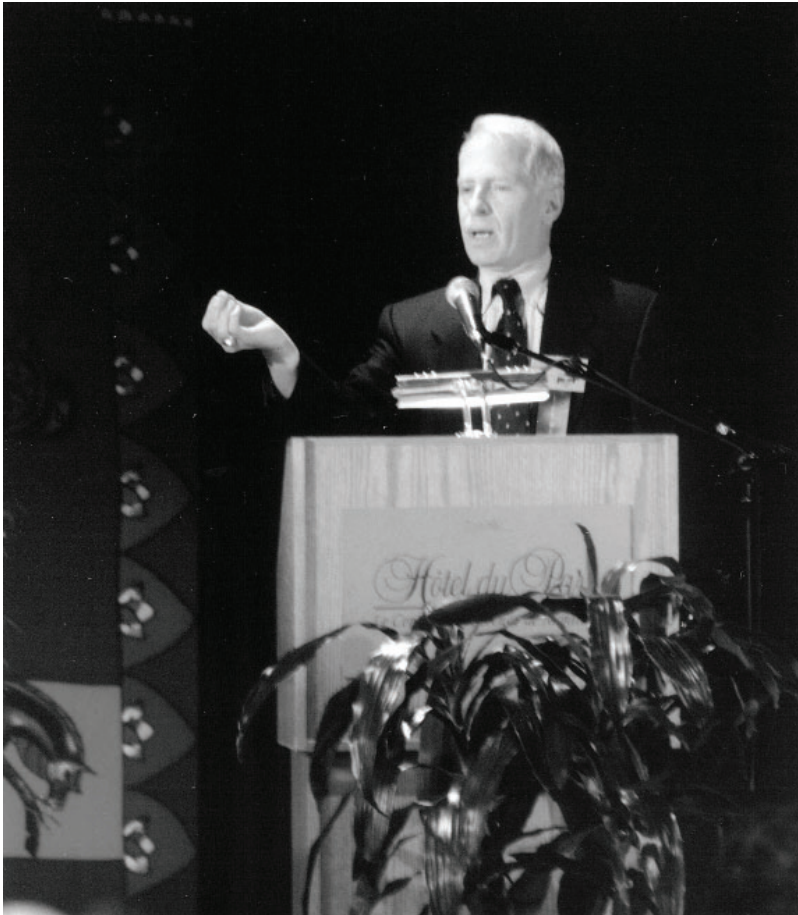
Meim and I were also at the first annual meeting of the Association, which was held in 1976 at Cedar Glen, a United Church of Canada retreat site in Ontario. Prior to this

inaugural meeting, I had decided to submit a piece—“The Bahá’í Faith and Lifestyle Modification,” a rather poorly constructed research paper, in my opinion—on the Bahá’í community’s core knowledge and community function. I was helped immensely by Dr. Peter Morgan in reviewing the data and providing the statistical analysis. To my delight, the paper was one of the seven papers presented at that conference, and the love and kindness of those gathered (about ninety-five from all over Canada) was reflected in the wonderful response and discussion of the paper by so many forgiving souls. The whole conference was a joy and the future of the Association looked promising and exciting.

The years since have shown how the Association has matured in response to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the eagerness of all to explore a vision of scholarship like never before seen. Meim and I have had the joy of being at all the Association’s annual conferences and have seen the growth of this vital agency of learning. Now, with ongoing learning and study groups in a multitude of disciplines, the ABS is clearly taking superb responsibility and initiative in exploring the application of the Bahá’í Teachings to the learning of the peoples of the world. It is wonderful to think back to the inaugural consultation in Ottawa and see what has happened in such a short time. Much has been learned, much has been done, and there is so much more to do. The future of the ABS looks very bright.

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David Smith at the 22nd annual conference,
Montreal, Quebec, 1998

None of Us Really Knew What Bahá'í Studies Was

ROBERT STOCKMAN

The first Bahá'í Studies conference I attended was in Ottawa in 1980, when the Canadian Association for the Studies of the Baha'i Faith (as it was then known) was only a few years old. I had completed research on the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Rhode Island, where I was living at the time, and I won some sort of award from the Association for the work. Unfortunately, my presentation ran rather long and I spoke so fast that it was hard for them to translate it into French quickly enough! It wasn't my most successful presentation.

In those days, the Association's annual conferences were attended by several hundred people. The early meetings that I attended were in Ottawa. They were immensely exciting because I met many other young Bahá'ís interested in studying the Faith deeply and intellectually. That was a much rarer experience in those days than it is today, with all the webinars, web firesides, and hundreds of books on aspects of the Faith now available. In 1980, only a handful of books about the Faith came out every year and people generally bought and read most of them. So the Association's conferences were held in a very different context

than they are today. None of us really knew what Bahá'í Studies was but we were happy to explore all the different possible aspects of it.

In the 1980s, the Association was presided over by the avuncular Hossain Danesh. Hossain lived in Ottawa and the headquarters of the Association was there, so he was deeply involved in its operation day by day. He was an idea-a-minute kind of man; he liked to think big and he always had a lot of good ideas for the Association to pursue. The other intellectual innovators were Douglas Martin, then secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, and William Hatcher, who was also Hossain's brother-in-law. The three of them had a great impact on the Association's early development.

I was appointed to the Executive Committee of the Association in September 1990. At that time, the committee was a very large and rather unwieldy body of twelve to fifteen members, more or less equally divided between the United States and Canada, with one Alaskan member as well. It was such a large committee that it was difficult to get things done. Later, the membership of the committee was decreased. As the size of the conferences grew, we faced many exciting challenges.

One of the highlights of my experience at ABS conferences was meeting Richard St. Barbe Baker. He attended an early conference in Ottawa and Christine Zerbinus, who was the full-time Secretary of the Association, invited me and a young woman who had

won an award to have lunch with her and Baker. This was only a year or so before he passed away, but he was filled with energy. He told us many amusing and amazing stories about his life, all of which later appeared in Paul Hanley's biography of him. Meeting him was quite an experience. I also recall an Association conference dedicated to Shoghi Effendi where several Hands of the Cause of God spoke about the Guardian and his many accomplishments. It was a particularly memorable event.



Robert Stockman's chairing the Study of Religion sessions at the 27th annual conference,
San Francisco, California, 2003

Exploring Dimensions of Racial Justice

JUNE MANNING THOMAS

The Association has functioned as an extraordinary institution for fifty years. In honor of that, I'd like to summarize how ABS affected my personal growth and development, via three themes: inspiration, support, and linkage with allied souls.

INSPIRATION

My first ABS conference took place in 1984, in Ottawa, and centered on the theme: "The Vision of Shoghi Effendi." At that time, I was a young associate professor, working in a field—urban planning—with little or no legacy of Bahá'í-centered scholarship, or of interest in the African American experience. I remember regretting, during this period of life, the lack of role models—Bahá'í and otherwise—for my own scholarship. Yet ABS gathered, into national and regional conferences, people who were open to the contributions of all peoples of the world, and who inspired us toward excellence in our disciplines but also in our knowledge of the Faith and its implications for our fields.

ABS later bound nineteen conference papers into a book, entitled *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*. The essays

it contains reveal a wonderful confluence. The presenters included Hands of the Cause 'Alí-Akbar Furútan, Zikru'llah Khadem, John Robarts, and 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, an impressive list indeed. Where else on this continent could one travel to hear such luminaries? Also listed were role models such as Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, William S. Hatcher, Nathan Rutstein, and Richard W. Thomas, my own dear husband. This convocation suggested that a Bahá'í identity as a scholar was possible, that one could study a specific field and yet stay connected to insights from the Revelation.¹

The conference of 1986, held in London, Ontario, was memorable in a different way. Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánúm gave the keynote

1 ABS helped clarify the nature of Bahá'í scholarship in part by sharing guidance from the Universal House of Justice on this subject. This guidance evolved over the years, but particularly noteworthy for this narrative is its letter of 19 October 1993, which warned against using the term "Bahá'í scholarship" as an exclusionary category: "The House of Justice wishes to avoid use of the terms 'Bahá'í scholarship' and 'Bahá'í scholars' in an exclusive sense, which would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. It is clear that such terms are relative, and that what is a worthy scholarly endeavor by a Bahá'í, when compared to the activities of those with whom he is in contact, may well be regarded as of vastly lesser significance when measured against the accomplishments of the outstanding scholars which the Faith has produced."

address. The Association had beforehand asked me to join her for lunch and then “introduce” her to the audience for her talk—as if she needed an introduction! This brought me, a relatively young academic, into contact with Shoghi Effendi’s widow, the inspiring author of his seminal biography, *The Priceless Pearl*. During our lunch, she spoke cogently of the guidance Shoghi Effendi had given her, as a teenaged Canadian, about what she should study in school and how she should approach her own education. Her frank comments urging humility have stayed with me for many years.

Throughout those years, extraordinary speakers and writers, through both conferences and written materials such as *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, led many of us along the pathway towards scholarship. ABS’s provision of this form of inspiration has continued for decades, as it brings together an evolving community of Bahá'í leaders of thought.

SUPPORT

Stimulated by such inspiration, it became easier to think of ways to apply Bahá'í principles of scholarship to our own fields of endeavor. Many of us began soon after leaving these conferences to think about ways we could write our own papers, conduct our own research, give our own presentations. The fact that ABS often opened up the conference to proposals for papers or workshops heightened the sense of possibility.

Even so, a certain amount of support was necessary. For those of us in academia, papers, journal articles, and books are the tools of survival, but someone has to accept and publish these. We could work on material that reflected our own efforts to pursue true scholarship but we needed some venue in which to offer this. The venues organized by ABS were an important source of support and confirmation.

In my case, for some years I wondered what possible contribution I could make to the body of written work by Bahá'ís that would relate to my academic field of urban planning. This yearning arose from seeing people from fields as diverse as agriculture, law, business, and medicine striving to draw implications for humanity from the Revelation and sharing these in ABS sessions and publications.

The successive inspiration provided by ABS concerning Shoghi Effendi—including the 1984 conference proceedings mentioned above, plus contact with Rúhíyyih Khánúm—burrowed into my psyche. Several years after those conferences, Hossein Danesh asked me to present a paper at the Bahá'í-inspired Landegg Academy in Switzerland. As if a lightbulb went off in my head, my response to him was that I would write a paper about “Shoghi Effendi as planner.” This paper focused on the strategies the Guardian used to ensure the success of the global plans, and this way of thinking was an extension of my own field’s explorations of successful strategic planning. Finally, a yearned-for connection had emerged!

It soon became clear that a book project was in order, but this was an intimidating step. ABS consented to publish the extended work as a book, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*. The editorial support and mentorship offered by the editorial board and especially by Christina Zerbinis, ABS staffer at that time, was first-rate by any standard. This was the ultimate expression of an organization's support: willingness to nurture an author's work on the journey to publication, publish it, and then disseminate it, all of which ABS did.

This feeling of support was surely true for many people. ABS is perhaps the cradle of Bahá'í scholarship for the North American continent. Even during the height of the COVID pandemic, ABS's online conferences illustrated the value of continued support for disparate efforts to shine the light of guidance onto our varied fields of work and study.

LINKAGES

ABS has played another critical role by linking people together. Implicit in the narrative above is the reality of some isolation for Bahá'ís and likeminded individuals, not only in academic settings but also in other fields and professions. ABS served as an essential gathering place to meet people in similar fields, or in allied or similar professions, or sharing the same interests. We gathered in breakout sessions but also in special interest groups, seminars, special editions of publications, and other venues.

Two examples in my own experience concern the built environment and racial unity. Over the years, at several conferences starting at least with the 1990 Atlanta conference, continuing with the 1996 Edmonton conference, and even more recently in Atlanta and elsewhere, small groups of urban planners, architects, housing experts, and others have gathered at conferences and in reading groups to share ideas. Another topic is racial unity, supported by ABS conference workshops dating from the mid-1980s to the 1990, "Models of Racial Unity" and beyond, with the issuance of several ABS publications, such as Richard W. Thomas's *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has published articles related to race and racism, including some of my own work. The 2021 creation of ABS's Africana Studies Working Group continued that tradition of centered fellowship; and allowed participants to explore together a critical dimension of racial justice.

A third point of collaboration concerned the concept of "constructive resilience," a term used in the House of Justice's guidance to the persevering Bahá'ís of Iran, but broadly applicable to other challenging situations. Michael Karlberg helped to organize a wonderful seminar on this concept in the summer of 2018, at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee. This gathering led to presentations at that summer's ABS conference as well as a special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* and,

subsequently, Karlberg's book, *Constructing Social Reality*. Later, that seminar experience helped me envision a theoretical approach to a book, a community history of school desegregation of the South, that is now published.

In conclusion, these are just a few examples of how ABS has affected my own attempts at scholarship. This essay focuses on ABS as a source of inspiration, support, and linkage, but all of its efforts reflected the steady guidance that the Universal House of Justice offered ABS. At critical points in its history, ABS has applied this guidance in several ways, through dissemination, by shaping its own work agenda, and by refining its programs. Such actions have allowed ABS to help many people, including myself, aim to journey toward the station of true Bahá'í scholarship.



Participants in the "Constructive Resilience" seminar
Highlander Research and Education Center, New Market, Tennessee, June 2018

My Personal Journey with the Association for Bahá'í Studies

RICHARD W. THOMAS

While I can't remember exactly when my personal journey with ABS began, I do remember how excited my wife June and I were attending and participating in some of its events beginning in the 1980s. In November 1984 I was privileged to participate in the 9th annual ABS conference on the theme of "The Vision of Shoghi Effendi." I delivered a paper entitled: "A Review of Shoghi Effendi's Vision of the Future as Expressed in *The Advent of Divine Justice*."

Being in the company of spiritual giants, including several Hands of the Cause and Bahá'í scholars, filled me with fear and awe! Some of these precious souls played a major role in my spiritual and personal journey. Others were in the wings waiting to assist me in the future as models and tutors as I struggled to become a Bahá'í-inspired scholar.

Being appointed to serve on the Executive Committee of the ABS came both as a great surprise and profound honor. Once again, I found myself in the company of spiritual giants and Bahá'í scholars, but this time was different: I was participating on a committee alongside several individuals who

had known me since the early 1960s, during the period when I was working to reconcile my then-radical Black identity with my developing spiritual Bahá'í identity.

Of the few members of the Executive Committee that I had known during those early days, Douglas Martin had the most influence on my early Bahá'í spiritual development. His visits to Detroit and encouraging talks to Bahá'í youth—especially Black Bahá'í youth facing the daily humiliation of white racism—had a lasting impression on us. He soon became our Canadian Bahá'í champion! I can still remember the precious moments discussing racial issues in the United States in his apartment. I was therefore delighted to attend my first Executive Committee meeting and see Douglas Martin, whom I have long admired.

Along with Douglas Martin, there were two other members of the committee that I had met years earlier: William S. Hatcher and Michael Rochester. All three welcomed me as a younger spiritual brother. Adding to the joy of serving with old friends were the equally joyful moments of meeting many new and remarkable colleagues, including Hossain Danesh and Christine Zerbinis, with whom I shared several years of collaboration. Both in their individual ways contributed immensely to my spiritual and intellectual development.

Hossain Danesh's leadership and Bahá'í-inspired scholarship provided me with a model of how Bahá'ís could use their academic training to

contribute to the betterment of society. His book, *The Violence-Free Society: A Gift for our Children*, affected me deeply. I read it during a time when Detroit African American neighborhoods, including ones where I was reared and relatives still lived, were experiencing decades of teenage violence.

I will never forget my dearly beloved Bahá'í sister Christine Zerbinis of the ABS editorial board who demonstrated remarkable patience and guidance throughout the critical stages of my journey in completing the two editions of my book, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. In particular, Christine played a key role in preparing the first edition of the book for the ABS conference mentioned below. She will always have a special place in my heart for her long and devoted service to those of us embarking on the long journey of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired scholarship.

The pioneering efforts of the ABS to enter the rarified world of academia occurred during the same period when some Bahá'í scholars of color and women were also engaged in similar efforts in those academic worlds. Some of us were engaged in promoting both our racial and gender perspectives as well as our Bahá'í-inspired perspectives in our respective academic fields. The ABS provided us with an intellectual laboratory to discuss these perspectives, so we were better equipped to engage in public and academic discourses.

I remember with great fondness how my decades-long association with

ABS inspired me to engage in Bahá'í-inspired scholarship, especially in the field of race relations. In November 1990, ABS released the first edition of my book, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, as a special conference edition for the 15th Annual ABS Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, themed “Bahá'í Model of Racial Equality and Unity.”

The ABS' support and publication of the book provided me with the opportunity to share with colleagues and students a Bahá'í-inspired scholarly approach to the history of race relations in the United States. After over fifteen years of teaching race relations using traditional historical texts that rarely focused on the oneness of humanity or racial unity, I was able to incorporate Bahá'í-inspired perspectives into my courses and share the book with colleagues, all due to the ABS!

When the first edition sold out, ABS encouraged me to write a revised edition, which was published in July 1993. This encouragement meant a lot to me. It demonstrated ABS' support for the serious study of race relations within and outside the Bahá'í community, and—of particular import—within the ABS community of scholars. The publication of the book enabled me to give lectures and conduct workshops with Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í gatherings.

On one occasion, the Australian National Spiritual Assembly invited me to lead multiple workshops and group sessions, during which the book was showcased and available for purchase. A distinguished sociologist wrote the

introduction to the book, which acquainted him with an ABS publication focused on Bahá'í-inspired race relations scholarship. Additionally, this served as his introduction to the broader Bahá'í community's longstanding dedication to racial unity.

Being invited to deliver the Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies in June 1999 was the highest honor of my personal journey with the ABS. Once again, my beloved ABS colleagues demonstrated their support for my Bahá'í-inspired scholarship in the field of race relations. The topic of my lecture, "The State of Race Relations within the American Bahá'í Community: Progress, Challenges and Future Directions," reflected my decades-long commitment to addressing race relations in the Bahá'í community.



Richard Thomas presenting at the 23rd annual conference,
Phoenix, Arizona, 1999



Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum (middle), member of the Universal House of Justice Ali Nakhjavani (right) and his wife Violette Nakhjavani (left) at the 11th annual conference in London, Ontario, 1986



June Manning Thomas' plenary presentation at the 38th annual conference, Toronto, Ontario, 2014

Striving to Eliminate Prejudice

NEGIN R. TOOSI

When I was in high school, I spent my Friday nights with a group of youth reading and discussing the writings of Shoghi Effendi. We had a blast. The cadence, the complexity, and the precision of his words were formative to my young mind. I remember being particularly struck by the section of *The Advent of Divine Justice*, his 1938 letter to the American Bahá'í community, where he described racial prejudice as “the most vital and challenging issue” and emphasized the need for the Bahá'í community to eradicate it. In my daily life as a young person in Texas, I could see the continuing suffering that prejudice caused, and I interpreted the Guardian's words as an outstanding responsibility placed upon our community.

A few years later, in a college course on social psychology, I was thrilled to realize that there was a whole academic field that focused on the topic of prejudice. I joined a psychology lab as an undergraduate research assistant and eventually completed a senior honors thesis on the topic of racial stereotypes evoked by physical movement—in other words, how racial stereotypes mean that a Black man reaching for his wallet gets perceived as reaching

for a weapon, often with tragic consequences. I poured a lot of energy into that honors project, working up to thirty-five hours a week to recruit participants, record the stimuli videos, run the study, analyze the data, and write the manuscript under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt.

I presented the findings from my honors thesis (Toosi and Eberhardt) at the first Association for Bahá'í Studies conference I ever attended, a few months after I graduated college. Dr. Richard Thomas was there at the session, and he approached me afterward. With great warmth and enthusiasm, he encouraged me to keep doing the research, to keep studying not just the causes and consequences of racism, but even more importantly, the cures for it. He shared the insights from his work on the “Other Tradition” of racial amity in American history (Thomas) and his experiences with the Multi-Racial Unity Living Experience with Dr. Jeanne Gazel at Michigan State University. I kept that encouragement in my heart as I applied for, and eventually attended, graduate school.

As a graduate student, I continued to study issues related to race and other social identities. I built on research showing that racially diverse groups outperform racially homogenous groups in decision-making (Sommers) and found that, compared to all-White groups where men spoke much more than women, racially diverse groups demonstrated more gender equality in terms of speaking time and perceived persuasiveness (Toosi, Sommers, and

Ambady). My dissertation was about interracial interactions and the factors that shape outcomes in terms of explicit attitudes, observed behavior, emotional responses, and task performance. I was looking for what could make interracial interactions better instead of worse. Throughout this time and the years that followed, I tried to attend ABS conferences whenever the opportunity presented itself; I felt invigorated by these spaces, as well as by my interactions with the many inspiring people associated with the Association.

A few years ago, I was invited to participate in one of the ABS seminars bringing together scholars in related fields to reflect on questions of methodology. This introduced me to a number of new methodological approaches as well as to other Bahá'ís studying social science. The ongoing collaborations that have arisen from this experience are precious. One outgrowth of that seminar was the chance to help organize an ABS reading group with Michael Karlberg and Livia Dittmer on the topic of the psychology of social change. We identified some guiding questions to help us articulate a coherent theory of social change that clarifies the role that could be played by the individual, community, and institutions as protagonists, identified key readings from the fields of community psychology, social psychology, communication, sociology, and so on, and then invited people to join us. We ended up with a beautiful set of people participating, and as we met, the friends

suggested additional readings, and our list of discussion topics expanded.

Inspired by the enthusiasm and ideas we shared in this space, I considered how some of these ideas could be examined within my own research as well as teaching. In terms of research, I proposed and was awarded a grant to study novel educational interventions to reduce prejudice. In terms of teaching, many of the materials from the reading group ended up forming the core of a new course I developed for my university, called “Eliminating Prejudice.” Whereas most psychology departments offer a course on “Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination” which provides a great deal of information about the existence and persistence of racism, I created this course to offer students ways to develop their own capacities to take action to overcome the forces of prejudice. Each semester the class implements three to four projects to improve intergroup relations in our community. The title of the course was confirmed when I read this quote from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The aim of the Bahá'ís is to raise aloft the banner of the world's Great Peace, to eradicate the foundations of war and conflict throughout all regions, to gather together all the divers nations and peoples beneath the single-hued Tabernacle of God, and to *eliminate prejudice*—whether racial, national, religious, sectarian, or political—from the face of the earth, so that all countries may

become as one country, all races as one race, and all nations as one nation. Thus may the world of creation attain unto peace and tranquillity. (*Additional Tablets*; emphasis added)

Throughout the past few decades, my interactions with ABS and the wonderful people associated with it have encouraged me to continue my academic work on the topic of racial prejudice and to bring a unique solutions-oriented approach to it.

Airport Marriott, San Francisco, CA. Breakout presentation.

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Deborah Ke Deborah Kerstin van den Hoonaard presenting remotely during the 45th annual conference, held virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic



Will van den Hoonaard delivers the Balyuzi Lecture at the 31st annual lecture, Mississauga, Ontario, 2007

Broadening the Scope and Appreciation of Various Academic Disciplines

DEBORAH K.

VAN DEN HOONAARD

Dear Friends:

I have participated in ABS' initiatives on and off over the years. I've never really been at the centre of the association but have delighted to see it mature and benefited from it.

In the early days, I was just beginning to take sociology and submitted a possible presentation comparing the socialization of Bahá'í and Catholic children through children's and Sunday school classes, respectively. In those days (mid-80s), the Association had very little familiarity with sociology and insisted that I remove the word socialization, a standard sociological concept, from the presentation as it sounded like brain-washing to the reviewers. In the decades since, ABS has broadened its scope and appreciation of various academic disciplines, which has been very heart-warming to see.

Bahá'í studies have never been at the centre of my work (although much of it has to do with issues around prejudice of various kinds), but I did serve on the editorial board of the *Journal*

for a while and came to appreciate the challenges it faced in attempting to construct a new kind of journal that was more open to less "academic" articles. It was a pleasure to serve during those years.

I remember that at one of ABS' annual conference, we were sitting in random groups for a discussion (I can't remember what about). As it turned out, the person I sat down next to was Catherine Bigonesse, one of the few other Bahá'í scholars I have known who studies aging from a social science perspective. Bringing together Bahá'ís with similar interests and approaches is one wonderful effect of ABS and its conferences.

In more recent years, as the House of Justice has focused on the importance of social discourse, I have benefited from the panels ABS organized at its conferences, which have impacted my own thinking. In addition, the online conference commemorating 100 years since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a special treasure, and it led me to consider what His role as Exemplar had to teach us about how to be old and how to think about prejudice around aging, leading to an article that was later published in the *Journal*.

WILL C.

VAN DEN HOONAARD

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

Thank you for asking some of us to share our experiences with ABS. Of course it is a matter of joy to be associated with the activities of ABS.

It is interesting to note that the original mode of ABS has shifted away from scholarship that focused mainly on Bahá'í history related to the Middle East. I trust there is now a growth in the number of social scientists within ABS circles. At the same time, I hope we can see more publications stemming from a social-science perspective.

Reflecting on the influence of ABS on my own scholarship, I am pleased to confess that this scholarship has led me to publish books and articles on the advancement of women in various scientific fields, on ethics in research, and on the Bahá'í community. Those three areas have been a wonderful avenue for research and writing.

There are two other major influences that ABS exerted on my scholarship. They led me to work on *The Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Between 1984 and 1995 the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the United States National Spiritual Assembly focused its efforts to create an international Bahá'í encyclopedia. Those efforts have remained largely unknown even among many Bahá'í scholars, let alone among the broader audience. The aim of the Encyclopedia was create a one-million-word compilation, consisting

of close to 450 entries. The project was led by a group of Bahá'í scholars and perhaps some forty-five contributors. While it never reached publication, it was a major highlight in my academic life.

What also brought me enormous pleasure was to see the engagement of more of my family member in the activities of the ABS, especially our son Jordan who is nearly finished writing his PhD in Philosophy.

For all your influences on my scholarly life I am so very grateful.

With love,
Will

Making Space and Modelling Respect for Indigenous Voices

PATRICIA VERGE

I am honored to share a few reflections about my experience with the Association for Bahá'í Studies over several decades. I think metaphorically of ABS as a well-kept greenhouse or conservatory with moist and fragrant air, filled with diverse flourishing plants, each deriving nutrients from the environment, growing towards its fullest beauty and potential and contributing to the growth of others. The structure holds the possibility of continuous learning, adaptation and collaboration, with new plants introduced and new ways of cultivation tried.

As I have lived mostly in small Bahá'í communities, ABS conferences, recorded talks and publications have enriched and widened my learning. Much of that learning comes from the work ABS has done in Indigenous studies and reconciliation, such as talks by the following speakers, to name only a few: Jordan Bighorn, Roshan Danesh, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Louise Mandell (counsel on Delgamuukw Aboriginal title case in northwestern British Columbia), Michele McIsaac, Tara Nault, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, Bob Watts, and Dr. Marie Wilson (Truth

and Reconciliation commissioner).

An early article in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, "Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self" by the late Dr. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, had a significant influence on me. She explains that in "conversive" writing (as differing from "discursive"), the emphasis is on the process, the relationship between the writer/scholar and the subject: "[I]t seems to me that Bahá'í scholars and writers have the responsibility to try to provide as many openings into their work as possible as a means of enabling their readers to approach, access, enter and engage with their writing" (9). She explored oral tradition and storytelling as examples of new models for scholars.

My background is in journalism, which in many cases focuses on "story" as well as facts. I have written three books about the intersection of the Bahá'í Faith and Indigenous peoples, and have been grateful to ABS for the opportunity to present three times at the annual conference and to contribute to a special edition of JBS on Indigenous subjects, with an article titled "A Personal Journey toward Reconciliation."

Jordan Bighorn, in his keynote session at the annual ABS conference in Calgary in 2025, pointed out the very low number of Indigenous people attending, either as participants or presenters. I hope with the new directions ABS is taking, based on the 24 July 2013 letter of the Universal House of

Justice, that its activities will become increasingly accessible and attractive to Indigenous peoples and safe spaces for them to share insights into the most pressing matters facing their communities and wider society.

My own service in the Bahá'í community has involved a decades-long relationship with a nearby community, the Iyarhe Nakoda, consisting of three Nations, the Bearspaw, Chiniki and Goodstoney. As well, members of our local Bahá'í community have been involved since its inception in 2023, with the creation of an Indigenous-led center in our town of some 38,000 people. Called Wazin Ichinabi Ti, "House of Oneness," a name chosen by Iyarhe Nakoda elders, it has given individuals experience participating in a form of social action and discourse, as well as enabling them to serve in various ways. It is a fledgling project, and we have been learning a great deal.

A wonderful part of any work in the field of reconciliation and building relationships and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is that there is *always* an assumption of the reality of the spiritual, and of the oneness of humanity. For myself, this has been a great solace, as this field of service has brought much encounter with intergenerational trauma.

The late Murray Sinclair, chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in his memoir *Who We Are*, wrote:

Non-Indigenous peoples cannot answer Indigenous questions, but

they can help facilitate a path in understanding how connected, independent and human we all are and can be. In the same vein, non-Indigenous peoples don't know that their identities and cultures are partly created by their connections with Indigenous peoples, or that working with Indigenous communities is the most important journey Canada (and, frankly, the world) must take. That is why the creation of strong, healthy, and vibrant Indigenous communities is the only path to reconciliation for all peoples. (6)

What I would be so grateful to see ABS explore is how Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are contributing to the kinds of transformation Justice Sinclair envisages. I look forward to learning, for example, what youth who have frontline experience with the community building processes of the Faith in neighborhoods and villages with Indigenous people are beginning to witness. I would love to learn about decolonization, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and for institutions, as well as lessons being learned in overcoming trauma.

As a cautionary note, I would like to share these sobering words of Murray Sinclair, in a media interview on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021, about denialism in Canada:

The difficulty that Canada faces generally is that there is a group of

very vocal, very influential people in Canada, who hold significant positions of power who are working hard against reconciliation. People who are holding positions of privilege, who are benefitting from the riches of this country that have been taken away from Indigenous people . . . I said at the end of the TRC report getting to the truth was hard but getting to reconciliation will be harder because I knew that there would be people working very hard, very forcefully, even violently against reconciliation. . . . (qtd. in LeMay 149)

My own perspective is that, in this field of reconciliation so close to my heart, the role of ABS is more important than ever, by making space and modelling respect for Indigenous voices, and in educating a wide range of people in issues so important to the future of the human race.

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ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES
ASSOCIATION D'ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES

Farzam Arbab (right) and Hossain Danesh (left) preside the morning plenary
at the 9th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984



ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES
ASSOCIATION D'ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES

Hands of the Cause of God, John Robarts (left) and Dhikrullah Khadem, (right), with Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Audrey Robarts, presenting at the 9th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984

A More Profound Engagement with the “World of Ideas”

MATT WEINBERG

In reflecting on my history with the Association for Bahá'í Studies, I hadn't quite realized that this relationship has been ongoing for forty-four years, and in so many ways has meaningfully shaped my identity and journey as a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. That ABS has provided a profound vehicle for exploration of the vast ocean of His Revelation and the implications of that Revelation for social and spiritual transformation, there is no doubt. From my attendance at my first ABS conference in 1982, with the alluring theme “The Bahá'í Option,” to the stirring experience of hearing the great Ervin Lazlo in 1987 articulate the convergence between systems theory and Bahá'u'lláh's “law of oneness,” to the countless instances of distinguished Balyuzi lecturers and plenary speakers creatively correlating the Teachings with contemporary needs and dilemmas, it was ABS that again and again confirmed for me that it was only the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh that could serve as the “the promise, the reconciler, and the unifier of all religions,” (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 112) and “the illumination of an entirely new way of life” (Universal House of Justice, 27 April 1995).

And given this confirmation, it is not surprising that my engagement with ABS—initially as an undergraduate and graduate student, and then through various phases of my professional life—moved from attendee to participant to presenter to reviewer to planner (as a member of the ABS Executive Committee!). ABS would not just let me be a passive beneficiary of its events and publications but inevitably made of me a protagonist in its broad enterprise of learning how to learn—specifically about how the truths of religion and the insights of science formed the substrate of a new conceptual framework for understanding and reshaping reality. As the Blessed Beauty averred, “A different Cause . . . hath appeared in this day and a different discourse is required.” Indeed, ABS' most distinguishing achievement thus far may be that it has served to identify, connect and elaborate the primary elements of this new discourse about humanity's essential purpose and direction—a holistic ensemble of principles, concepts, methodologies, models and insights flowing from both the light of spiritual perception and the lamp of reflective inquiry.

Any journey of course has moments of challenge and struggle, and the effort of so many associated with ABS to build an entity that has substantively and systematically enriched the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community is a story in and of itself. The multi-decade movement from inchoate and tentative categories of inquiry to the now fully fledged areas of collective research,

dialogue and learning across manifold disciplines, has demonstrated how an expanded notion of rationality encompassing mind and spirit is the sure compass for traversing “the way that leadeth to true felicity,” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons Súriy-i-Mulúk* ¶58) “the way of certitude and truth” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*). With this maturation, new capabilities and possibilities for ABS can now be seen. Deeper and more profound engagement with the “world of ideas” is the inevitable destiny of a Faith defined by its commitment to “betterment of the world” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* XCII) And so to all involved with ABS as a vital agent of this project of human betterment, “Go thou straight on and persevere in His service.”

With gratitude and love,
Matt Weinberg

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Approach to Learning

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES¹

INTRODUCTION

This essay accompanies the 50th Anniversary Retrospective published in this volume. While the retrospective traces the Association's history from 1975 to the present, this essay focuses primarily on the period since 2013. It examines more closely how the Association has striven to understand and apply the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in its letter of 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. This letter marked a pivotal moment in the Association's development, recognizing its many contributions to that point and inviting it to conceive of its endeavors as a means of promoting learning among a wide range of participants on how to enhance their ability to contribute to the discourses of their academic and professional fields.

It is understood that contributing to a discourse means taking part in how a group of people thinks and talks about a given topic of common concern, such as economic inequality, climate

change, or health-care inequity, among many others. The Bahá'í community more broadly has given progressively greater attention to participation in such discourses. It works alongside like-minded individuals and organizations and, where possible, seeks to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built. Such participation also involves examining the assumptions embedded within a given discourse, since these shape what is regarded as normal, natural, and possible, and thus enable or constrain thought, action, and social structures alike. Wherever they live, work, or study, believers strive to contribute to particular discourses a principled perspective shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation. Bahá'u'lláh asks, "Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?"² The Association's work can be understood as fostering the development of a growing web of contributions aimed at realizing this transformative vision.

This essay explores how the Association has responded to the 2013 letter's invitation to promote learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses. It discusses the Association's mandate, the foundational principles and elements of the

1 Written in collaboration with the Executive Committee's subcommittees, staff, and other close collaborators.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*.

conceptual framework that guide its work, the dispositions these principles and elements have helped shape, and the Association's deepening understanding of the nature of scholarship and the broader generation of knowledge. It begins with an account of the 2013 letter itself and some of the key scholarly contributions in the first five years following its arrival that have informed the Association's understanding of its approach to learning. It is complemented by the companion essay in this volume, "Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives," which explores how this understanding is currently being put into practice and refined by various groups within the Association.

OVERVIEW OF THE 24 JULY 2013 MESSAGE

The letter opens by acknowledging the significant role the Association has played over nearly four decades. It notes that "since its establishment in North America in 1975, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has made a valued contribution to the development of the Bahá'í community," and that its activities have addressed a range of significant concerns, including "fostering appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, defending the Cause, encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits," and "providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to collaborate with one another." This acknowledgment

situates the Association's history within the larger narrative of the Faith's intellectual development, affirming the value of what had been built over nearly four decades.

In view of the rich history and the learning generated to date, the House of Justice observes that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society, and suggests that it is "perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived." The Association is thus being invited to understand itself not primarily as a scholarly society serving an academic constituency, but as an instrument for building the capacity of a wide range of believers to engage with the discourses of their fields. Central to this vision is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, "a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates." The letter further identifies learning in action as perhaps the most important of the insights that have contributed to the community's progress, explaining that "the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time."

The letter's practical suggestions include holding small seminars to assist individuals from certain professions or

academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field; special interest groups having gatherings to intensify efforts; and reimagining existing activities such as the hosting of a large conference. Beyond these practical suggestions, the letter articulates a broader vision of how this work could be carried forward. The House of Justice looks to “rising generations of Bahá’ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world,” noting that “in the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá’í Studies can offer an important contribution.” For the Executive Committee, these words constituted a charge to build on the Association’s rich history while learning to think and act in new ways.

The House of Justice provided additional guidance two years later. In its letter of 7 September 2015 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, it acknowledges the efforts to reorient the work of the Association and affirms the initiative to create mechanisms for individuals from similar disciplines to interact at the annual conference, encouraging them to explore thought in their field or profession in light of the Teachings, since this “holds greater promise than has thus far been realized and, accordingly, should be the focus of further exploration.” Among the aims identified is fostering wider

participation across a range of engagement—from those already seriously involved to those for whom such endeavors are relatively new—alongside contemplating opportunities beyond the annual conference for interested individuals to meet, reflect together, explore related themes, and for some to present their conclusions more formally, whether arrived at through individual or collaborative effort. It also notes the particular significance of the guidance regarding special interest groups in the 24 July 2013 letter. The Executive Committee understood this as a signal that the working group model, discussed in the 50th Retrospective, was on the right track, but that its fuller potential remained to be discovered.

FURTHER ARTICULATIONS OF THE APPROACH TO LEARNING

Following the 2013 letter, four authors in particular made significant contributions that would help the Association understand the implications of this guidance. Each approached the central question of what it means for Bahá’ís to engage seriously, humbly, and effectively with the intellectual life of society, informed by the evolving conceptual framework. Reading them in sequence gives a sense of how the conversation evolved in the years following the letter’s arrival. Each contribution is summarized briefly below.

HALEH ARBAB, "LEARNING TO READ SOCIAL REALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE REVELATION."³

In this essay, Arbab addresses a fundamental challenge facing Bahá'í scholars: how to bring the insights of the Revelation to bear on social reality without retreating into internal community discourse or surrendering distinctive perspectives to prevailing academic paradigms. She argues that those engaged in such work should neither dismiss existing human knowledge nor uncritically accept it. Instead, Bahá'í scholarship involves combining full mastery of a field with the capacity to examine its underlying assumptions in the light of the Revelation. Referring to science and religion as "two complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice," she argues for coherence rather than compartmentalization, refusing to separate the insights of the Faith from the practice of scholarship. Her central illustration concerns migration. Specifically, she explains that examining the global movement of populations through the lens of the oneness of humankind reveals patterns and cases—among them those who choose to remain in difficult conditions out of conviction—that purely materialistic frameworks entirely miss. The essay closes with

a methodological caution that runs through all of the work of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity: bringing the light of the Revelation to social inquiry requires immersion in the ocean of the Writings. Such immersion in turn requires far more than selecting a few passages from which formulaic answers can be derived.

PAUL LAMPLE, "TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION."⁴

Lample responds directly to the 24 July 2013 letter's call to clarify the elements of an evolving conceptual framework. He refers to Shoghi Effendi's use of the term "framework" in relation to the Administrative Order of the Faith. In doing so, he situates the Association's challenge within the broader pattern of how the community has elaborated such a framework through the successive global Plans. He identifies three conceptual elements as central, namely, the nature of the quest for knowledge, the scope and limits of personal interpretation, and the implications of the harmony of science and religion. On each, he steers carefully between extremes, arguing that humility about the limitations of human understanding is the necessary foundation for the collective investigation of truth; that every believer has both the freedom and the obligation to study and share personal

3 Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, 38th Annual Conference, Toronto, 2014. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 25, n. 3, 2015.

4 Plenary talk, 38th Annual Conference, Toronto, 2014. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 28, n. 3, 2018.

understanding without imposing it on others; and that the genuine complementarity between science and religion requires guarding against both naïve fundamentalism and philosophical materialism. To illustrate, Lample considers the question of evolution. He shows how Bahá'ís holding differing personal interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements on the subject might advance toward greater clarity through disciplined consultation. In this process, each view is offered as a contribution to a shared search for truth rather than as a position to be defended.

FARZAM ARBAB, "THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY."⁵

This essay examines the intellectual vocation of the Bahá'í community. Arbab challenges what he calls the "simple narrative" of intellectual life, namely that Bahá'ís pursue education and then excel in their fields, gradually bringing their values to bear. He observes that this account, while valid, falls well short of what the moment demands. An analysis of what ails humanity cannot be limited to surface-level attitudinal, behavioral, and social problems, or even structural defects in the present order; it must diagnose and grapple with foundational defects in the knowledge

systems underpinning modern civilization itself. On this basis, he argues that the principle of the oneness of humankind demands not merely placing spiritualized individuals within existing structures, but organic change in those structures and in the knowledge systems that underpin them. Crucially, however, he insists that identifying the defects of the present order is only a first step. What is ultimately required is the generation of knowledge and a distinctive intellectuality capable of laying the intellectual foundations of a new civilization. He also discusses the natural sciences, affirming their significant contributions, while anticipating the eventual discrediting of philosophical materialism and the reductionist effort to explain consciousness, morality, and meaning solely in physical terms. He then identifies three enabling conditions for 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. The essay closes on a note of genuine joy, pointing to the tens of thousands of youth engaged in community-building efforts as evidence that "the light of the desired intellectual life of the community has dawned."

5 Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, 40th Annual Conference, Montreal, 2016. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 26, n. 4, 2016.

SHAHRIAR RAZAVI, "BAHÁ'Í PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO HISTORY, CONCEPTS, AND APPROACHES."⁶

In this essay, Razavi integrates historical perspective, conceptual analysis, and practical guidance about participating in public discourse. He opens with the foundational premise that Bahá'í engagement with public discourse is not a peripheral activity, but rather an expression of faith itself, animated by Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to be "anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in." The essay traces the arc of institutional engagement from Bahá'u'lláh's epistles to world leaders in the 1860s through to the establishment of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre in 2013. He pays special attention to the House of Justice's 1985 statement "The Promise of World Peace" as the defining modern model, observing that it galvanized Bahá'í communities worldwide by demonstrating how to raise discourse from narrow technical questions to the level of spiritual principle, and that its approach became the template for institutional contributions ever since. The essay's conceptual core discusses the elements of the Bahá'í

framework most relevant to public discourse. These include the oneness of humanity, unity as a prerequisite for progress, non-involvement in partisan politics, consultation as one of the principal means of reaching unity of thought, the unbiased investigation of reality, the spiritual nature of the human being, and the harmony of science and religion. Regarding consultation, Razavi explains that the goal is not to compromise, but rather to identify principles on which genuine agreement can be secured, elevating discourse to what is "immanent in human nature" and therefore universally resonant. The essay closes with a moving vignette from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1919 correspondence, in which He explains that Bahá'í commitment to peace is "a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith." This vignette crystallizes the essay's final claim that faith and public engagement are inseparable.

MANDATE

In the thirteen years since the 24 July 2013 message, the Association has progressively learned how to translate this guidance into action. To this end, it has benefited from the further guidance of 7 September 2015; the insights of Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi; the direct counsel of all four of these authors as well as Universal House of Justice members Stephen Birkland and Firaydoun Javaheri, all of whom have met with the Executive Committee

6 Originally presented as a plenary talk at the 39th Annual Conference, Orange County, 2015 Conference and subsequently published as chapter 6 in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, ed. Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel, 2017.

and close collaborators to help deepen understanding of the letter and its implications; the regular encouragement and guidance of members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada; and the additional assistance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. The message calls on the Association to serve as an instrument for building capacity to engage in society's academic and professional discourses and to "consciously and progressively clarify" the elements of the evolving conceptual framework most relevant to its work. Now that the Association is approaching its 50th annual conference, it is timely to reflect on what has been learned.

Drawing on the Ten Year Retrospective published in 2023, the following account provides an overview of the features of the Association's development since 2013 related to its unfolding vision, its approach to learning, and the dispositions it is striving to cultivate in an effort to contribute to the development of a new paradigm of scholarship. The aim is to convey how the Association has come to understand its mandate, one that has emerged progressively from thirteen years of accumulated experience, which has in turn built on thirty-eight years of prior history and learning.

The mandate has been formulated as follows:

The Association plays a role in fostering the intellectual life of the community, focusing in particular

on 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 "enrich[es] the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission."⁷ It aims to enable participants of varying backgrounds and academic interests to effectively explore how "to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds." In this way, the Association understands its work as a contribution to "the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures."⁸

Recognizing that such formulations necessarily evolve with experience, the Association views this formulation as a point of reference that helps to unify its various activities and consolidate its understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between its work and the broader pattern of activity in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. The activities of the Association are understood to complement, and to be nurtured by, the full range of community endeavors of which it is a part. In this context, the Association seeks to be accessible to all who are interested

7 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 7 September 2015.

8 Quoted passages are from a letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 30 December 2021.

in actively learning to contribute to the discourses of their fields, and to support their efforts in doing so.

It is further understood that this approach aligns with the vision the House of Justice expressed in the 24 July 2013 message of rising generations entering diverse fields of human endeavor, with the Association being able to offer an important contribution to that arena. As Razavi notes, such engagement is not peripheral for Bahá'ís but goes “to the very heart of what it means to practice one’s faith.” The Association has embraced this vision, endeavoring to discover what it means to contribute to “a fuller expression of the Faith’s society-building powers”⁹ in the realm of academic and professional discourses. It strives to do so through systematic learning, the patient cultivation of capacities, and the fostering of a welcoming spirit of collaboration among those committed to this work.

The Association also recognizes that many of the foundational capacities and dispositions it seeks to cultivate—habits of study and reflection, the spirit of service, the ability to correlate the teachings with experience—are being developed more broadly through the institute process. The 24 July 2013 message notes that involvement in the institute is “a part of a lifetime of inquiry” that will extend throughout participants’ academic studies and beyond. The Association understands its work as building on these foundations,

providing specialized spaces in which “the knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights” developed in the institute can find further expression in the work of contributing to the discourses of “various disciplines of knowledge.”

Of particular relevance is Ruhi Book 14, *Participating in Public Discourse*, which seeks to help participants gain insight into the capabilities and attitudes that enable them to engage fruitfully in society’s discourses. Its first unit equips participants to analyze issues of social import in the light of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation, drawing on examples from economics and the news media to show how ideals that seem aligned with the teachings can, at a deeper level, contradict them. It also cautions against both extreme relativism and fanaticism, calling additionally for vigilance against the many subtle forms prejudice can take in individuals, social structures, and culture. The second unit examines the dynamics of the Bahá'í community’s participation in public discourse, situating such engagement within the same conceptual framework that gives coherence to expansion and consolidation, and social action. It explores the parameters of collaboration with like-minded organizations, and the approach to action, reflection, consultation and study that participants are encouraged to extend to public discourse, including the educational and professional settings in which many of them are engaged. Book 14 thus reinforces the very dispositions, capacities, and themes that are essential to the Association’s work.

9 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 May 2020.

APPROACH TO LEARNING:
FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Crucially, the Association is building its capacity to operate in a mode of learning within an evolving conceptual framework. As noted above, this framework is central to advancing the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society. At the core of the conceptual framework are several foundational principles that work together to give coherence to the Association's activities and encourage unity in diversity of intellectual inquiry. As the Association develops, it aspires to more fully embody these principles in all dimensions of its work.

The first principle is the oneness of humanity, which frames how participants are meant to see one another: not as competitors, opponents, disputants, or even as debaters seeking to prevail, but as "potential partners to collaborate with." The Association's spaces aim to translate this principle into practice by working to "transcend differences" and "foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another,"¹⁰ building connections grounded in the essential nobility of every person and their place in humanity's shared journey. It aims to foster conditions in which, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, participants associate in such a manner that no trace of self is detected from their

conduct and manners, from their words and deeds. This is because "Man's greatness lieth in humility, and his abiding glory is found in lowliness, self-effacement, and servitude to the servants of the Lord. This, verily, is the greatest attainment in this resplendent Day."¹¹ Such oneness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains elsewhere, calls participants to become "the waves of one sea, and bright stars of the same endless sky, and pearls within the shell of singleness, and gleaming jewels quarried from the mines of unity," servants one to another, who "see nothing but good in one another, hear nothing but praise of one another, and speak no word of one another save only to praise."¹²

Closely related to the principles of oneness and nobility is the conviction that "all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect."¹³ By extension, as Shoghi Effendi observes, "man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."¹⁴ This concept of interdependence leads the Association to foster an orientation in which participants learn to draw fruitful connections between

11 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Light of the World* section 76.

12 *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* section 193.

13 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* section 21.

14 Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 17 February 1933.

10 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

domains of knowledge. Rather than succumbing to the impulse to fragment, atomize, or superficialize, they seek to recognize the intricacy and depth of any given matter and to draw connections where fragmentation has created chasms. As the Universal House of Justice has encouraged, the aim is to help one another “to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize.”¹⁵

Underlying this aspiration is a worldview that “includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence.” To approach any field of inquiry while bracketing this dimension is not scholarly neutrality but a form of reductionism, one that casts “the Faith into a mould which is essentially foreign to its nature.”¹⁶ A statement prepared by the Bahá'í International Community for the United Nations illustrates what is at stake in such instances of reductionism. The BIC observes that conceptual models of what is normal, natural, and possible shape not only personal behavior but the structures of society, privileging certain values over others. Assumptions that often go unexamined—that, for instance, prosperity depends on the pursuit of self-interest, or that the well-being of nations can be understood apart from the well-being of humanity as a whole—carry significant consequences once

they inform policy and practice. This is analogous to the practice of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases, against which the House of Justice cautions, noting that resisting this tendency “is no small task” in a society that “speaks more and more in slogans.” It thus hopes “that the habits the friends are forming . . . to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.”¹⁷ The work of the Association is one such sphere of activity in which participants are learning to realize this aspiration in concrete ways, grounding their engagement with academic and professional discourses in the Bahá'í conceptual framework.

These principles—oneness, nobility, and interdependence—are inextricably linked with a conception of history that situates every act of scholarship within a larger story: that each human being is a protagonist on a collective journey toward the inevitable realization of humanity's oneness. This journey is propelled by the twin forces of disintegration and integration, both of which “serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity.”¹⁸ As the House of Justice affirms, “such is the view of history that underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá'í community.”¹⁹

15 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

16 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 4 October 1994.

17 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

18 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

19 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

This consciousness of where humanity has come from, where it is going, and what this moment demands increasingly shapes how the Association understands its work, giving its participants a dynamic sense of shared purpose and meaning. It plays a key role in enchanting what may otherwise seem purely instrumental. Along with these central principles, it provides the generative center of the framework through which various assumptions, concepts, and approaches informing different academic and professional discourses can be scrutinized for their strengths and limitations.

ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED DISPOSITIONS

With such principles shaping its approach, the Association has been engaged in a sustained effort to understand and apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted in the 24 July 2013 message. These elements—the relationship between study and action, focus, fostering capacity and accompaniment, organic growth, institutional arrangements, coherence among endeavors, sound relations among individuals, communities, and institutions, and learning in action—have come to serve as a touchstone for examining its priorities and assessing its progress. Attentiveness to them has helped generate new strengths, raise new challenges, and disclose new possibilities for advancement.

It has also helped frame the

Association's work as a contribution to the learning ecosystem described in the House of Justice message of 31 December 2025. As it explains, "in the natural environment, combinations and connections create vibrancy and new life; likewise, a flourishing process of learning arises from countless formal and informal interactions and their emergent properties." Central to this process is "a free-flowing, uninterrupted exchange of insights, experience, and ideas among the friends at the grassroots," unfolding upward through regional and national levels, with "learning at each level . . . fostered by the dynamic discussions that take place in spaces created for reflection on action." The Association plays its role in this ecosystem by striving to create and sustain the settings, processes, and conditions in which learning can flourish among those engaged in academic and professional discourses.

This sustained engagement with the framework and with the wider learning ecosystem, in turn, gives rise to related dispositions that enable the kind of inquiry the Association is working to cultivate. Rooted in the foundational principles described above, these dispositions foster the evolution of an intellectual community animated by divine love, grounded in humility and detachment, committed to the faithful correlation of insights, shaped by consultation in a dynamic interplay with independent investigation, and resolutely oriented toward transcending difference and harmonizing perspectives. Together, they illuminate how

the processes of the Association can unfold most fruitfully and what scholarship can be at its best.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDY AND ACTION

The first element mentioned by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 message is “the relationship between study and action,” which is increasingly evident in the settings fostered by the Association. What participants read and reflect on in such spaces forms the study dimension of this relationship. In practice, this means engaging seriously with the texts, ideas, and questions of an academic or professional field, relating the insights found there to the teachings of the Revelation, and then bringing the resulting understanding to bear in conversations, writing, conference or seminar presentations, and other concrete forms of participation in the relevant discourse. This participation is the action dimension, which can in turn inform subsequent discussions in the group and enable deeper study of the texts and related guidance. The aim is an ongoing cycle in which such study and action mutually enrich one another. As Adaikkalam Zabihi et al. note in a recent article on methodology, “theory and practice advance hand in hand,” with knowledge “derived from and ascertained through effective action and distilled through spaces for reflection and deliberation that employ a consultative epistemology.”

The dynamics of this cycle are

directly related to the capacity “to correlate [the Faith’s] beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.”²⁰ Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope “that all the Bahá’í students will . . . investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and . . . correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science,” noting that “therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.”²¹ The Universal House of Justice has described this work as entailing “the devising of the new scholarly paradigm,” one that offers “a priceless opportunity of service and achievement to those Bahá’ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer.” It explains that the Bahá’í community “already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality” that “needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation.”²²

Haleh Arbab’s analysis of migration, noted above, illustrates what this dynamic looks like in practice, demonstrating how the Revelation functions not as a source of ready-made answers but as a lens through which patterns of behavior that materialistic frameworks cannot see become visible and analytically significant. The result is a

20 Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 21 October 1943.

21 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 October 1993.

22 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 5 October 1993.

bidirectional process of mutual enrichment. On the one hand, participants strive to understand social reality in a manner consistent with the teachings, applying elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation together with the contents and methods of science. On the other hand, engaging deeply with contemporary thought—its questions, methods, concepts, insights, becoming attuned to how these have all developed over time—enables participants to more fully grasp the significance of the teachings and their relevance to the pressing issues of the day. Such correlation enhances comprehension of contemporary problems while also illuminating the efficacy of the Faith's principles in addressing them.

This correlative work within reading groups, seminars, and other spaces is further enriched when participants draw upon at least four sources of knowledge: the academic or other texts participants are studying collectively; the writings of the Faith; the participants' own experiences, including those stemming from participation in disciplinary discourses and research; and the insights emerging from their consultation together. The interplay among these sources is most fully realized when animated by spiritual receptivity and the promptings of divine guidance, consistent with the explanation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that all methods of human comprehension must be augmented and guided by the bounty of the Holy Spirit.²³ This confluence

of sources, sustained by that spiritual dimension, enables participants to expand their horizons of understanding.

This work is irreducibly collaborative. Participants come to view intellectual exchange as shared exploration between partners rather than opponents, recognizing one another as both teachers and learners, scrutinizing ideas and interpretations while fostering fellow feeling across traditional divisions, and building on and combining valid insights rather than seeking to demolish arguments. In these spaces, human well-being becomes the guiding criterion, intellectual work is understood as service, and all are treated as protagonists in a collective endeavor to generate knowledge, each one bringing unique gifts and potentially viable contributions to shared challenges.

The consolidation of such understanding, moreover, is enlivened by the arts—music, poetry, drama, storytelling, and crafts. The Universal House of Justice affirms that the arts are “so integral a part of the development of a community from the start” and serve as “an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding.”²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes all art as “a gift of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ This gift is related to attraction to beauty, a spiritual force that not only draws participants closer to one

of *Universal Peace* 254.

24 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

25 'Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *The Importance of the Arts* 23.

23 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation*

another but deepens their understanding of what is being studied.²⁶ Artistic endeavors are thus understood as not peripheral but as essential to intellectual development, connecting the material with the spiritual and contributing to the efflorescence of a culture of learning. With all such sources of knowledge, participants work toward the “synthesis” the House of Justice called for, “or at least a coherent correlation, of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century.”²⁷

FOCUS

Regarding the next element, “the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity,”²⁸ the Association is learning to concentrate on various lines of action while giving priority to some over others as needed. The challenge is particularly acute for an organization whose mandate is inherently expansive and whose activities tend to multiply organically as new spaces and initiatives generate new possibilities. Much remains to be learned about how to focus energies, particularly given the demands on the time and energy of those who serve. Yet the Association’s growing capacity to name its priorities explicitly and align its activities around them, while welcoming a widening

circle of participation, reflects notable advancement in this dimension of its work. The identification of six specific objects of learning, outlined in the retrospective and discussed in more depth in the accompanying essay “Learning in Action,” is the Association’s most recent organizing principle for structuring and unifying its priorities.

Focus is directly related to systematization, a mode of operating that allows the Association to sustain its work over time rather than being pulled in too many directions all at once. As the House of Justice states, systematization “ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans” and “implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá’í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavour.” The value of such an approach, however, is not only organizational. Through consistent, focused effort, readings of prevailing conditions, including the obstacles they present and the opportunities they afford, can be more effectively tested and progressively refined. Without such continuity of action, the Association cannot build the experience needed to develop a clear sense of what is working, what requires adjustment, and what the possibilities for advancement are. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, systematization calls for being “clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious,” a mode of functioning that is “animated

26 *Walking Together on a Path of Service* section 2.

27 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 23 March 1983.

28 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

by the urgency to act.”²⁹ As the House of Justice explains in its letter of 27 December 2005, this requires arriving at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, developing strategies accordingly, and devising plans of action commensurate with capacity—all while maintaining the agility to make adjustments as circumstances demand and experience accumulates.

To this end, the Association is striving to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages participants and collective initiatives “to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.”³⁰ This balance between continuity and flexibility reflects the deeper dynamic of unity and diversity at the heart of the learning process itself. Continuity of action contributes to the unity that makes sustained investigation possible; openness to individual initiative and different perspectives contributes to the diversity from which new insights emerge. The interplay between them allows the Association’s collective understanding to advance. Learning to operate in this way remains a major objective at all levels, including among the Association’s committees, special interest groups, and other

collective endeavors. This interplay is explored further in the section on Learning in Action below.

FOSTERING CAPACITY AND ACCOMPANYING OTHERS

The next element is “fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service.”³¹ In the context of the Association’s work, this element entails developing participants’ ability to generate relevant learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses, to share that learning with others, and to expand the circle of those engaged in this process. The disposition to accompany others is vital to this capacity-building, enabling participants to elicit insights, build momentum, learn from and remove obstacles, and promote organic growth. This disposition reflects the growing emphasis on accompaniment across the worldwide Bahá’í community. As the House of Justice observes in its *Riḍván* 2010 message, the word “accompany” is being endowed with new meaning, signaling a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, in contrast to “the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.” This culture takes shape among those who delight “not so much in their own

29 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message* 1998.

30 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

31 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

accomplishments but in the progress and services of others.”

The Association has given particular attention to creating intimate settings for meaningful conversations in which experience, ideas, challenges, and progress can be shared among coordinators, seminar and reading group facilitators, and other collaborators, complemented by broader spaces for larger groups to share learning and coordinate efforts. A primary objective now is to expand the nucleus of friends who can accompany a widening network of collaborators, who can in turn encourage and coordinate an increasing number of collaborative settings that operate “on the principle of universal participation.”³²

It is, moreover, becoming clear that divine love is interwoven with this spirit of accompaniment. Contemporary discourse is too often characterized by a deep unwillingness to engage across differences, a condition in which disparate factions show little desire to discover truth or viable solutions together. In such a culture, logical argumentation easily degenerates into intellectual combat focused on winning rather than arriving at agreement on what is true or best. Divine love is essential to releasing the flow of reason and achieving mutual understanding. As the Universal House of Justice states: “Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members

of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity.”³³ Love of this kind dissolves the defensiveness that calcifies reason into rationalization. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exemplifies this dynamic interplay in His own writings and talks, seamlessly combining rigorous logic with absolute love. He states: “Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle... Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world.”³⁴

The Association is learning to manifest the interplay between love and reason in the environments it is fostering. In a seminar, reading group, writing group, or other collective endeavor, participants come to “view every task and every interaction as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress.”³⁵ Speaking “with words as mild

32 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 12 December 2011.

33 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 July 2020.

34 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* sec. 12.

35 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

as milk”³⁶ they nonetheless engage rigorously with one another’s ideas and the texts they are exploring together, taking to heart Bahá’u’lláh’s counsel: “Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.”³⁷ They find, as Bahá’u’lláh affirms, that “a kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding.”³⁸ Such loving kindness imbues reason with a significance that resonates with and inspires a diverse community of inquirers to commit to the collective pursuit of truth and the common good. Without it, inquiry loses vitality and analysis becomes prone to dogmatism. Heart and mind are not competing faculties, but complementary dimensions of an integrated capacity for discovering truth.

THE DYNAMICS OF ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

Also essential to all aspects of the Association’s work are “the dynamics of organic development.”³⁹ Lasting

capacity is built organically through a process that may begin modestly, but that evolves and becomes more complex over time. This principle rests on a conception of social bodies characterized by emergence, mutual transformation, and an ever-increasing capacity for complexity. The Universal House of Justice observes that Bahá’í administration “has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves.”⁴⁰ The Association’s spaces and endeavors are understood in this light. They are not fixed structures to be maintained. Rather, they are living expressions of collective learning whose potential manifests progressively as foundations mature and participation multiplies.

A newly formed reading group, for example, is encouraged to see itself as a setting that aims to advance understanding of how to contribute to a particular discourse, but to begin modestly. Its main objective is to create a consultative space in which participants can reflectively develop their capacity to correlate ideas from the texts they are reading with passages from the writings, their own experience, and the insights of their fellow participants. At the same time, the group is encouraged to view itself as part of a larger learning network, as one element in a constellation of Association endeavors. As

36 Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd.

37 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* V.

38 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* CXXXII

39 Universal House of Justice, letter

dated 24 July 2013.

40 Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message* 2010.

such, groups may start modestly, with some gradually giving rise to special interest groups that operate increasingly systematically, concentrating on identifying objects of sustained inquiry, focusing their energies, widening the circle of participation, and achieving coherence among their various endeavors. Over months and years of patient, cumulative effort, such special interest groups may take on multiple initiatives, making sustained contributions to different aspects of a given academic or professional discourse.

This expansion of both individual and collective capacity reflects the underlying principle that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts: as collaboration strengthens, participants transcend what they could achieve individually, and the resulting collective understanding surpasses what any one of them could have generated alone. The gradual maturation of understanding and commitment that occurs along the way both emanates from and fuels this cumulative unfolding.

As noted earlier, the Universal House of Justice has urged the community to analyze, not reduce, and to identify distinct areas of action, not compartmentalize. This spirit is increasingly animating the Association's ongoing effort to bring its various lines of action into coherence while preserving the vitality and independence that give each space its distinctive role. The Universal House of Justice provides further grounding for this approach in a letter dated 21

January 2014, explaining that "the ability of the Bahá'í community to contribute to thought-shaping social change will increase, and answers to questions that appear to be unsolvable today will become apparent through a process of organic change, rather than as a result of imposing particular perspectives." The network of spaces the Association is working to develop is, in this sense, its contribution to the living ecosystem of learning described in the 31 December 2025 message, one in which combinations and connections create vibrancy and new life, opening onto novel vistas of complexity, coherence, and insight.

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The next element, "the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity,"⁴¹ has evolved correspondingly. As just discussed, lasting capacity is built organically, and the Association's institutional dimension is no exception.

This evolution reflects the principle that as a body grows in the scope and depth of its work, its structures must develop the capacity to accommodate higher degrees of complexity. This is accomplished not by becoming more rigid or centralized, but by differentiating in ways that preserve coherence while enabling each part to contribute distinctively to the whole. The current configuration includes the

41 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

Executive Committee; the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, which attends to strengthening the Association's reading groups, seminars, special interest groups, and related lines of action; the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* Editorial Committee; the ABS Publications Committee; and the Conference Committee, all supported by four full-time staff, one half-time position, and a growing volunteer network. A continuing focus of the Executive Committee has been how "to ensure that there are adequate arrangements in place, both institutional and less formal, to enable [the Association] to thrive, and that all those involved in the learning process are connected by loving relationships imbued with a spirit of humility and magnanimity."⁴²

The creation of the Conference Committee as a specialized body reflects the guidance of the 7 September 2015 letter. As the Executive Committee turned its attention to the purpose and character of Bahá'í studies and the nurturing of fledgling efforts, the House of Justice suggests it would be reasonable to delegate the complex organizational dimensions of the conference and other gatherings to a specialized sub-committee operating within a clear framework. The creation of the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives reflects this same broader pattern of delegation, allowing the Executive Committee to focus on the

purpose and character of Bahá'í studies while specialized bodies attend to particular lines of action. Much of this work entails accompanying and learning alongside the growing network of volunteers who facilitate or coordinate reading groups, special interest groups, seminars, writing endeavors, and elements of the annual conference, as well as synthesizing and disseminating what is learned. The ABS Publications Committee and the JBS Editorial Committee are similarly evolving in their scope and collaborative character.

The systematization of administrative and technical practices has proven equally critical to managing this growing complexity with consistency and care. Significant attention has been paid to establishing efficient administrative processes—logistical, financial, editorial, and communications—particularly through the efforts of the administrative aide and other staff to develop and employ appropriate technological tools across the Association's various committees and activities. At the same time, given the advances over the last thirteen years, the question of the human capacity needed to sustain this growth continues to be a regular topic of consultation, although in recent years it has led to some expansion of staff positions. In this regard, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada has lovingly encouraged the Association to be judicious yet clear about its needs going forward, indicating that meeting those needs is a priority.

42 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 31 December 2025.

COHERENCE

The next element is “the coherence required among all areas of endeavour.”⁴³ As discussed above, the Association envisions each space as a node in a mutually reinforcing network whose combined efforts generate understanding that no single space could achieve on its own. In this network, large conferences serve as points of convergence where the various threads are brought together, reflected upon, and catalyzed for further development. The network itself is also part of the greater coherence being built across the Bahá'í community through the institute process, whose participants enrich the Association's spaces by bringing to it a shared vocabulary, common habits of learning, and a unified vision of service—as is true of those participating in the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

Achieving coherence in the Association's ever-evolving work is an ongoing aspiration. The Association advances this aspiration in part through devising plans of action for each of the Association's areas of focus; creating spaces for the ongoing generation and dissemination of insights aimed at articulating an evolving unity of vision; and consulting with and accompanying staff members and collaborators in their efforts to further coordinate their work,

all while continuing to explore possibilities with, and receive guidance from, the senior institutions.

The Association is learning, moreover, that organizational coherence depends in turn on the quality of the relationships and mode of communication that animate its work. As noted earlier in the discussion of the ecosystem of learning, the promotion of serious learning about complex matters is fundamentally a communal enterprise, one that requires a quality of exchange capable of facilitating fruitful comparison and correlation of perspectives and, where warranted, the disciplined integration of insights from different lines of inquiry.

To this end, the Association is coming to appreciate that consultation is the preeminent means for advancing both collective inquiry and organizational development, one that proceeds from the conviction that truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups, and that the desire to exercise power over one another dissipates rather than generates useful knowledge. Participants seek instead the power of unified thought and action, where they may see reality from different points of view, but where, as these views are examined and compared, further clarity is achieved. This power stems from the devotional quality of consultation, the recognition that it is a spiritual act undertaken with humility and impartiality rather than simply a technique for collective problem-solving. One who expresses an opinion sets it forth not as correct and right but as a genuine

43 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

contribution to a shared search for authentic knowledge, remaining sincerely open to being moved by the insights of others. By the same token, consultation stands in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the independent investigation of truth. Here, individual inquiry generates diverse insights that enrich consultation, while consultation provides participants with new ideas and considerations that further inspire their subsequent independent investigation. As Bahá'u'lláh affirms, consultation “bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude.”⁴⁴

In short, far from the adversarial debate and performative disagreement that characterize much of contemporary public and academic discourse, those engaged in consultation find points of unity whenever possible and proceed from the conviction that errors are fruitful, that everyone has the potential to contribute, and that solutions to complex questions rarely emerge from dichotomous or reductive thinking. In reading groups, seminars, and other settings, participants are learning, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advises, to proceed with “the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation,”⁴⁵ searching out the truth rather than insisting upon their own opinions. Conversing in this manner is among the most potent means of nurturing the coherence and transformation the Association is striving to achieve.

SOUND RELATIONS

The next element, “sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions,”⁴⁶ is essential for the coherence of the Association’s work at every level. As the House of Justice observes in its 28 December 2010 message, the relationships that bind these three protagonists “are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree.” They are characterized “at a fundamental level” by “cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe.” The transformation involves a reconceptualization of power itself. Here, power is exercised not through control or dominance but through what the House of Justice calls “the powers of the human spirit,” namely, “the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds,” forms of power associated with words such as “release,” “encourage,” “channel,” “guide,” and “enable.”⁴⁷ In its 28 November 2023 message, the House of Justice elaborates on this reconceptualization, stating that, “In place of the quest for power over others, [Bahá'u'lláh] introduced arrangements that would cultivate the individual’s latent powers and their expression in service to the common good. Trustworthiness,

44 Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 May 2009.

45 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* sec. 45.

46 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

47 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

truthfulness, rectitude of conduct, forbearance, love, and unity are among the spiritual qualities that form the basis of association between the three protagonists of a new way of life, while efforts for social advancement are all shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity."

This vision is shaping how the Association understands the relationship between its organizational structures, its collaborative groups, and all those who participate in its spaces. The fundamental orientation is one of service, which infuses all dimensions of community life, including how leadership is understood and exercised. The House of Justice describes leadership as "that expression of service by which [an institution] invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized."⁴⁸ In the same letter, it states that a united and self-sustaining community depends on "a sense of partnership based on appreciation of each other's distinctive sphere of action" that is "fully recognized and unfailingly upheld," and that when this sense exists, "the community is transformed from being the mere sum of its parts to assuming a wholly new personality as an entity in which its members blend without losing their

individual uniqueness." Within such an environment, the Association's spaces can evolve from a collection of parallel endeavors into a lively ecosystem of learning.

The quality of the relations established, moreover, creates a climate in which the aspiration to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives can take root and flourish. In a reading group exploring questions of social cohesion, for example, participants may bring perspectives from sociology, anthropology, Africana Studies, education, community organizing, and Indigenous Studies. Rather than defending their particular explanatory frameworks, participants move toward recognizing how multiple factors—underlying assumptions, structural features, individual agency, collective identity, and spiritual transformation—interact dynamically. This approach reveals connections that no single disciplinary lens could disclose, producing a more integrative understanding, while reinforcing rather than displacing the importance of disciplinary investigation. Disciplinary focus and interdisciplinary openness become mutually reinforcing rather than competing impulses.

LEARNING IN ACTION

The House of Justice closes the paragraph on the elements of the conceptual framework by stating that "[p]erhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection,

⁴⁸ Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 May 1994.

study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.”⁴⁹ This mode of learning is fundamental to everything the Association does, as it is to the broader work of society building. In its 28 November 2023 message, the House of Justice observes that the Bahá’í community is today “distinguished by a mode of operation characterized by study, consultation, action, and reflection,” one in which “individuals and communities become protagonists of their own development, an embrace of the oneness of humanity banishes prejudice and otherness, the spiritual dimension of human life is fostered through adherence to principle and strengthening of the community’s devotional character, and the capacity for learning is developed and directed towards personal and social transformation.” The message affirms that “the conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age,” and that “this process will increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual in the years ahead, as the Bahá’í world takes on ever-greater challenges and releases in ever-greater measures the Faith’s society-building power.” The more this mode of learning permeates the work, the more the three

protagonists harmonize in their respective efforts to contribute to individual and social transformation.

With such a vision in mind, the Association is learning to apply ongoing cycles of action, reflection, study, and consultation at various levels and among committee members, staff, and special interest groups. At the broader institutional level, it has become clearer over the past thirteen years that this process of learning advances when there are sufficient opportunities for reflection. These include quarterly reflection meetings, as well as regular smaller meetings and informal discussions that bring together different committees and collaborators to share insights, review progress, identify new opportunities, address challenges, and explore relevant guidance. In this way, the Association is developing its capacity to apply the conceptual framework to guide its own evolution as an organization, treating itself as a constellation of learning rather than merely a vehicle for facilitating others’ learning.

Moreover, this organizational learning matures to the extent that the harmony of science and religion is treated as a governing principle of development and inquiry itself. The 24 July 2013 message identified this harmony as among the concerns requiring particular attention in the years ahead, and the vision that Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi articulated in their respective essays has proven especially relevant here. Each engages with the implications of the harmony of science and religion for a

49 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

vision of development, of intellectual life, and of participation in discourses committed to the generation, application, and dissemination of knowledge as a dynamic, integrated process. The Association is learning, cycle by cycle, to embody this very process.

The quality of inquiry improves accordingly. Learning in action is strengthened when study of the Sacred Texts is woven together with scientific analysis. This is in part because the Writings furnish ontological assumptions, constructive dispositions, and a teleological orientation that guard the search for knowledge against ideological insularity and the unreflective rationalization of existing presuppositions. Reciprocally, rigorous engagement with the methods and findings of science ensures that interpretations of the Texts do not become forms of dogmatic self-confirmation. The reciprocity between these two systems, each cultivating the other and each checking the excesses of the other, enables a community of inquirers to achieve progressively more attuned readings of reality as they engage their respective discourses.⁵⁰ Fostering this interplay in reading groups, seminars, and collaborative writing projects is consequently among the most important contributions the Association can make.

The Association is also finding that learning in action requires the right

inner orientation, with humility as its governing disposition. According to the House of Justice, this entails “weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines.”⁵¹ In this context, humility does not involve abandoning conviction. As Lample observes, even as individuals share their views on the teachings “with personal conviction and with the strongest possible supporting arguments,” this conviction should be accompanied by an appreciation that such views “are not authoritative and may be wrong.”⁵² The disposition of humility keeps inquiry genuinely open, allowing participants to be surprised, corrected, and enlarged by what they encounter in texts, in reality, and in others’ perspectives.

Closely related to humility is detachment, particularly from the competitive and self-aggrandizing habits that characterize much of academic life, and from the tendency to defend a position simply because it is one’s own. The House of Justice has specifically cautioned that “Bahá’í scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride,” noting that “there are many aspects of western thinking which have been exalted to a status of unassailable principle in the general

50 See, Todd Smith, “Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2023.

51 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 July 2020.

52 Paul Lample, “Toward a Framework for Action.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2018, 26.

mind, that time may well show to have been erroneous or, at least, only partially true.”⁵³ Detachment requires, as Farzam Arbab observes, the courage to challenge such orthodoxies through “painstaking, spiritually illumined scientific and philosophical inquiry”⁵⁴ rather than mere dismissal. As noted earlier, what sustains both humility and detachment is a commitment to service for the betterment of humankind. When service rather than recognition is one’s deepest motivation, the willingness to be corrected, to acknowledge error, and to build upon the insights of others affirms one’s true identity as a noble being. The House of Justice describes such a culture as one that promotes “a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service, supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment,” recognizing that “therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.”⁵⁵

Equally essential is the principle of moderation. As noted in the discussion of accompaniment above, Bahá’u’lláh teaches that utterance “needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would

manifest opposition from the very outset,” and that “moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets.”⁵⁶ When utterance is so endowed, He asserts, “it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men.” In the context of scholarly discourse, one direct implication is that the manner in which insights and criticism are shared is as consequential as their content. The ability to calibrate one’s contributions to what others are able to receive is an essential form of wisdom.

Razavi writes that the capacity to “weigh knowledge in the balance of spiritual principles constitutes an indispensable faculty demanded of those who participate in public discourse.”⁵⁷ This faculty protects participants from both dogmatic religious assertion and uncritical assent to every research claim advanced within a given discourse. In this light, humility, detachment, and moderation, taken together, are among the inner conditions for the emergence of a new kind of scholarly community within the Association, one animated by love, freed from the compulsions of ego and faction, and oriented toward generating knowledge that contributes to the well-being of humanity.

53 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 23 March 1983.

54 Farzam Arbab, “The Intellectual Life of the Bahá’í Community.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2016, 16.

55 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message* 2010.

56 Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, Lawḥ-i-Síyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají ¶ 13.

57 Shahríar Razavi, “Bahá’í Participation in Public Discourse” in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition* 177.

SUMMARY: CULTIVATING A
DISTINCTIVE CULTURE OF INQUIRY

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers a portrait of the truly learned: those in whom “the forms of transcendent realities are reflected,” who are “busy by night and by day with meticulous research into such sciences as are profitable to mankind,” and who “devote themselves to the training of students of capacity.” To such souls, He writes, “the proffered treasures of kings would not compare with a single drop of the waters of knowledge.” This vision of the scholar—at once rigorous and selfless, intellectually serious and spiritually striving—speaks directly to what the 24 July 2013 message identifies as a critical aspect of the conceptual framework: the generation and application of knowledge. The manner in which the search for truth is conducted is inseparable from both its outcomes and the spaces and processes that give it shape. Attending to the quality of this search is central to the Association’s distinctive contribution to cultivating the intellectual life of the community.

The House of Justice’s description of “enkindled souls” in its 30 December 2021 message offers a compelling encapsulation of many of the qualities the Association’s culture of learning seeks to foster among its participants:

They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion

rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity’s capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur.

In its 31 December 2025 message, the House of Justice states that these same souls embody “a heightened spiritual consciousness that leads to a life of purpose and meaning, a life dedicated to developing their God-given potentialities and labouring for the transformation of society.” They “recognize the value of knowledge in propelling progress, are committed to its generation, and share it freely and humbly. Learning is a habit of mind for them, an orientation in all they do. In every face they see a fellow seeker after truth.” Crucially, they “are not

swept off course by the world's unabating distractions. Steady do they go, patient and perseverant, pledged to long-term endeavour." Such steadiness of purpose, combined with openness to learning and infused with historical consciousness, enables the work of the Association to advance. The dispositions being cultivated in the Association's spaces and processes embody the conviction that how one seeks truth is inseparable from what one finds, and that the quality of the search is itself a contribution to the civilization of oneness being built.

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Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR
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INTRODUCTION

As discussed in both the Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective and the companion essay on the Association's Approach to Learning in this volume, the Association has identified six objects of learning that currently organize its work: multiplying and developing the settings and processes of collaborative inquiry; enabling growing numbers of diverse participants to assist each other in contributing to the discourses that shape spiritual and material progress; developing an outward-looking culture; helping young adults view participation in academic and professional discourses as a core dimension of their service; assisting a growing number of authors to publish work contributing to the intellectual life of the community; and employing the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding.

This essay draws on the experience of collaborative initiatives spanning fields as varied as Africana studies, agriculture, the arts, climate and environment, economics, evolution and consciousness, health and wellbeing, Indigenous studies, organization studies, public health, social science, and technology and society, as well as groups focused, for example, on overcoming racism and sexism, or on rethinking social justice. Together, they illustrate how these objects of learning are framing the Association's work and how they are being advanced in practice. While some of these groups function as special interest groups and

others have a more limited focus, the generic term “group” is used throughout to refer to each of them. This essay highlights what these collaborators are discovering, the experiences they are generating, some of the challenges they are encountering, and how this process of inquiry is extending the frontiers of what collective endeavors can achieve.

FOSTERING SPACES FOR GROWTH

The first object of learning is how to multiply and develop 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.”² The main types of specialized settings the Association has developed to this end are reading groups, seminars, writing groups, and other small group endeavors, each serving a distinct purpose within an increasingly coherent constellation of collaborative activity.

OVERVIEW

READING GROUPS are small groups that form to read a book or a set of texts from a given field or theme and to thoughtfully explore the content in a collaborative environment. They are an accessible way for participants to deepen their understanding of a

specific discourse and how it correlates with the teachings of the Faith. Once formed, these groups often meet for six to twelve weekly sessions, though some develop into longer-term efforts, and all aim to analyze the text or texts they are studying in the light of the writings of the Faith, the community's experience, and the framework for action. SEMINARS vary in format and size. Some, organized by special interest groups, convene dozens of people at a time for relatively broad and inclusive conversations and presentations about important trends across a range of discourses in related fields, while others gather smaller groups of collaborators for more specific conversations and presentations informed by substantial preparatory reading. Many seminars now take place over two days as part of the annual conference, while others are held throughout the year, either in person or online. WRITING GROUPS are collaborative endeavors aimed at producing content for *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* and other fora. Of particular concern is how to create consultative environments that enhance individual and collective research, writing, and review. The core aim is to foster a humble posture of learning in the writing and review process, one in which each member of the group feels supported by the other members and the *Journal's* editors to strengthen his or her contribution.

The groups documented in this essay range in their degree of development. Some are learning to function as SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS consisting of a

2 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

widening network of participants connected by a shared academic or professional field, coordinated by a nucleus of collaborators, and organizing a range of spaces, including reading groups, seminars, writing groups, and other specialized gatherings. OTHERS ARE ORGANIZED AROUND A MORE SPECIFIC FOCUS or a single set of activities, such as drafting seminar materials or advancing a particular line of inquiry. What they share is a commitment to sustained collective inquiry and to creating spaces in which participants can enter into conversation with one another, identify common interests, consult on questions of shared relevance, receive encouragement and support, set goals, and initiate or develop new lines of inquiry and collaborative endeavors.

WORKSHOPS have also served as natural entry points into these groups' activities and the Association's activities more generally. Typically half-day sessions, workshops help familiarize participants with the aims of the Association and its approaches to contributing to professional and academic discourses, exploring such themes as the dispositions conducive to participating constructively in discourses, how to read these discourses for their underlying assumptions, concepts, and methods of inquiry, and how attending to the elements of the conceptual framework helps to ensure coherence between the efforts of the Association and the community-building work and social action of the wider Bahá'í community.

Each of these spaces can function relatively autonomously and also

become part of a mutually reinforcing network of activity, giving rise to and strengthening the others, while being strengthened by them in turn. A few reading groups, for example, may evolve into writing groups whose participants eventually present and receive feedback on their work at seminars or during breakout sessions at the annual conference. Other reading groups may simply give rise to new reading groups, or they may also lead to seminars and lay the basis for the emergence of a special interest group. The annual 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; it can also serve as a portal for the multiplication of new, smaller group initiatives. Workshops provide insights into the aims of the Association and stimulate further engagement. Together, these spaces form an organic web of mutually reinforcing yet autonomous efforts, each contributing to the progressive clarification of how the Revelation's principles can inform and transform contemporary discourses. What emerges is an ecosystem of learning³ characterized by shared commitments, collaborative inquiry, and a dedication to reciprocal growth.

In this context, the growth of these spaces over the past thirteen years has been substantial, particularly in reading groups and seminars. What began as a modest set of gatherings has recently

3 See the essay "Approach to Learning" in this issue.

grown significantly, reaching a point where, in the period from May 2024 to April 2025 alone, seventy-one reading groups engaged approximately 500 participants and seventy-seven facilitators, while twenty-four thematic and discipline-specific seminars engaged nearly 350 participants and forty-four facilitators. As of April 2026, this momentum had continued: sixty-seven reading groups have engaged 476 participants and seventy-four facilitators since May 2025, and thirty-four seminars have engaged 783 participants and ninety-four facilitators over the same period. The 49th annual conference in Calgary in 2025, which brought together some 2,000 participants, featured nineteen two-day thematic seminars for 307 participants preceding the general sessions.

Taken together, these figures reflect not merely numerical expansion but a culture of collaborative inquiry that is growing in both reach and depth. In some cases, these spaces are coalescing into special interest groups that are themselves learning to become more systematic in their functioning, to cultivate a mode of learning among a widening circle of participants, and to gain insight into how to nurture fledgling efforts. Some groups have developed significant momentum over the past few years, while others are gaining momentum; some longstanding groups continue to refine their modes of functioning, and still others are beginning to recognize themselves as special interest groups for the first time.

RECENT EXPERIENCE

The growth and development of special interest groups have become a major focus for the Association. In this context, the Association is learning to create spaces and opportunities for capacity building among diverse participants, including those deeply immersed in its work and those newer to the process but keen to participate. It does so by endeavoring to foster a culture in which the vitality of any collaborative space is understood to depend on the quality of relationships and the approach to learning among all who participate.

This culture can be seen, for example, in the recent work of the Advancing Organizations group, which has been deepening collective understanding across different perspectives and sources of information. Its facilitators describe making sense of the group's work as akin to "solving a jigsaw puzzle, with a twist: we don't have all the pieces on hand, and since it is impossible to make sense of the pieces in isolation, we have to discover where the missing pieces are hiding—some in the Bahá'í Writings, others in secular or scientific sources, and still more in the experiences of individuals, communities, and institutions." The group began simply as a reading group focused on a single book, curious about what insights from the Writings might emerge from reading it together. "It is only with the passage of time," they reflect, "that we've come to appreciate the fruits of the journey, and the opportunity

for everyone to contribute and participate.” Every member, they observe, “possesses pieces to the puzzle, and it’s only through a process that invites diverse people to participate in different degrees over time that the puzzle is slowly but surely taking shape.”

The Agriculture group reflects a similar culture of sustained, open inquiry: originating in the 1990s and relaunched at the 2018 Atlanta conference, it has developed a body of work across more than thirty reading groups and fifty monthly online sessions. The range of texts explored—from Wendell Berry’s reflections on culture and agriculture to Indigenous perspectives on food systems, from studies of regenerative farming to FUNDAEC’s work on education and development—reflects a commitment to engaging the full breadth of the discourse. The group describes itself as “very outward-looking,” with members recently participating in a range of agricultural initiatives across North America and internationally.

The Climate and Environment group has also built its work on deep and wide-ranging engagement with a number of texts. Since 2021, it has worked through writings by Joseph Romm, Katharine Hayhoe, Tim Jackson, Jeff Goodell, and Kate Marvel, among others, alongside books on sustainable food and water security, key Bahá’í writings, and documents of the Bahá’í International Community such as *One Planet, One Habitation*. It has also connected with related Bahá’í-inspired initiatives, including the International

Environment Forum and FUNDAEC. This breadth of reading has helped participants develop the shared understanding needed to engage the environmental discourse with both scientific literacy and principled conviction.

The Technology and Society group provides yet another example. Emerging from initial reading group experiences in 2022, it assumed a more defined form in early 2024 and has become increasingly consolidated over the past two years. The group’s convenors note that “the movement of this special interest group reflects the influence of individuals and institutions that foster the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community”; they have taken inspiration from ISGP seminars and Farzam Arbab’s essay on the intellectual life of the community, and have benefited from “direct accompaniment from individuals with experience that further guided [them] toward distinctive readings and authors and supported reflection on [the group’s] movement through the field.” To date, the group has engaged some 250 individuals in the study of twelve books and a range of articles. The group’s convenors explain that its various spaces, including reading groups, seminars, facilitator planning spaces, training sessions, conference breakout sessions, and discovery spaces, function as “interrelated components of a broader process of inquiry.” In engaging with the wider academic literature, they have found that this literature “addresses fundamental questions extensively and arrives at a degree of convergence around certain

key ideas, including the co-construction of technology and society and the recognition that technology reflects underlying values"—points of reference that contrast with influential yet often unexamined assumptions in popular discourse, and that provide a basis for organizing sustained inquiry.

Another group that has been building momentum is the Social Sciences one, which is emerging as a special interest group bringing together social scientists from a range of disciplines to examine the presuppositions of their respective fields and of social inquiry more broadly in the light of the Revelation. Participants describe the experience as transformative: the space allows for reading closely and methodically, making connections across disciplines and sources, and attending to concepts—what lines of inquiry they open and what they foreclose—in ways that individual study does not always afford. The continuity of the space has proven particularly generative, with participants returning session after session to find that insights from seemingly disparate sources often illuminate each other and converge in unexpected ways. The back-and-forth between larger and smaller spaces, moreover, has been invigorating, enriching participants' understanding of insights from the Revelation on themes such as the three protagonists of society-building, the nature of the community as a protagonist in its own right, and the interplay between the individual and the collective. Pierre Bourdieu and other thinkers have offered analytical tools

for reading social reality, and participants have found themselves discovering unexpected convergences between these analyses and the conceptual framework of the Faith. The group has also organized a series of participatory webinars in which presenters share their ongoing work as social scientists, focusing on how they are learning to contribute to academic and professional discourse in their fields and on how they correlate insights from their respective disciplines with the teachings of the Faith. Themes explored in these webinars have included prefigurative climate action, the biology of human rights and the dehumanizing brain, and rethinking care, justice, and knowledge through a maternal health case study. A seminar held in November 2024 explored three interrelated themes: the role of diversity in achieving objectivity, the development of moral virtues in the pursuit of research, and the engagement of complexity through the use of multiple frameworks. Drawing on the ideas of Helen Longino, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Simone Weil, as well as those furnished by the evolving Bahá'í conceptual framework, participants reflected on the moral, intellectual, and structural prerequisites for generating meaningful knowledge in a world striving for unity. The group understands this conversation as part of a sustained collaborative effort to lay the foundations for deeper engagement with social science discourses from a Bahá'í perspective.

The Health group's trajectory has also been defined by successive stages

of learning, each prompting a reorientation of its approach. From 2016 to 2022, annual seminars brought together twenty to sixty health care professionals and students for broad, inclusive conversations. These were “uplifting and joyful spaces,” but the same foundational conversation tended to repeat itself each year as new participants arrived, while deeper questions about how to participate meaningfully in specific health discourses remained difficult to pursue. Beginning with the Nine Year Plan, three developments transformed their approach: the involvement of a growing number of participants shaped by the institute process and ISGP seminars, bringing a new orientation toward the analysis of discourse; the introduction of sections of *Participating in Public Discourse* (Book 14 of the institute process) into the seminar structure; and the emergence of focused collaborative sub-groups exploring mental health, trust and trustworthiness in medicine, professional identity formation, and palliative care. By 2025, the group had reconvened its larger seminar after a two-year hiatus; this space now functioned less as a general gathering and more as a community where collaborative groups and interested individuals could connect, share what they were learning, and identify questions of common concern. This experience shows that the vitality of a space evolves through participants’ willingness to reflect honestly on what is and is not working and to reconfigure it accordingly.

Altogether, the different groups are learning to build on strengths, assess challenges and new opportunities arising from growth, and persevere in the face of ambiguity. As the Advancing Organizations facilitators put it, it is important not to “wait until your understanding feels complete” or assume that “mastery is required in order to make meaningful contributions,” since “every engagement, no matter how small, surfaces new puzzle pieces that help the group move forward.” Their advice, therefore, is simply to begin from wherever the group finds itself.

WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF PARTICIPATION

The second object of learning is how to enable growing numbers of diverse participants, intent on “transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation,” to assist one another in contributing to the discourses that influence the direction of spiritual and material progress.

The experience of the Indigenous Studies group speaks directly to the question of widening participation. One of its most significant accomplishments, its members write, is “making scholarship accessible to all participants, regardless of their formal academic background.” They note that the reading group format has “allowed individuals from many walks of life to engage meaningfully with complex questions,” challenging “the assumption that scholarship must be confined to professional academics.” Great care

has been taken “to listen attentively to each voice,” with participants mindful of “the distinction between information that is accumulated and knowledge that is illuminated through insight and reflection.” Early on, members realized that “most participants—regardless of educational or professional background—knew very little about Indigenous lives today, history, spiritual beliefs, and cultures.” This recognition “became an important starting point,” prompting them “to approach the subject with humility and with a commitment to learning rather than presuming expertise.” They found that “discussing works of fiction that are grounded in experience seems to generate thoughtful, sensitive and respectful comments from all participants. . . . Especially for those who have limited or no contact with Indigenous friends, reading these stories truly seems to reduce notions of differences felt, such as ‘them’ and ‘us.’” As noted below, members also came to see art “as a vehicle for learning and achieving deeper understanding,” finding that “artistic forms—whether visual, narrative, or performative—have the capacity to convey experience, memory, and meaning in ways that purely analytical discourse may not.”

They have also recognized “the importance of focusing on the education of junior youth,” and have initiated an online reading group studying *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*. The group has engaged these young participants in fostering greater appreciation for Indigenous perspectives on

reciprocity, relationship, and responsibility—dispositions the group views as foundational to the kind of engaged, outward-looking orientation it seeks to cultivate from an early age, enabling ever more meaningful participation in the discourses of society. Organizing this study group is viewed as “a first step in linking [the Indigenous Studies group’s] learning about reconciliation with practical educational action among youth.” Through the Indigenous Studies group’s discussions, participants have come to understand that reconciliation is “not a single event but an ongoing process.” Drawing on Jody Wilson-Raybould’s insight that “reconciliation is a marathon, not a sprint,” members have further noted that it “may, in fact, resemble a relay marathon, requiring sustained effort across generations, with each participant contributing to a larger, collective journey.

The experience of the Indigenous Studies group reflects a broader aspiration that has shaped the Association’s approach to participation across all of its spaces. Wider participation has been fostered through reading groups and seminars focused on promoting racial harmony, the role of women in society, Africana studies, and other themes that invite participation from communities whose voices have historically been underrepresented. This expansive understanding of who belongs in these spaces reflects guidance the Universal House of Justice offered in its letter of 19 October 1993, which cautions against any narrowing of the term “Bahá’í scholarship” that would

“effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it.” What is sought instead is a community “in which the members encourage each other” and in which it is recognized that “every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh,” bringing that understanding to bear on the discourses that shape the life of society. The Association’s effort to make its spaces readily accessible—to those with and without formal academic credentials, across disciplines and generations—is an embodiment of that vision, albeit one still being realized. The Africana Studies Group has exemplified this commitment by bringing Africana intellectual traditions into sustained dialogue with Bahá’í insights on oneness and social transformation. Some of the fruits of this work were shared at the 46th annual conference in a plenary session on Bahá’í perspectives on reparations, and were further explored at the 47th conference in a thematic seminar on Africana discourses of social transformation, among other gatherings. Engagement of this nature has proven generative for both the group and the wider Association, opening new lines of inquiry into the relationship between Bahá’í principles and questions of justice and social transformation.

A broader challenge the Association is still learning to navigate concerns the tension between widening participation and maintaining disciplinary focus. When individuals unfamiliar

with a particular discipline join discipline-specific conversations, discussions can sometimes lose direction and turn inward toward Bahá’í community concerns rather than remaining oriented toward the ways Bahá’ís can contribute to relevant academic and professional discourses. In the ideal, discipline-specific spaces complement the more interdisciplinary or thematic spaces created by many reading groups and seminars by allowing for more intensive, more extended engagement with a given field. In this regard, the Association has been learning how to maintain the integrity of specialized settings while keeping them open and accessible to those interested in actively pursuing their specific objects of inquiry. It has also started designing on-ramp materials on different themes that build understanding in layers, enabling participants to engage meaningfully with related concepts and assumptions while being drawn forward into more focused engagement in the area.

Along these lines, the Technology and Society group has navigated this tension in organizational terms, eventually introducing “invitational spaces intended for participants with prior experience in the discourse, while continuing to offer publicly announced groups open to all,” moving in the direction of “a more refined realization of the aim of universal participation.” This logic resonates with the way the Universal House of Justice describes the three educational imperatives in its message of 12 December 2011, each of which is “distinguished by its own

methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field,” giving rise, quite naturally, to distinct discussions suited to each. Similarly, the Association is learning to create opportunities for widening participation while also creating spaces distinguished by a level of focus on a particular line of inquiry that promotes depth of understanding.

The Advancing Organizations group has found that this spirit of open participation, when it takes hold, itself gives rise to the most generative conversations—those arising from participants sharing partially formed ideas, honest observations from practice, and genuine questions for mutual exploration. When this occurs, the emphasis shifts “from asking ‘What is new or impressive?’ to asking, ‘What is useful to the collective process of learning?’” Such an approach, they continue, “has been both liberating and challenging. It requires a willingness to share ideas that are still forming, to speak from experience rather than abstraction, and to remain open to having one’s ideas and assumptions tested by others.”

DEVELOPING AN OUTWARD-LOOKING CULTURE

The third object of learning is how to develop an outward-looking culture in which participants in different Association spaces understand themselves to be contributing to the

discourses of their fields in ways that are concurrently aligned with the society-building power of the Faith.

This orientation flows from two dispositions central to the Association’s approach: correlating insights from the teachings with those of modern thought, and harmonizing perspectives from various sources. It takes inspiration from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own example. As Shahriar Razavi explains, His public addresses in the West typically strengthened constructive currents of thought already present in the wider discourse, finding and reinforcing what was in sympathy with the Bahá’í teachings rather than simply opposing what was wrong. Progress in this area has taken several forms. Facilitators and participants are gaining experience, inviting individuals from the wider academic and professional community to participate alongside them in reading groups, seminars, and conference sessions. Following the 30 December 2021 guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they are learning to view all involved as potential partners to collaborate with and to foster fellow-feeling among groups that may traditionally have been less inclined to engage with one another. At the same time, they are learning to be present in new ways in academic and professional spaces in the wider society.

As noted in the companion essay on the Association’s approach to learning in this volume, Haleh Arbab captures the disposition these groups are working to embody: Bahá’í engagement with a discourse involves neither

dismissing existing knowledge in the field nor uncritically accepting it, but rather combining full mastery of the field with the capacity to examine its underlying assumptions in the light of the Revelation. This is what the Public Health group is demonstrating when it holds together the material and spiritual dimensions of health; what the Economics group is enacting when it sifts rather than dismisses the assumptions of Economics 101; and what the Climate and Environment group is exemplifying when it cultivates a shared analytical vocabulary grounded in both scientific knowledge and spiritual principles. This integrative orientation also resonates with the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing developed by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, which holds that the strongest knowledge emerges when Indigenous and Western ways of knowing are brought into complementarity, each enriching the other—a vision that speaks directly to the disposition the Indigenous Studies group is working to embody.

The experience of the Public Health group offers a helpful illustration of these outward-looking dispositions in practice. It was formed in 2021 to create a space where people could come together to read, consult, and potentially contribute to the discourse on religion and public health, a relationship its members quickly recognized as difficult to understand if the human being is treated as purely material. Holding together the material and spiritual dimensions of health became “a central feature of the group’s inquiry.”

During a first phase of action, the group undertook a qualitative research study, including interviews with public health leaders and practitioners, to explore how religion and public health are defined and how their interaction is perceived in professional and community contexts. “This step translated our internal conversations into conversations with a wider network of colleagues extending from academic public health to applied practitioners.” The research resulted in a peer-reviewed publication, presentations at professional conferences, and a new university course on Faith and Public Health. The group has now entered a second phase, hosting public seminars that “create conditions in which participants can explore the relationship between religion and public health in an environment of mutual respect, and cultivate relationships that support ongoing collaboration.” Throughout, participation in reading groups has proven foundational. “Under the guidance of the Association,” its members reflect, “the reading groups created a certain rigor that would not have been possible to sustain in an informal arrangement,” providing a space for questions about human nature to be explored with curiosity, an opportunity to develop facility with a new vocabulary, and a source of mutual support that helps to advance a new area of inquiry. As they observe, engaging in professional discourses that seek to reexamine certain assumptions “is like diving underwater together. There is uncertainty and a lack of clarity. It requires patience

and perseverance to explore the depths together, and most of the time, the destination is unknown. Diving with a group feels much better than diving alone.”

A further illustration is the decade-long process by which two scholars developed their work on contributive justice and constructive agency, which unfolded across ABS reading groups, seminars, conference panels, university classrooms, and professional academic spaces in an integrated way. The content of their manuscript, *Rethinking Social Justice*, was further enriched by a two-day colloquium co-hosted with the Kroc School for Peace Studies at the University of San Diego. The details of this journey are captured in their reflections in this volume. The entire process exemplifies how an outward-looking culture can produce scholarly contributions that are simultaneously grounded in Bahá'í insights and fruitfully engaged with the wider academic discourse on social change.

Other groups are also learning how to strengthen their outward-looking orientation. In the Evolution and Consciousness group, engagement with the concept of latency—the understanding that capacities present in a species' potential are progressively actualized under the right conditions—has begun to shape the research directions of different facilitators. In one case, it has prompted investigation of convergent evolution in cognition across distantly related species as a possible neural expression of latent

capacity. What began as a seminar designed to help undergraduates navigate a contested discourse has begun to generate the kind of dynamic Haleh Arbab describes in her essay, in which the Revelation functions both as a lens through which scientific findings can be read more fully and as a source of insights that go beyond what materialistic assumptions alone can yield.

Since 2021, the Climate and Environment Group has been exploring how its participants can become “active protagonists for sustainability, agents of change who promote the integration of spiritual values with scientific knowledge.” Two sources have proven particularly generative in grounding this aspiration. First, the Bahá'í International Community's *One Planet, One Habitation* articulates the conviction that “each of us enters the world as a trust of the whole” and that our choices must take into account the well-being of future generations—a framing that has helped participants situate their engagement within a vision of intergenerational responsibility. Second, the Universal House of Justice's 29 November 2017 letter on climate change grounds the work explicitly in justice, noting that those who do the least to cause climate change are most affected—a recognition that gives the group's outward engagement its moral urgency. Central to this aspiration is a shared analytical vocabulary the group has developed for reading environmental discourse, including an awareness of the frames through which environmental issues are perceived and

acted on. Participants recognize the importance of drawing on the best available expert syntheses, while acknowledging the evolving nature of scientific knowledge, as humanity navigates the dual challenges of mitigating the causes of climate change and adapting to its effects. Grounded in Bahá'í principles of justice, moderation, and the oneness of humanity, this framework allows participants to engage the discourse not merely as concerned observers but as informed contributors.

That same letter, moreover, has served as an important orienting reference, characterizing the 2015 Paris Accord as “a starting point for constructive thought and action that can be refined or revised on the basis of experience and new findings over time” and modelling the posture of principled, non-partisan engagement with a contested public discourse. The group has also learned that outward-looking engagement operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the level of daily life, they share a range of practical actions, from home gardening and teaching children about recycling in their classes to career choices aligned with sustainability and engagement with local government on environmental policy. Here, the group draws on James Speth, founder of the World Resources Institute, who argued that the deepest environmental problems are not technical but moral, including selfishness, greed, and apathy. The Bahá'í teachings, participants in this group are finding, offer a viable framework for the spiritual and cultural transformation

these root causes require. At the level of discourse specifically, members have developed practices for conversation with family, co-workers, and co-volunteers that move beyond argument about scientific evidence toward exploring shared values and helping others overcome the anxiety or paralysis that the scale of the environmental crisis can produce. They are, moreover, learning to bring this conviction into the varied outward spaces in which they find themselves.

In the Advancing Organizations group, the most meaningful contributions have arisen from dialogue that brings together “observations from scientific advances, the Faith, and personal experience,” enabling participants to gradually learn “how to bring our professional thoughts, speech, and actions into coherence with the principles we espouse.” The group notes that people may initially adopt incentive structures that appeal primarily to self-interest, but “upon deeper introspection, they recognize that economic rewards are not the only (or even an effective) driver of individual performance.” Surfacing assumptions such as these through sustained dialogue, the group is finding, can itself be a meaningful contribution to the wider discourses in which they are engaged.

Alongside this, the Agriculture group anchors its outward engagement in both authoritative guidance and professional knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh characterized agriculture as the most important of the five principles “conducive to the advancement of mankind” in

the Tablet of the World. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, they observe, established the model farming community at Adasíyyih, which helped save Haifa residents from starvation during the First World War. This scriptural grounding gives the group’s outward engagement coherence, enriched by professional knowledge as expressed through its YouTube channel, its connections with the Berry Center in Kentucky, and its engagement with agricultural communities across North America, Kenya, and Uganda. The group’s thirty-four facilitated reading groups and fifty-two monthly online sessions to date, featuring leading experts in food production and agriculture, have built a body of shared learning that informs and continues to deepen their outward engagement.

The Health group’s experience further underscores the value of applying the lessons of the institute process to outward-looking engagement. From their earliest seminars, participants began discovering what such engagement could produce in their individual professional lives. One participant notes that the consultations during the seminar helped her formulate a research proposal for her graduate studies, ensuring that both her questions and methodology were inspired by the Revelation. Another reports having gained experience correlating concepts from the Revelation with the practice of medicine, learning to weave conversations about the nobility of the human soul into end-of-life care discussions with patients and families. When the group

subsequently incorporated the first unit of Book 14 into its 2023 seminar on health equity, participants experienced “identifying elements of our shared conceptual framework that are relevant to health care and analyzing the prevalent understanding of them in our health systems.” This proved so helpful that the group organized regional studies of Book 14 across Ontario, Alberta, and Arizona, making the study of the institute materials a central feature of its evolving approach. These examples suggest that outward-looking engagement is not only a collective aspiration but also finds greater expression in the daily professional practice of individual participants.

HELPING YOUNG ADULTS PARTICIPATE

The fourth object of learning is how to help young adults—in particular university students and recent graduates—view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service that is coherent with the imperatives of community-building and social action, the objectives of the training institute, and the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

A significant development in recent years has been the offering of seminars for youth and young adults, both at the annual conference and increasingly at decentralized locations. These gatherings generally aim to help young people, especially undergraduates, navigate challenging

issues in the discourses of their fields. Between April and November 2025, the Association organized multi-seminar gatherings in five locations—Boston, Calgary, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Providence Point (Ottawa/Montreal)—bringing together 160 participants, predominantly youth and young adults. Each gathering offered two to four concurrent seminars, with attendance ranging from eleven in Calgary to fifty-four in Los Angeles. Beyond these multi-seminar gatherings, single decentralized seminars have taken place in several other locations across North America in the last two years, as well as at the annual conference.

These decentralized seminars represent the latest expression of a campus engagement tradition that extends back to the Association's founding mandate. The Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada and college Bahá'í clubs in the United States strove to cultivate a Bahá'í scholarly presence on campuses by connecting students and faculty to the Association's broader intellectual life, organizing speaker tours, and encouraging systematic study. The current model extends that tradition. The Association is now exploring ways to build students' capacity to engage in the discourses of their own fields from a Bahá'í perspective—reflecting an evolving understanding of what intellectual capacity-building requires—an understanding that has been greatly strengthened in recent years by ISGP.

MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Four sets of materials focused on mental health, technology and society, economics, and evolution and consciousness—the latter two written specifically with students in mind—have been well received and are proving effective at fostering shared understanding of fundamental questions within these given discourses. The economics materials were the first to be developed and have since inspired the development of materials in other fields. They emerged from a decade of collaborative engagement with the economics discourse documented by Jordan van Rijn.⁴ This account traces the group's evolution from collective reading and reflection to the development of a heuristic for reading a discourse, and finally to the writing of a document specifically designed to help undergraduates understand Economics 101 principles through the lens of the Bahá'í conceptual framework. That seminar document, refined through use at the annual conference and in smaller settings, has become a prototype for a broader set of student-facing materials now being deployed across decentralized gatherings. It has thus shown how a sustained collaborative initiative, given sufficient time and accompaniment, can generate resources of lasting practical value. All such materials aim to model how to engage with a particular

4 See, "Learning to Sift," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1-2, 2023.

discourse—clarifying its underlying assumptions and correlating insights from the Revelation with its key ideas by identifying similarities and differences—while also creating conditions for participants to think independently, consult freely, and begin to see themselves as potential contributors to the discourse rather than merely students of it.

The Economics group's account of how it developed these materials helps to illuminate what the process requires. Motivated by the observation that students "appear to become more selfish and less cooperative after studying economics," the group created its document "Engaging Introductory Economics" to help students "reflect on the assumptions and principles taught in introductory Economics 101 courses in light of the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í community." As such, the document encourages participants "to engage ideas in terms of their best possible interpretation and seek to understand their most noble aspirations," drawing on Bahá'u'lláh's admonition not "to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men." The process is bidirectional. On the one hand, as Farzam Arbab has observed, it requires asking which of "our societies' cherished conceptions of human psyche, which elements of today's elaborate theories of social progress, which methods of education, which conceptions of work, wealth, love, justice, freedom and authority are

the playthings of childhood and infancy."⁵ On the other hand—and equally important—the group has found that, when approached with humility and openness, one can learn a great deal from the economics discourse, while not uncritically accepting some of the more limiting assumptions and conceptions present in the field. On the question of human nature, for instance, the group does not disagree with the characterization of the individual as self-interested and competitive, but considers it an incomplete picture. It is this spirit of sifting rather than dismissing that the materials reflect. The group maintained this collaborative work for six to seven years despite considerable competing demands on its members, motivated by the vision of "having a practical service component." They state that "there is something powerfully inspiring in having a concrete view of who we are serving and accompanying through our efforts, as opposed to simply engaging in an intellectual exercise."

The Evolution and Consciousness group, inspired by this model of materials development, developed materials on evolution and consciousness—two domains where scientific and spiritual perspectives are often presented as incompatible. Their two documents—one on evolution, one on consciousness—emerged from learning across several years of ABS spaces focused on science and religion, methodologies in science, and mind and consciousness,

and have been facilitated in fourteen locations to date. The conviction animating both documents is that students often face a false choice between creationist rejection and materialist acceptance of evolutionary science, and that the Bahá'í conceptual framework offers a coherent third path.

The challenge these materials address is not new. Haleh Arbab, for example, identified it a decade earlier, arguing that students who encounter strong materialistic worldviews at university struggle to maintain coherence between their religious convictions and their academic formation. Her proposed response is to enable students to take ownership of their education by reflecting on the conceptual framework that guides Bahá'í participation in discourses of society. This vision is informing how the Association and its different groups understand their role with young scholars. The materials being developed by these groups represent an effort to carry this work forward, helping students learn not to choose between rigorous academic engagement and Bahá'í conviction but to weave the two into productive interaction.

This work likewise reflects Farzam Arbab's observation that the intellectual life of the community depends on cultivating, at its grassroots, "a worldwide, intellectually and spiritually sound conversation" in which the learning is "profound but not so pointlessly difficult as to scare away most people," a culture that "allow[s] everyone to enter the conversation at

the most accessible levels and then build capacity for increasingly more complex thought."⁶ Paul Lample's essay reinforces this vision, noting that developing the habits and sensibilities needed for this kind of scholarship is a formation that begins early, deepens over a lifetime, and is collective in character, oriented not toward the expression of personal opinion but toward the shared pursuit of truth.

Guided by these principles, the Technology and Society group has been introducing concepts into its materials based on its engagement with the technology discourse in various reading groups and seminars, finding that "undergraduate students have engaged with these ideas with great openness, creating space for further consultation." In terms of designing the materials, the group underscores the importance of being in a mode of learning, and that "the generation of content unfolds not as an immediate outcome of reading but through a disciplined and collective process of reflection, consultation, and refinement, through which thought gradually attains clearer expression." The Health group has similarly begun asking, from within its renewed collaborative space, what concepts might be helpful for students "as they enter the field of health and before they are shaped by its dominant paradigms," leading to a first concept paper and ongoing refinement through seminar experience.

6 Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life" 17.

POINTS OF LEARNING

Several points of learning have emerged from this experience with seminars.

One concerns the nature and purpose of the seminars themselves. The Association has found it helpful to make explicit that these gatherings are not intended to present definitive Bahá'í positions on topics, but rather to serve as exploratory spaces that require active exchange and full participation. Participants have found them stimulating and relevant to their studies, and some have noted that they complement what they have been learning through ISGP programs. The Evolution and Consciousness group has contributed a related insight: when apparent contradictions arise during discussion, the group has learned to treat them as productive rather than threatening on the premise that truth cannot ultimately be contradictory, and that a seemingly unresolved tension, honestly named, is an invitation to deeper inquiry into a given aspect of reality.

Other points of learning concern recruitment, facilitator capacity building, and institutional coherence. Personal conversations and word of mouth through youth networks and ISGP alumni have proven more effective for recruiting to seminars than general announcements, with the invitation process itself becoming an avenue for conversation about the Association's purpose and a reminder that the relationships being cultivated among young adults are part of the

seminars' work. Pairing new facilitators with experienced co-facilitators in preparation sessions leading up to the gatherings has proven an effective approach to building facilitation capacity. Deliberate engagement with Auxiliary Board Members, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and, in some cases, university partners has proven equally essential to the success of the seminars, strengthening both the quality of the experience and institutional understanding of the Association's evolving role. In California, conversations with all twelve Auxiliary Board Members serving the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas helped spread the word and drew several Auxiliary Board Members and Local Spiritual Assembly representatives to Saturday evening reflections during the seminars, deepening relational bonds while enabling financial and logistical support. The experience in several locations also demonstrated the value of university partnerships in reducing organizational burden and supporting financial sustainability, suggesting a model worth building upon as the seminar network continues to expand.

As these seminars have multiplied and matured, a number of important questions have emerged for further consideration: how to help participants move from reading texts to reading society and discourse; how to adapt materials to serve participants of varying academic backgrounds while maintaining depth and rigor; what spaces and processes need to be put in place to help a widening network of individuals

learn to facilitate these seminars confidently; and how local seminars can catalyze the formation of reading groups, special interest groups, and other ongoing Association activities both online and more locally. Such questions have been the subject of consultation with Continental Counsellors, National Assembly members from both countries, and close collaborators, and are animating the Association's ongoing conversations about how its activities can best complement and strengthen the pattern of action taking place in communities across North America.

ADVANCING PUBLICATIONS

The fifth object of learning is how to assist a growing number of authors in publishing articles and books that contribute to the intellectual life of the community and to academic and professional discourses.

The editorial process for *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has evolved considerably during the last thirteen years, becoming not only more rigorous and systematic, but also more collaborative and more characterized by a spirit of accompaniment. Two milestones within this period helped establish the model that the *Journal* has since been working to develop. The first was the volume *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), edited by Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel and published in collaboration with the Association. Although

not a *Journal* publication, the writing and publication of this book was a precedent-setting experience in which contributing authors met regularly to achieve coherence across their essays and assist one another in developing and refining their drafts. The discipline and quality of that collaborative process directly inspired the *Journal's* own subsequent experiments in collective scholarship.

The second milestone was the thematic issue on constructive resilience (vol. 30, no. 3, 2020), which brought together nine authors whose essays were the product of a self-organized collaborative process unfolding over three years. In his editorial commentary, Michael Sabet describes that issue as “one early milestone in learning about this kind of collaboration”—an experiment grounded in a particular conception of knowledge, which holds “that an elicitive and reflexive mode of engaging with ideas creates insights, elucidates questions that are obscure, and generates understanding.” The issue also introduced a broader stylistic range than the *Journal* had previously published, welcoming personal and introspective voices alongside traditionally academic ones on the grounds that “scholars who seek to share the knowledge generated by reflection on their own life experience must necessarily speak in a different voice from those studying phenomena outside themselves.”

Building on these precedents, the Editorial Committee is further expanding its role beyond soliciting and

receiving articles from individual authors to include supporting and accompanying collaborative writing projects emerging from sustained collective initiatives, such as long-term reading groups. Through such endeavors, authors approach a common topic from a range of perspectives and benefit from each other's insights as they develop their articles. A related development involves qualified peer reviewers consulting directly with authors on how to strengthen their submissions. This practice has proven a rich source of learning for all involved, with authors feeling supported and accompanied, and reviewers gaining experience in mentoring.

Volumes 33, no. 3 and 33 no. 4 (2023–24) represent a recent expression of what such a collaborative model can produce. These two issues were the fruit of a process spanning more than four years, in which a group of friends studied, consulted, wrote, and reflected together on the relationship between science, religion, and collaborative inquiry. In his editorial commentary on these issues, Sabet describes a process that illuminates what such scholarship can look like at its best. The spiritual quality at the genesis of the project, he writes, was love, including a shared love for the capacity of science and religion to investigate reality, expressed as deep curiosity and a desire to understand, which, in turn, deepened friendship and trust among the participants. That trust made honest feedback possible and allowed participants to share tentative understandings, unresolved

puzzles, and points where they were stuck. The group strove to work in a deliberate learning mode, beginning with abstracts that were each given focused consultative attention across two or three weekly meetings, and allowing topics to shift fluidly over time as they shared outlines, drafts, and reflections on their respective pieces. In this way, they aimed to deliberately apply the very insights they were gaining about Bahá'í consultation to the consultative dynamics of their own group. At later stages, the group convened two seminars to invite feedback from participants across a wide range of academic disciplines, ensuring diversity of perspective that helped to uncover elements of collective thinking that had been taken for granted. Sabet also notes that the constructive resilience issue had established an important precedent for this model, one that the science and religion issues were explicitly building upon, and that the Association hopes will be extended further as more collaborative initiatives find their way into print.

This emphasis on collaboration does not displace the individual scholarly voice. The *Journal* continues to welcome and actively encourage articles by single authors, and the accompaniment offered through the review process is designed to strengthen individual contributions as much as collective ones. What is shifting is not the value placed on individual scholarship but the recognition that collaborative and individual efforts are mutually enriching. Each makes the other more rigorous,

more expansive, and more deeply rooted in the life of the community. Over the period from 2023 to 2025, seven issues of the *Journal* were published, each reflecting the evolving range of both individual and collaborative efforts increasingly characteristic of the Association's scholarly work. Volume 35 no. 3 included a paper by a group of social scientists, "Aspirational Trends in Social Science Methodology"—a collaboratively written article that exemplifies the Association's efforts to cultivate a consultative approach to scholarship.

Other collaborative writing projects by various special interest groups are at various stages of development for future issues. This, along with the development of seminar materials, is proving vital to their learning process. As shared by the Technology and Society group, "producing written materials helps consolidate thought among collaborators and clarify ideas emerging from the discourse." They also state that "these materials [serve] as useful starting points for consultation, particularly in introducing such concepts into technical contexts where they are less commonly explored." This group has additionally published "Insights from the Discourse on Technology and Society" in *Bahá'í Canada*, opening the possibility for more groups to publish in venues beyond the *Journal* itself. Yet another form of publication is the Agriculture group's YouTube channel—with over 450 subscribers and more than fifty recorded presentations—which has created a durable

repository of accessible learning to complement the Association's formal spaces.

ABS Publications has similarly proceeded steadily on multiple fronts in recent years, further advancing the collaborative spirit animating the *Journal's* work. In 2020, Michael Karlberg's *Constructing Social Reality* was published. In 2022, John Hatcher's *The Body of God, A Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Súrih of the Temple*, appeared. In 2023, Nader Saiedi's *Gate of the Heart* was republished in softcover and e-book formats. In 2024, Kim MacQueen's *Visions of the Sacred: Conversations with Bahá'í Artists* was published, alongside republications of Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* and June Manning Thomas's *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*, with a new preface by Todd Smith. In 2025, two further books appeared: *In Pursuit of a More Superb Mission*, a stand-alone version of Paul Lample's plenary address at the 2024 ABS annual conference, and *Revelation, Reality, and Reason: 'Alí-Murád Dávudí's Philosophical Discourses on the Foundations of Bahá'í Belief*, edited by Vargha Bolodo-Taefi.

This culture of publication reflects what Farzam Arbab envisioned when he called for "more and more talented Bahá'ís in each field" to "begin to collaborate with one another and together advance the frontiers of knowledge in their areas of expertise."⁷ It reflects

7 Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life" 9.

the strengthening of an already existing scholarly culture in which “the relationship created among those who walk the path of service is one of accompanying each other—not competing with each other, not managing each other, not manipulating each other, and not gaining power over each other,”⁸ making it easier to avoid the dangers of elitism. This culture, including the individual scholarly endeavors that both complement and help to sustain it, is ultimately in service of the following vision expressed by Shoghi Effendi: “The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.”⁹ Each writing group, each thematic issue of the *Journal*, and each collaboratively developed seminar document is a step toward meeting that need.

INCORPORATING THE ARTS

The sixth object of learning is how to draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding. Artistic expressions, whether literary, visual, or musical, enable participants to engage with ideas through aesthetic and experiential modes that enrich and

enliven understanding, complementing analytical discussion and other forms of learning.

The arts have been present in the Association's work from the beginning, such as in the poetry included in the Bahá'í Studies Notebook series in the early 1980s and, more recently, in every issue of the *Journal*, the professional interest seminar on the arts established in 1985, the Arts Special Interest Group that sustained an ongoing conversation about artistic practice and Bahá'í scholarly life across many conferences, and in publications such as *Crystallizations: 20 Works by Bahá'í Artists* in 1996. More recently, this publishing tradition has continued with works such as Kim MacQueen's *Visions of the Sacred*, which brings together a diverse range of artistic voices that explore the relationship between spiritual principles and artistic expression.

Based on the learning generated in various consultative spaces, three connected areas of inquiry have recently been identified: first, how the arts can be more effectively integrated into various Association spaces; second, what artists themselves are learning regarding advancing discourses about the arts; and third, how the arts can play a direct role in disseminating learning pertaining to various discourses. Recognition of this contribution is growing across reading groups, seminars, working groups, and the annual conference itself. Reading groups have taken up a widening range of themes at the intersection of the arts, knowledge,

8 Farzam Arbab, “Intellectual Life” 18.

9 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Bahá'í Scholarship* ¶13.

and community life—exploring speculative fiction, narrative and ethics, storytelling and cinema, music, media, and creativity—as well as texts that directly address the role of the arts in community building, examining, for example, how the arts can be integrated into teaching and social outreach, study circles, devotional programs, children’s classes, youth activities, and the Nineteen Day Feast. Other groups have explored the relationship between science and art as complementary dimensions of human capacity, understood in light of the teachings of the Faith. This framing has significant implications for how participants understand themselves and the communities they serve. The conviction animating much of this exploration is captured in the words of the Universal House of Justice: “Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder.”¹⁰

Several seminars have, moreover, been organized to explore how artistic expression can deepen contributions to discourse. Through reading, discussion, and artmaking, participants have worked to better understand the spiritual nature and powers of the arts and to develop basic skills for channeling their vitality into the activities of community life. These seminars understand artistic engagement as integral to intellectual inquiry, and specifically as a vital means of accessing dimensions

of understanding that purely conceptual approaches cannot reach. Spaces have also been created for facilitators to share learning about incorporating the arts into their reading groups and seminars.

The Indigenous Studies group offers an example of this integration in practice. Participants in this group have come to see art as a vehicle for learning and deepening understanding, finding that artistic forms—whether visual, narrative, or performative—have the capacity to convey experience, memory, and meaning in ways that open additional pathways of perception and empathy, allowing participants to engage more fully with the realities being explored and to approach questions of reconciliation with greater sensitivity and insight. Discussing works of fiction and narrative grounded in experience generates thoughtful, sensitive, and respectful engagement from group participants, each ready to listen and learn, suggesting that storytelling is a powerful tool for transcending differences and widening the circle of participation. The group’s engagement with art has encompassed an examination of metaphor, imagination, and the cultural dimensions of artistic expression. They also share that, through movement, participants have explored the concept of reciprocity; through short skits, key concepts have been embodied and communicated in ways that verbal explanation alone could not. A virtual seminar they have held on reconciliation has been further enriched by a series of three- to five-minute artistic

presentations—including poetry, quilt art, paintings, visual art, and short films—that explored the meaning of reconciliation. These creative expressions have demonstrated how art can serve as a means of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, and collective understanding.

Another practice taken up within some Association spaces is PhotoSophia (drawing on the Greek roots of light and wisdom, and created by Chuck Egerton for his doctoral research), employed by the Whiteness and Patriarchy reading group, whose work centers on dismantling inherent patterns of racism and sexism. This art form uses a photographic self-portrait and combines sacred long-looking with arts-centered inquiry and deep heart-searching as a form of intentional self-reflection. Grounded in Bahá'u'lláh's admonition that "true loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self,"¹¹ the practice invites participants to bring themselves to account and consider how willful ignorance becomes a serious obstacle to overcoming ingrained patterns of racism and sexism in community-building efforts. Used with adults, youth, and children in communities around the world, PhotoSophia creates conditions that help participants foster a humble posture of learning. It reflects a growing recognition of the arts, at their most generative; not only a means of communicating insight but as a sacred practice. It cultivates inner transformation—develops

attentiveness, honesty, vulnerability, and an openness to change—without which sincere collective inquiry cannot take root.

The annual arts seminar at the conference, organized by the Arts group, has become an increasingly important occasion for this learning. Building on the momentum of the seminars held in the previous two years, its various reading groups, and its monthly online reflection spaces, the 2025 Calgary seminar drew participants into workshops on visual, literary, musical, theatrical, and textile arts, with an emphasis on Indigenous art and the full participation of those who did not consider themselves practicing artists. Participants described the experience as enriching, uplifting, and empowering, a space where trust developed quickly, with the arts becoming a genuine means of collective inquiry. The aspiration is to deepen this integration throughout the conference as a whole, enhancing artistic expression in devotions, plenary sessions, and breakout spaces, so that it becomes a living thread running through the entire gathering, coherent with and enriching the Association's intellectual life in this setting.

The Arts group, moreover, sustains a range of interconnected activities: periodic reading groups, monthly online reflection spaces, seminars connected to the annual conference, special interest group meetings, and connections with other initiatives, including writing groups and other artistic collectives. Its reading groups have explored

11 Bahá'u'lláh, *Aṣḥ-i-Kullu'l-Khayr*.

the concept of art as active spirituality—the idea that creating is akin to worship—as well as how the arts serve as tools for healing, personal growth, and unlocking creativity. Discussions have emphasized the importance of knowledge, skill, and the pursuit of excellence, and have considered how the arts connect minds, hearts, and souls. Participants have also reflected on methods for promoting personal, educational, and community transformation through artistic practice, and on how to draw on the arts across the full range of ongoing activities in community life. A recurring theme in the group’s conversations has been the coming era and the role the arts will play in it, inspired in particular by Shoghi Effendi’s statements on the connection between the development of the arts and the flourishing of Bahá’í culture. The relationship among these various spaces, and how learning generated in each can more deliberately strengthen the others, remains an active area of attention.

In general, what animates this group and the object of learning more generally is the conviction, expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and central to Bahá’í understanding, that the arts are not ornamental but civilizational. They are among the primary means by which the truths that animate the human spirit are made accessible, memorable, and transformative. As such, the Association continues to explore what it means to weave them into the full fabric of its work.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

A number of additional insights are worth highlighting, all of which align closely with the previous essay in this issue on the Association’s approach to learning.

The first is that learning in action constitutes an essential mode of inquiry. The Advancing Organizations group has found that “the central question is not primarily how to generate or disseminate new ideas, but how to cultivate the capacity to learn in action.” The Economics group has sustained its collaborative work for six to seven years, not because its members achieved clarity before acting, but because they embraced action as a means of generating clarity when reflecting. The Technology and Society group has found that “reflection and action remain integrated within a coherent process of learning.” The Health group’s most significant advances have come from focused collaborative initiatives in which a smaller group of friends has been “reflecting and learning together, participating in conferences and, in some cases, writing together.” The consciousness portion of the Evolution and Consciousness group’s seminar materials has itself been transformed through the process of facilitation: what began as a largely critical analysis of physicalist neuroscience evolved, through successive iterations and participant feedback, into an exploration of how consciousness matures socially, through language, consultation, and participation in communities

oriented toward truth. The Climate and Environment group has found a parallel dynamic, with participants gradually integrating spiritual values and scientific knowledge through direct engagement in the professional and civic spaces they inhabit. Participants note that sustainable technologies are increasingly cost-effective, creating real openings for principled engagement—and that when spiritual conviction and scientific literacy are developed together in sustained collaborative spaces, participants find themselves equipped to contribute not only to the group's internal learning but to these wider spaces as active protagonists.

The second insight is the role of humility as a governing disposition. The Economics group is learning to approach the discourse “in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy,” drawing on Bahá'u'lláh's admonition not “to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men.” The Technology and Society group is cultivating “the discipline of striving first to understand the basic meaning intended by an author” and resisting the tendency to approach ideas “as positions to be accepted or rejected wholesale, as though one were joining a camp, but rather to sift through them with a posture of humility and discernment.” As Razavi observes, what protects participants from both dogmatic religious assertion and uncritical assent to every claim advanced within a discourse is the capacity to “weigh knowledge in the balance of spiritual principles”—a standpoint that allows

one to “recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice.” The Indigenous Studies group is coming to understand scholarship itself as “a process of sincere collective learning that integrates intellectual exploration with humility, openness, and a willingness to be transformed through shared insights.” The Evolution and Consciousness group is discovering a related form of humility in its facilitation work, finding that seminar participants who arrive with strongly held positions—whether creationist or materialist—are best served not by being corrected but by exploring their ideas in relationship to a conceptual framework that offers points of unity and ways of transcending false dichotomies.

Closely related to this posture is, third, what the Advancing Organizations group identifies as the role of love as a governing principle in discourse. In environments where organizational challenges are often approached in an adversarial manner, the group is learning that “when contributions are grounded in a sincere desire to serve—to uplift colleagues, to strengthen institutions, and to contribute to the betterment of society—the tone and quality of discourse changes markedly.” This does not mean avoiding difficult truths, but rather approaching them “in a way that invites participation and builds capacity, rather than diminishing it.” The posture of love, in other words, is the primary condition under which mutually beneficial inquiry becomes possible. The Universal House of

Justice affirmed in its letter 23 March 1983 that the great advances in Bahá'í scholarship will come from those who, "while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of its teachings." This includes the disposition to impart divine love in every space, doing so in a manner that is both intellectually rigorous and outward-looking.

The fourth insight is the significance of accompaniment. The groups in this essay link the sustainability of their efforts with this essential feature of the conceptual framework. The image of "diving together" used by the Public Health group evokes not only the support that comes from shared endeavor but the particular quality of attention and trust that sustained accompaniment makes possible. The Health group has similarly found that its most generative moments have emerged from the companionship of a smaller circle of friends thinking together over time, a pattern that has proven essential to the development of its emerging framework on health. The Agriculture group has been building a body of work across its reading groups and online sessions, sustained by both individual initiative and group encouragement and planning. The Technology and Society group's systematic approach to coordination reflects the same understanding: that sustained learning requires collaborative planning and reflection animated by the right spirit. The Arts group has similarly found a related dynamic in its

own spaces: that the trust and vulnerability required for artistic inquiry, and for the more profound forms of reflection it makes possible, develop through companionship rather than simply in isolated encounters. Its monthly online reflection spaces, reading groups, and annual seminar together form a continuing environment in which participants regularly return to one another, building the kind of shared attentiveness that allows art to function not merely as expression but as a mode of fostering collective understanding.

The Social Sciences group's experience takes this insight further still. Participants describe how the continuity of their shared space has shaped not only what they think but how they think—finding themselves continuing to make connections between sessions, returning to the same sources with fresh eyes, and discovering, through what each person brings from their own discipline and experience, convergences they could not have anticipated alone. Emerging from this kind of regular accompaniment is not merely a fuller grasp of a given discourse but, reciprocally, an enriched relationship with elements of the Revelation itself, whose teachings participants find illuminated in new and unexpected ways through the very process of correlation and shared reflection. This quality of mutual illumination is among the most significant fruits of the culture of learning the Association is working to cultivate.

None of these groups has reached a final understanding. As the Advancing

Organizations group writes, they are “on the journey toward something more demanding and more hopeful: a way of working, grounded in spiritual principles and expressed through collective inquiry, that enables individuals and groups to contribute, however modestly, to the ongoing transformation” of the discourses they are exploring. This description applies equally to every group in these pages. The Climate and Environment group’s participants are finding that integrating spiritual conviction and scientific literacy opens avenues of insight that a purely technical framing would foreclose. The Evolution and Consciousness group similarly finds that systematic interaction with evolutionary theory, refined through years of collective reflection, gradually sharpens participants’ capacity to bring Bahá’í perspectives on human nature and consciousness into constructive dialogue with the discourse.

Overall, the capacity being built is both scholarly and relational, involving a growing ability to tend to the conditions under which collaborative discovery can take root, deepen, and bear fruit over time. Across all of these groups, what is coalescing is not simply a set of practices but a shared mode of being and doing, so essential to scholarship and the intellectual life of the community—one that is increasingly demonstrating, in academic, professional, and other settings, that the approach to learning the Bahá’í community has been developing through its Plans can generate profoundly

beneficial contributions to the prevalent discourses of society.

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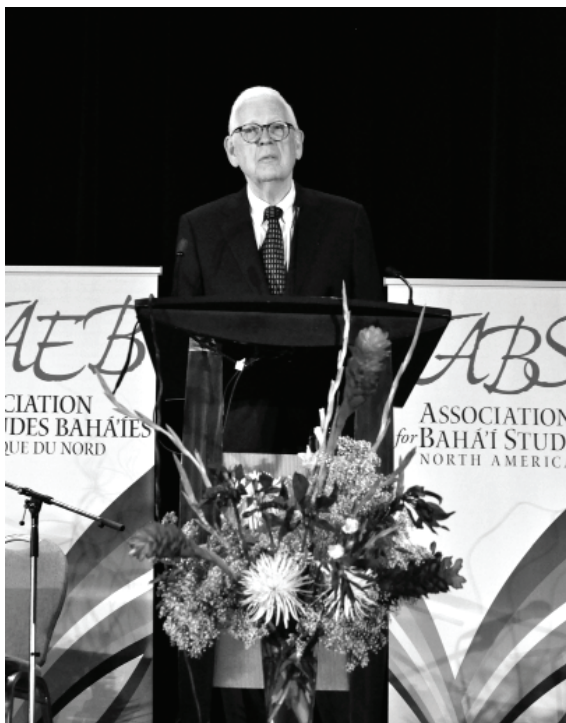
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Attendees of the Health Seminar study together
at the 48th annual conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 2024



Ninth annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984.
William S. Hatcher presented a paper on behalf of Shapour Rassekh



Douglas Martin presenting "A Hundred Years On,"
plenary address at the 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012

APPENDIX A

Conferences and Notable Speakers

1 – 4 January 1976

1st Annual Conference, Cedar Glen, Bolton, ON

Attendance: 80

Noted Speakers: Don Rogers, Douglas Martin, William Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Hossain Danesh

31 December 1976 – 1 January 1977

2nd Annual Conference, Cedar Glen, Bolton, ON

Attendance: 100

Noted Speakers: Jane Faily, William Hatcher, David Smith, Hossain Danesh, Douglas Martin, John Hatcher, Don Rogers

30 December 1977 – 1 January 1978

3rd Annual Conference, Rosemary Heights, Surrey, BC

Attendance: 168

Noted Speakers: Hossain Danesh, Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian

26 – 27 January 1979

“Spiritual Education: The Missing Ingredient”

4th Annual Conference, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON

Attendance: 200

Noted Speakers: Dan Jordan, Willard G. Oxtoby, Hossain Danesh, William Hatcher

30 May – 1 June 1980

5th Annual Conference, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 325

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Abbas Afnan, Muhammad Afnan

Noted Speakers: Jean-Rene Milot, John Robarts, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Ruth Eyford, Agnes Ghaznavi, Douglas Martin, Richard St. Barbe Baker, Ali-Muhammad Varqa

1 – 4 June 1980

Bahá'í International Conference on Health and Healing

Special Event, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 250

Noted Speakers: Victor de Araujo, Hossain Danesh, David Smith, Ruth Eyford, Agnes Ghaznavi, John Robarts

29 – 31 May 1981

6th Annual Conference, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 325

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Douglas Martin, Glenford Mitchell

Noted Speakers: Hossain Danesh, Kent D. Beveridge, William Hatcher, Rúhíyyih Rabbani

1 – 3 June 1981

International Bahá'í Conference on Marriage and Family

Special Event, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 300

Noted Speakers: Rúhíyyih Rabbani, Yoshiko Nomura

30 August – 2 September 1982

“The Bahá'í Option” 7th Annual Conference, Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Gayle Morrison, “A New Creation: Power of the Covenant in the Life of Louis Gregory.”

Noted Speakers: Hossain Danesh, James Nelson, Dorothy Nelson, John Huddleston, Larry Miller, Farzam Arbab, Lewis Perinbam

4 – 7 November 1983

8th Annual Conference, Palmer House, Chicago, IL

Attendance: 450

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Firuz Kazemzadeh, “The Soviet Official Interpretation of Bábí-Bahá'í History.”

Noted Speakers: Joanna Macy, Gustavo Correa, Ervin Laszlo, Hossain Danesh, Udo Schaefer, Christine Hakim, Sheila Banani

2 – 4 November 1984

“The Vision of Shoghi Effendi” 9th Annual Conference, Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: David Hofman, “Shoghi Effendi: Expounder of the Bahá'í Faith.”

Noted Speakers: Farzam Arbab, May Hofman Ballerio, Rodrigo Carazo, Edward Diliberto, David Hofman, Dhikrullah Khadem, Benjamin Levy, John Robarts, Ali Muhammad Varqa

23 – 25 March 1984

Symposium on the Relationship of the Bahá'í Faith and Islam

McGill University, Montreal, QC

Attendance: 115

Noted Speakers: Firuz Kazemzadeh, Michael M.J. Fischer, J.C. Burgel, Heshmat Moayyad, Charles Adams, Amin Banani, Alessandro Bausani, Issa J. Boullata, Douglas Martin, Roy Mottahedeh, Vahid Rafati, Annemarie Schimmel, Marvin Zanis

16 – 18 August 1985

10th Annual Conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC

Attendance: 450

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Dorothy Freeman, "From Copper to Gold: The Life of Dorothy Baker."

Noted Speakers: Jack E. Matthews, Dorothy MacKinnon, Varindra Vittachi, William Maxwell, Otto Don Rogers

January 1986

"The Bahá'í Faith and Marxism"

Special event: Louhelen Baha'i School, Davison, MI

Attendance: 100

Noted Speakers: Laurie Adkin, Farzam Arbab, Sheila Banani, Howard Buchbinder, Glen Eyford, William Hatcher, John Huddleston, Colin Leys

22 – 24 August 1986

"Creating a New World Order"

11th Annual Conference, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

Attendance: 2000

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Adib Taherzadeh, "The Human Soul."

Noted Speakers: Husayn Banani, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Jane Faily, Bahia Mitchell, Ervin Laszlo, Mohan Lal Purushothaman, Rúhíyyih Rabbání, Donald Rogers, Adib Taherzadeh, Ali-Muhammad Varqa, Marion Woodman

22 – 25 October 1987

"Converging Realities: An International Conference on Science, the Humanities, and Religion"

12th Annual Conference, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

Attendance: 400

No Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture

Noted Speakers: Farzam Arbab, Hossain Danesh, John Fobes, Robert Henderson, George Land, Ervin Laszlo, Lowell W. Livezey, Douglas Martin,

Karl H. Pribram, Anatol Rapoport, Don Rogers, Tapio Varis

7 – 10 October 1988

“Towards a Global Civilization: An International Conference on Spiritual Foundations of Cultural Development”

13th Annual Conference, Skyline Hotel, Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 500

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Moojan Momen, “Learning from History.”

Noted Speakers: Alvino Fantini, Viviane Launay, Mildred Mottahedeh, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, Joseph Sheppherd, Francis Wolfleg, Bernard Wood

15 – 17 September 1989

“Full Partnership: An International Conference on the Equality of Women and Men”

14th Annual Conference, Irvine Hilton, Irvine, CA

Attendance: 800

No Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture

Noted Speakers: Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt, Riane Eisler, Robert Henderson, Dorothy Nelson, Reggie Newkirk, Mary Power, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, Hossain Danesh

9 – 11 November 1990

“Models of Racial Unity”

15th Annual Conference, Georgia World Congress Centre, Atlanta, GA

Attendance: 700

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: H. Elsie Austin, “Faith, Protest, and Progress.”

Noted Speakers: Joy Berry, Hossain B. Danesh, Jacqueline Delahunt, Wilma Ellis, Francis Edwards, Lloyd Davis, Ruth Simms Hamilton, Robert Henderson, Everette Lee, Kevin Locke, B.G. Ramcharan, William Roberts, David Smith, Richard W. Thomas

15 – 18 August 1991

“Bahá'u'lláh: His Life and Writings

16th Annual Conference, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC

Attendance: 500

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: David Hofman, “Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory.”

Noted Speakers: Wilma Ellis, Robert C. Henderson, Firuz Kazemzadeh, Enayat Rawhani, David Smith, Hossain B. Danesh, David Hofman, Fred Schechter

17 – 20 June 1993

“Spirituality: The Key to Personal and Social Transformation”

17th Annual Conference, Sheraton Centre Montreal, QC

Attendance: 650

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Abbas Amanat, “Progressive Revelation: From Zoroastrianism to the Bahá’í Faith.”

Noted Speakers: Amin Banani, John Hatcher, Habib Riazati, Julio Savi, Martha Schweitz, David Smith, Kamyab Samii, Marian Stenbaek

11 – 14 August 1994

“Anarchy into Order: Understanding Humanity’s Role and Destiny”

18th Annual Conference, Boston Marriott Cambridge, Cambridge, MA

Attendance: 700

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: David Ruhe, “A New Evolution: Religious Bonding for World Unity.”

Noted Speakers: Techeste Ahderom, Ivonne A. Baki, Paul Chartrand, Hossain Danesh, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt, Jeffrey Hamley, Patricia Locke, Reginald Newkirk, Mary Power, Ruth Pringle, Richard Thomas, David Wilkins, John Woodall

12 – 15 October 1995

“Anarchy into Order: Uniting the Nations”

19th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Airport Hotel, San Francisco, CA

Attendance: 800

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Amin Banani, “Tahirih: Her Life and Poetry.”

Noted Speakers: Techeste Ahderom, Sheila Banani, Susie Clay, Juan R. Cole, Ben Crow, Rhett Diessner, Mary Fish, Sandra Fotos, Steven Gonzales, Hoda Mahmoudi, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Rebequa Getahoun Murphy, Dorothy W. Nelson, Frank C. Newman, Betty A. Reardon, Farhad Sabetan, Kerry Stirton

26 – 29 September 1996

“Anarchy into Order: Crafting Better Governance”

20th Annual Conference, Westin Hotel, Edmonton, AB

Attendance: 650

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Ross Woodman, “The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá’í Faith.”

Noted Speakers: Robert Henderson, June Thomas, David Kilgour, Eleanor Sioui, Joan Crockatt, Wendy Heller, Hugh Adamson, Glen Eyford

14 – 16 November 1997

“Fostering Human Rights: Developing Pathways to Peace”

21st Annual Conference, Renaissance Washington Hotel, Washington, DC

Attendance: 725

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Dorothy Nelson, “International Human Rights Law.”

Noted Speakers: Suheil Bushrui, Kit Cosby, Firuz Kazemzadeh, John McDonald, Lester Brown, John Edward Porter, Richard Pierre Claude, Payam Akhavan, Techeste Ahderom, Susan Clay, Shulamith Koenig

24 – 27 September 1998

“L’alliance: pivot de l’unicité de l’humanité / The Covenant: Pivot of the Oneness of Humanity”

22nd Annual Conference, Hotel du Pare, Montreal, QC

Attendance: 650

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: William S. Hatcher, “Love, Power, and Justice.”

Noted Speakers: Ann Boyles, Nosrat Tirandaz, Alberta Deas, Rochan Yazdi, Abdu’l-Missagh Ghadirian, David Smith

17 – 20 June 1999

“Sacred Justice: Uniting the Human Family”

23rd Annual Conference, Tempe Mission Palms Hotel, Tempe, AZ

Attendance: 300

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Richard W. Thomas, “The State of Race Relations in the American Bahá'í Community: Challenges, Progress, and Future Directions.”

Noted Speakers: Carl Ewing, Stephanie Fielding, Sohrab Gandomi, Tannaz Grant, Mary Hagen, George Holly, Charlotte Kahn, Kathleen Kelly, Dorothy Nelson, Valerie Phillips, Valerina Quintana, Sayena Rouhani, Shaheeb Saeed, Jack Weatherford

31 August – 3 September 2000

“A Century of Light: Who Is Writing the Future?”

24th Annual Conference, Delta Meadowvale Centre, Mississauga, ON

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, “Fact and Fiction: Interrelationships between History and Imagination.”

Noted Speakers: Susanne Tamas, John Hatcher, Janet Khan, Landon Pearson, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Martha Schweitz, Nader Saiedi, Sohrab Kourosh, Howard Adelman, Berry Stuart, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, Suheil Bushrui

31 August – 3 September 2001

“Towards a Spiritual Civilization”

25th Annual Conference, Sheraton Hotel and Towers, Seattle, WA

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Hossein Amanat

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Fariborz Sahba, “From Vision to Reality.”

Noted Speakers: Lasse Thoresen, Holly Hanson, Anne Furlong, Ian Kluge,

Nader Saiedi, Robert H. Stockman, Eugene Andrews, Ian C. Semple,

Rebequa Getahoun Murphy

30 August – 2 September 2002

“Towards a Spiritual Civilization: Spirit into Action”

26th Annual Conference, Delta Meadowvale Centre, Mississauga, ON

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Udo Schaefer, “Theological Foundations and Structural Elements of Bahá’í Ethics.”

Noted Speakers: Mary K. Radpour, Shahriar Razavi, Brian Lepard, William

Roberts, Dorothy Marcic, Garry Berteig, Benjamin Hatcher, Kathryn Tahiri,

Abdu’l-Missagh Ghadirian

29 August – 1 September 2003

“Religion and Community in a Time of Crisis”

27th Annual Conference, San Francisco Airport Marriott, San Francisco, CA

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Suheil Bushrui, “The Opening of the Academic Mind: The Challenges of Reforming a Culture in Crisis.”

Noted Speakers: Ann Boyles, June Manning Thomas, Philip Selznick, Stephen

Birkland, Ruha Benjamin, Constance M. Chen, Chitra Golestani-Maghzi,

Derik Smith, Shahla Maghzi, Michelle Hemmat, Brian A. Miller,

Pierre-Yves Mocquais, William E. Davis

3 – 6 September 2004

“Spirit and Intellect: Advancing Civilization”

28th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Calgary, Calgary, AB

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Ali Nakhjavani, “Shoghi Effendi’s Ten Year Crusade—Climax of His Ministry.”

Noted Speakers: Harold Coward, W. Andy Knight, Nicola Towfigh, Susan

Maneck, David Smith, Siamak Hariri, Lisa Dufraimont, Cindy Poitras-

Farahani, Shahla Maghzi Ali, Otto Donald Rogers, Violette Nakhjavani

11 – 14 August 2005

“Science, Religion, and Social Transformation”

29th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Cambridge, Cambridge, MA

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: John S. Hatcher, “Unveiling the Húrí of Love.”

Noted Speakers: Stephen Birkland, Douglas Martin, Redwan Moqbel, Faraneh Vargha-Khadem, Arash Abizadeh, Julia Berger, Jose Uribe, Stephanie Urie

10 – 13 August 2006

“Religion and the Evolution of Consciousness”

30th Annual Conference, San Francisco Airport Marriott, San Francisco, CA

Attendance: 1100

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Janet Khan, “Reflections on the Life of Bahíyyih Khánúm.”

Noted Speakers: John Grayzel, Roshan Danesh, Behrooz Sabet, Farzin Aghdasi, Hoda Mahmoudi, Shabnam Koirala-Azad, David Diehl, Rachel Enslow, Anne Gillette, William Silva

16 – 19 August 2007

“Scholarship and Community Building”

31st Annual Conference, Delta Meadowvale, Mississauga, ON

Attendance: 1200

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Will van den Hoonaard, “Emerging from Obscurity: The Journey of Sociology in the Bahá'í Community.”

Noted Speakers: Haleh Arbab, Augusto Lopez-Claros, Cheryl Fennell, Marie Gervais, Lisa-Jo van den Scott, Elizabeth Wright, Michael L. Penn, Thomas Homer-Dixon, Tahirih Naylor, Layla Parker-Katiraei, Nadim Sobhani

29 August – 1 September 2008

32nd Annual Conference, San Diego Marriott La Jolla Hotel, San Diego, CA

Attendance: 1400

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Houshmand Fatheazam, “Some Observations on the Scope and Value of Bahá'í Scholarship.”

Noted Speakers: Paul Lample, Joy DeGruy, Ismael Velasco, Mary Darling, Clark Donnelly, Mojgan Sami, Kamal Sinclair, Ashkan Monfared, Eric Harper, Jenny Wilson

13 – 16 August 2009

“Environments”

33rd Annual Conference, Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, Washington, DC

Attendance: 1000

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Otto Don Rogers, “The Artist and the Grammarian.”

Noted Speakers: Arthur Lyon Dahl, Peter Adriance, Peter Brown, Soli Shahvar, Mark Perry, Payam Akhavan, Kit Bigelow, Ann Boyles, Adam Ludwin, Maame Nketsiah, Anisa Khadem Nwachuku

12 – 15 August 2010

“Rethinking Human Nature”

34th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vancouver, BC

Attendance: 1800

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Julio Savi, “Destiny and Freedom in the Bahá’í Writings.”

Noted Speakers: Hooper Dunbar, Lee Brown, Chief Douglas White III Kwulasultun, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Payam Akhavan, Michael Karlberg, Pouya Ehsani, Holly Hanson, Mary K. Radpour, Ryan Siegel, Allison Milston, Payam Sazegar, Tamara Martella, Shin-Yu Chang, Alan Cundall

11 – 14 August 2011

“Transforming Habits of Thought”

35th Annual Conference, San Francisco Airport Marriott, San Francisco, CA

Attendance: 1600

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Nader Saiedi, “The Birth of the Human Being: Beyond Religious Traditionalism and Materialistic Modernity.”

Noted Speakers: Kenneth Bowers, Billie Mayo, Ludwig Tuman, Hoda Mahmoudi, Fariborz Sahba, Rainn Wilson

9 – 12 August 2012

“The Vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for North America”

36th Annual Conference, Fairmont Queen Elizabeth, Montreal, QC

Attendance: 1500

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Shapour Rassekh, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Standard Bearer of a New Civilization.”

Noted Speakers: Douglas Martin, Louise Mandell, June Manning Thomas, Mina Yazdani, Chief Douglas White III Kwulasultun, Claire Lapointe, Lyse Langlois, Luc Bégin, Irwin Cotler, Robert Stockman, Louis Venters, Patricia Verge, Bob Watts, Elizabeth Wright, Ann Boyles

15 – 18 August 2013

“Learning in Action: Scholarship and the Generation of Knowledge”

37th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Irvine, Irvine, CA

Attendance: 1400

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Layli Miller-Muro, "Knowledge into Action: The Bahá'í Imperative to Serve Humanity."

Noted Speakers: Hooper Dunbar, Andy Tamas, Vasu Mohan, Shabnam Koirala-Azad, Hoda Mahmoudi, Rainn Wilson, Borna Nouredin, Farida Vahedi, Payam Akhavan, Nava Ashraf, Richard Thomas, Rama Naraharisetti, Aaron Yates, Josh Homnick, Hashem Selph

7 – 10 August 2014

"Scholarship and the Life of Society"

38th Annual Conference, Fairmont Royal York, Toronto, ON

Attendance: 1350

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Vahid Rafati, "The Evolving Role of Bahá'í Scholarship."

Noted Speakers: Paul Lample, Geoffrey Cameron, Deborah van den Hoonaard, June Manning Thomas, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, Elizabeth Bowen, Kamran Sedig, Arthur Dahl, Haleh Arbab, Faraneh Vargha-Khadem, Elham Afnan, Susan Maneck, Gerald Filson, Roshan Danesh

6 – 9 August 2015

"Advancing the Life of the Mind"

39th Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Orange County, CA

Attendance: 1400

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Nazila Ghanea, "Striving for Human Rights in an Age of Religious Extremism."

Noted Speakers: Shahriar Razavi, Julia Berger, Emily Goshey, Benjamin Schewel, Navid Sabet, Sahar Sattarzadeh, Ryan Siegel, Nanabah Bulman, Marilyn Calderon, Eric Dozier, Louis Venters, Nader Saiedi, John S. Hatcher, Jenna Nicholas

11 – 14 August 2016

40th Annual Conference, Le Centre Sheraton, Montreal, QC

Attendance: 1400

Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: Farzam Arbab, "The Intellectual Life of the Bahá'í Community."

Noted Speakers: Bani Dugal, Chitra Golestani, Elena Toukan, Marie Wilson, Eloge Butera, Bob Watts, Stephen Phelps, Arash Abizadeh, Gerald Filson, Carl Murrell, Mark Towfiq, Mitra Naeimi Solomon, Matthew Weinberg, Mary Darling, Clark Donnelly, Shadi Toloui-Wallace, Leili Towfigh, Sona Arbab

10 – 13 August 2017

41st Annual Conference, Hyatt Regency Orange County, CA

Attendance: 1600

No Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture from this date forward.

Noted Speakers: Robert Henderson, Ruha Benjamin, Mariam Ashtiani, Zhaleh Boyd, Nanabah Bulman, Robin Chandler, Layli Miller-Muro, Michael Karlberg, Kristen Monroe, Holly Hanson, Shabnam Mogharabi, Hooper Dunbar

9 – 12 August 2018

42nd Annual Conference, Sheraton Atlanta, GA, USA

Attendance: 1400

Noted Speakers: Shahrzad Sabet, Gillian Hue, Karen Rommelfanger, Paul Root Wolpe, Craig Rothman, Edward Price, Steve Sarowitz, Firaydoun Javaheri, Soroosh Behshad, Laurretta George, Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Masud Olufani, Jesse Washington

8 – 11 August 2019

43rd Annual Conference, Westin Ottawa, ON

Attendance: 1400

Noted Speakers: Caity Bolton, Elizabeth de Souza, Holly Hanson, Michael Karlberg, Layli Maparyan, Michael Penn, Sahar Sattarzadeh, Derik Smith, Bradley Wilson, Layli Maparyan, Esther Maloney, Kyle Schmalenberg, Ashraf Rushdy, Hoda Farahmandpour, Eric Farr, Ilya Shodjaee-Zrudlo, Stephen Birkland, Julia Berger, Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi, Doug White, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc

27 July – 8 August 2020

44th Annual Conference (virtual)

Attendance: 3300

Noted Speakers: Kamal Sinclair, Hoda Mahmoudi, Mojgan Sami, Thomas Ponniah, Derik Smith

23 – 31 July 2021

“In the Footsteps of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Contributing to the Discourses of Our Time”

45th Annual conference (virtual)

Attendance: 3000

Noted Speakers: Benjamin Schewel, Shahrzad Sabet, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond/Akikwe, Roshan Danesh, Jordan Bighorn, PJ Andrews, May Lample, Kenneth Bowers, Paul Lample

29 – 31 July 2022

46th Annual Conference (virtual)

Attendance: 1000

Noted Speakers: Firaydoun Javaheri, John Borrowes, Azza Karam, Daniel Perell

4 – 6 August 2023

47th Annual Conference, Crowne Plaza Perimeter at Ravinia, Atlanta, GA

Attendance: 1900

Noted Speakers: Michael Penn, Daniel Perell, Yvette Allen, Nwandi Lawson, Mtali Banda, Chitra Golestani, Penny Carroll, Nora Dicker, Tyrone Lamonte Baker, Kyla Brown, Harvey McMurray, Tim Conley, Diane George, Paula Richards Bell, Mackaylia Jackson, Natalie Colbert

2 – 4 August 2024

48th Conference, Crowne Plaza Perimeter at Ravinia, Atlanta, GA

Attendance: 1900

Noted Speakers: Paul Lample, Firaydoun Javaheri, Naisohn Arfai, Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Kim MacQueen

1 – 3 August 2025

49th Annual Conference, Telus Convention Center, Calgary, AB, Canada

Attendance: 2000

Noted Speakers: Haleh Arbab, Gustavo Correa, Bradley Wilson, Jordan Bighorn, Borna Nouredin, Kenneth Bowers, Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, Michael Karlberg, Saphira Rameshfar

7 – 9 August 2026

50th Annual Conference, Rogers Convention Center, Ottawa, ON

Noted Speakers: Shahriar Razavi, Tara Raam, Yasmine Ayman, Bayan Toloubadei, Anisa White, Ymasumac Marañon-Davis, Michael Orona, Derik Smith, Todd Smith, Mariam Ashtiani, Shabnam Koirala-Azad, Andres Shahidinejad, Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz

APPENDIX B

Executive Committee Membership by Year, 1975–2026

Compiled from ABS annual reports, the 1998 Association history document, and related committee minutes. Years are presented as recorded in the source documents (some years are combined, e.g. “1986–87,” where the original report did not separate them). Gaps reflect years for which no roster document has yet been located.

- 1975 Hossain Danesh (Chair), Glen Eyford, William Hatcher, Elizabeth Larin, Douglas Martin (Secretary), Michael Rochester (Treasurer), Don Rogers
- 1976 Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, William Hatcher, Elizabeth Larin, Douglas Martin, Michael Rochester, Don Rogers
- 1977 Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, René Steiner (Secretary/Treasurer), William Hatcher, Robert Laliberté, Don Rogers, Jane Nishi Goldstone
- 1978 Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, William Hatcher (Secretariat), Doug Martin (Secretariat), Jane Nishi Goldstone, René Steiner, Michael Rochester, Robert Laliberté, Jane Faily (Secretariat), Peter Morgan (Secretariat)
- 1979 Louis Brunet (resigned Jan. 1980), Alan Coupe, Hossain Danesh (Chair), Glen Eyford, Jane Nishi Goldstone, William Hatcher, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan (Secretary), Christine Zerbinis
- 1980 Unavailable
- 1981 André Bergeron, Alan Coupe, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Jane Nishi Goldstone, William Hatcher, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan, Christine Zerbinis
- 1982 André Bergeron, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Jane Nishi Goldstone, William Hatcher, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, Christine Zerbinis, John Walbridge (U.S. Liaison)
- 1983 André Bergeron, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Jane Goldstone, William Hatcher, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, John Walbridge, Christine Zerbinis

- 1984 Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Richard Gagnon, Jane Nishi Goldstone, William Hatcher, Firuz Kazemzadeh, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan, Dorothy Nelson, Christine Zerbinis
- 1985 Dwight Allen, Hossain Danesh, Glen Eyford, Richard Gagnon, Jane Nishi Goldstone, William Hatcher, Douglas Martin, Peter Morgan, William Maxwell, Dorothy Nelson, Nasser Sabet, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis
- 1986–87 Sheila Banani, Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh (Chair), Victor de Araujo, Bonnie Ellis, Glen Eyford, Richard Gagnon, William Hatcher, Robert Henderson, Tod Jones, B. Todd Lawson, William Maxwell, Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1988 Sheila Banani, Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, Victor de Araujo, Bonnie Ellis, Glen Eyford, Richard Gagnon, William Hatcher, Robert Henderson, Tod Jones, B. Todd Lawson, Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1989 Sheila Banani, Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, Victor de Araujo, Bonnie Ellis, Glen Eyford, Richard Gagnon, Robert Henderson, B. Todd Lawson, Augusto Lopez-Claros, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, Joyce Shales, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1990 Sheila Banani, Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, Victor de Araujo, Glen Eyford (Chair), Richard Gagnon, Robert Henderson (Vice-Chair), B. Todd Lawson, Augusto Lopez-Claros (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Academic Director), Peter Morgan, Nasser Sabet, Haifa Sadighi, Robert Stockman, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1991 Sheila Banani, Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, Techeste Ahderom, Glen Eyford (Chair), Richard Gagnon, Robert Henderson (Vice-Chair), B. Todd Lawson, Augusto Lopez-Claros (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Academic Director), Peter Morgan, Haifa Sadighi, Robert Stockman, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1992 Techeste Ahderom (Bahá'í International Community), Mehrdad Baghai, Sheila Banani, Hossain Danesh, William Hatcher, Robert C. Henderson (Chair), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Academic Director), Haifa Sadighi, Robert Stockman, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)

- 1993 Techeste Ahderom (Vice-Chair), Mehrdad Baghai, Sheila Banani, Hossain Danesh, Gerald Filson, Robert Henderson (Chair), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Academic Director), Haifa Sadighi, Robert Stockman, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1994 Techeste Ahderom (Chair), Christine Zerbinis (Secretary) — no other officers elected
- 1995 Techeste Ahderom, Mehrdad Baghai, Sheila Banani, Gwen Etter-Lewis, Gerald Filson, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Anne Mackenzie Pearson, Haifa Sadighi, Robert Stockman, Richard Thomas, Christine Zerbinis
- 1996 Techeste Ahderom (Chair), Mehrdad Baghai (Treasurer), Gwen Etter-Lewis (Vice-Chair), Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1997–98 Techeste Ahderom (resigned May 1998), Niloofar Ahmadzadeh, Sheila Banani (Chair), Gwen Etter-Lewis (Vice-Chair), Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Anne Mackenzie Pearson, Haifa Sadighi, Leonard D. Smith, Robert Stockman (Recording Secretary), Will van den Hoonaard (Treasurer), Christine Zerbinis (Secretary)
- 1998–99 (As of Sept. 24, 1998) Sheila Banani (Chair), Gwen Etter-Lewis (Vice-Chair), Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Anne Mackenzie Pearson (Secretary), Haifa Sadighi (Alaskan Representative), Leonard D. Smith, Robert Stockman (Recording Secretary)
- 1999 Susan Stark Christianson (Recording Secretary, Alaska); Niloofar Ahmadzadeh, Lynn Echevarria-Howe, Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Ridvan Moqbel, Anne Pearson (Chair) — Canada; Rhea Harmsen (Secretary), Wendy Heller (Vice-Chair), John Hatcher — United States
- 2000 Unavailable
- 2001–02 Alaska: Susan Christianson (until Dec. 2001), Mary Gubatayao-Hagen (from Dec. 2001). Canada: Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims (from Jan. 2002), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Ridvan Moqbel, Anne M. Pearson (Secretary). United States: Charles Carnegie, John Hatcher, Wendy Heller, Martha Schweitz (Chair)
- 2003 Charles Carnegie (Recording Secretary), Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, Mary Gubatayao-Hagen, John Hatcher, Wendy Heller (Editor, ABS

Publications), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Ridvan Moqbel (Vice Chair), Martha Schweitz (Chair / Secretary Pro Tem)

- 2004 Charles (Val) Carnegie (Recording Secretary), Wendy Heller (Vice Chair; Editor of ABS Publications), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Ridvan Moqbel (Chair), Kim Naqvi (2004 Conference Program Chair), Martha Schweitz (Secretary). Also serving portions of the year: Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, Mary Gubatayao-Hagen, John Hatcher
- 2005 Charles (Val) Carnegie (Recording Secretary), Anne Furlong (Editor, JBS), Michael Karlberg, Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Claire Lapointe, Kim Naqvi (Acting Chair, 2005 Conference Program Chair), Martha Schweitz (Secretary), Matt Weinberg. Also serving most of the year: Wendy Heller, Ridvan Moqbel
- 2006 Charles (Val) Carnegie, Michael Karlberg (Chairman, 2006 Conference Program Co-Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Claire Lapointe, Kim Naqvi (2006 Conference Program Co-Chair), Martha Schweitz (Secretary), Matt Weinberg (Recording Secretary)
- 2007 Charles (Val) Carnegie (resigned Feb. 2007), Roshan Danesh (appointed Sept. 2006), Michael Karlberg (Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Claire Lapointe (Vice Chair), Kim Naqvi (2006 Conference Program Chair), Martha Schweitz (Secretary), Matt Weinberg (Recording Secretary, resigned Sept. 2006)
- 2008 Roshan Danesh, Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair), Stephen Friberg (Recording Secretary), Michael Karlberg (Secretary), Mehrzad Khorsandi Sahba, Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Executive Director), Kim Naqvi (2007 Conference Program Chair), Martha Schweitz (Chair)
- 2009 Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair), Stephen Friberg (Recording Secretary), Michael Karlberg (Secretary), Mehrzad Khorsandi Sahba, Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Kim Naqvi, Parvin Rowhani, Martha Schweitz (Chair)
- 2010 Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair, Conference Program Co-Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Chair, Academic Director), Kim Naqvi (Conference Program Co-Chair), Parvin Rowhani (Recording Secretary, Office Manager), Martha Schweitz (Secretary)

- 2011 Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair, Conference Program Co-Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Chair, Academic Director), Kim Naqvi (Conference Program Co-Chair), Parvin Rowhani (Recording Secretary, Office Manager), Martha Schweitz (Secretary)
- 2012 Lisa Dufraimont, Mehran Kiai, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Kim Naqvi, Parvin Rowhani, Martha Schweitz
- 2013 Lisa Dufraimont, Mehran Kiai, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Kim Naqvi, Parvin Rowhani, Martha Schweitz
- 2014 Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair, Conference Program Co-Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer, Editorial Committee member), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Chair, Editorial Committee member, former Academic Director), Kim Naqvi (Conference Program Co-Chair), Parvin Rowhani (Recording Secretary, Office Manager), Martha Schweitz (Secretary, Editorial Committee member)
- 2015 Geoffrey Cameron (appointed Sept. 2014), Lisa Dufraimont (Vice Chair, Conference Program Co-Chair), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer, Editorial Committee member, Conference Program Co-Chair), Pierre-Yves Mocquais (Chair, WLU Press Series Editor, Editorial Committee member), Kim Naqvi (Conference Program Co-Chair), Parvin Rowhani (Recording Secretary, Office Manager, Conference Coordinator), Martha Schweitz (Secretary, Editorial Committee member)
- 2016 Julia Berger (appointed 2015), Geoffrey Cameron, Mehran Kiai, Shabnam Koirala-Azad (appointed 2015), Martha Schweitz. Lisa Dufraimont, Pierre-Yves Mocquais and Kim Naqvi were relieved from their service this year after many years of service
- 2017 Julia Berger (Secretary), Geoffrey Cameron (Chairperson), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Recording Secretary), Martha Schweitz (Vice-Chairperson)
- 2018 Julia Berger (Secretary), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chairperson), Martha Schweitz (Vice-Chairperson), Mariam Ashtiani
- 2019 Mariam Ashtiani (Recording Secretary), Julia Berger (Secretary), Mehran Kiai (Treasurer), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chairperson), Martha Schweitz (Vice-Chairperson)

- 2020 Mariam Ashtiani, Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chairperson), Julia Berger (Secretary), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andres Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith (Deputy Treasurer), Todd Smith (Vice-Chair)
- 2021 Mariam Ashtiani, Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chairperson), Julia Berger (Secretary), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith (Deputy Treasurer), Todd Smith (Vice-Chair)
- 2022 Mariam Ashtiani (Vice-Chair), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chairperson), Julia Berger (Assistant Secretary), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith (Deputy Treasurer), Todd Smith (Secretary)
- 2023 Mariam Ashtiani (Vice-Chair), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chair), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith, Todd Smith (Secretary)
- 2024 Mariam Ashtiani (Vice-Chair), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chair), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith, Todd Smith (Secretary)
- 2025 Mariam Ashtiani (Vice-Chair), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chair), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith, Todd Smith (Secretary)
- 2026 Mariam Ashtiani (Vice-Chair), Shabnam Koirala-Azad (Chair), Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz, Andrés Shahidinejad (Treasurer), Derik Smith, Todd Smith (Secretary)

Biographical Information

ELHAM AFNAN received her PhD in English from McMaster University, Canada. She is a translator and author of articles on topics related to Bahá'í studies, English literature. Since 2011, she has served as a member of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre.

JULIA BERGER is an Affiliate Faculty member at Montclair State University (NJ) and a Curriculum Development Specialist for the Wilmette Institute. She serves as a Trustee for the Parliament of the World's Religions, a Board Member of the non-profit arm of St. Mark's United Methodist Church, a co-founder of the Race Amity Initiative in Montclair, NJ, and is the author of *Rethinking Religion and Politics in a Plural World* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

Born in 1978 to Deloria and Jacob Bighorn, JORDAN BIGHORN is of Lakota heritage hailing from the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes. He currently serves as Director of Indigenous Excellence in Education with the Manitoba Government. He is a passionate labourer in the field of Truth and Reconciliation, with particular focus on the emerging landscape of community-based education. Jordan, Meleyna and their children also serve in a focus neighbourhood where local youth gather on a weekly basis to

consider how service to humanity can change the world.

GEOFFREY CAMERON is assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Guelph. He co-edited (with Benjamin Schewel) *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought* (ABS-WLUP, 2018). He served on the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America from 2014 to 2017.

CHARLES (VAL) CARNEGIE is the author of *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*. Val now divides his time between Lewiston, Maine, and Kingston, Jamaica, working with non-profit organizations in both places and writing on urban issues in Kingston.

ROSHAN DANESH is the author of *Dimensions of Bahá'í Law* (2019), and the co-author of *Reconciling History: A Story of Canada* (2024) and *The Inbetween Leader: Cultivating Courage and Unity in a Complex World* (forthcoming, 2026).

MEREDITH B FOLLEY is a poet and writer of adult and children's fiction. Raised and educated in the U.S., she has spent half her adult life in West Africa, first as a language teacher and currently as a volunteer working with a children's literacy project in Ghana.

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG is a physicist specializing in quantum optics, with a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester and a postdoc at Bellcore. He spent over ten years at NTT in Japan and now works in California's semiconductor industry. A Bahá'í scholar, he focuses on the harmony of science and religion and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings on evolution.

Dr. ABDU'L - MISSAGH GHADIRIAN is an author, researcher and Emeritus Professor at McGill University, Faculty of Medicine in Montreal as well as a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He has spoken in numerous venues around the world, written over sixteen books on social, scientific, and spiritual subjects, and received several awards for his scientific and humanitarian contributions and services.

DUNCAN HANKS has dedicated over thirty-five years to the teaching and administrative work of the Faith in different capacities working throughout the Americas. His service focused primarily on organizational development and learning, social and economic development, and large-scale event planning and management. He currently lives and works in Ottawa, Canada.

HOLLY HANSON is Coordinator of the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre and Professor Emeritus of History at Mount Holyoke College. Her publications include: *To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good*

Government in Uganda, ca. 1500 to 2015 (Ohio UP, 2021), *A Path of Justice: Building Communities with the Power to Shape the World* (Grace Publications, 2010, bahaiebooks.org/publications/apathofjustice/), *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Heinemann, 2003), *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach* (George Ronald, 1989), and many essays.

Dr. JOHN S. HATCHER received his BA and MA degrees at Vanderbilt University, and his PhD at the University of Georgia. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of South Florida where he taught in the English Department for forty years and headed graduate studies in English Literature. An author and speaker, Professor Hatcher has published over a hundred poems and articles, and twenty-seven books. He presently serves as Editor on the Association of Bahá'í Studies Publishing Committee.

MICHAEL KARLBERG is a Professor at Western Washington University. His scholarship focuses on reconceptualizing human nature, power, social organization, and social change in the pursuit of peace and justice. His previous books include *Beyond the Culture of Contest* and *Constructing Social Reality*, alongside many articles and chapters on related themes.

NAVA KAVELIN is a writer, producer, and CEO of Ninth Mode, a production company striving to learn about the use

of media to contribute to the discourses of society. She previously served as Program Coordinator at the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, helping establish its university seminars worldwide, and as Senior Researcher and Writer of the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations office.

NEIL MACMILLAN is deeply interested in the ramifications of human civilization. After classical studies at school in the UK, he briefly studied archaeology and anthropology as a member of King's College at the University of Cambridge. He and his wife Jane joined the Bahá'í community in Canada in summer 1970.

Professor HODA MAHMOUDI (Ph.D.) has led the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland since 2012, uniting scholars, practitioners, and students to explore peace holistically. Her work bridges theory and practice, addressing women's empowerment, racism, governance, human nature, and environmental challenges, while fostering ethical, spiritual, and systemic approaches to justice and human flourishing.

YMASUMAC MARAÑÓN DAVIS is a Bahá'í transdisciplinary scholar, writer and educator whose work explores movements between ancestral knowings and future understandings, spirit-driven scholarship and embodied practice. She stands entre mundos, between Quechua ancestry and English-Irish roots. A recipient of the

Joi Spencer Champion Dissertation Award and a UN Delegate for the Bahá'í International Community at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. With a doctorate in Education for Social Justice, her scholarship is sustained by a central question: how do we learn to live and create in-between?

MICHAEL ORONA has held various senior positions during his twenty-five-year career at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC. This includes serving as Senior Advisor for China, Senior Advisor for Human Rights and Strategic Affairs and at the White House as National Security Council Director for Africa Affairs. He previously served as Senior Advisor for International Indigenous Issues and co-led the White House Council on International Indigenous Rights. He is the author of *The Brave Ones*, a unique Native American narrative on the struggle for equality and justice. His research is focused on Indigenous traditional knowledge systems, a shared humanity between African Americans and Indigenous peoples, and the role of Indigenous peoples in international relations. He is a member of the Chihene Apache Tribe and of Yaqui ancestry.

Dr. MICHAEL PENN is Professor of Psychology and is trained in the fields of clinical and experimental psychopathology. His research explores trauma related disorders, the application of psychological research to human rights, and the interpenetration of psychology and philosophy. Professor

Penn is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and currently resides in Cairo, Egypt while on sabbatical from Franklin & Marshall College.

ANNE GORDON PERRY, PhD Humanities, author, and filmmaker, has been an ABS member for 49 years, providing presentations and leadership in the Arts Special Interest Group and Arts Working Group. With her husband, Tim Perry, she produced the documentaries *Luminous Journey*, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in America, 1912* and *'Abdu'l-Bahá in France*.

An author, translator, and poet, JULIO SAVI is interested in the mystical and philosophical aspects of sacred Scriptures. He has published three anthologies of Italian poems: *Lontananza* (2001), published in English as *Remoteness* (2002); *Lontananza 2001-2016* (2016); and *Chiaroscuro* (2019). His poems in Italian and English have appeared in Italian, American, Canadian, and French magazines. He edited, in collaboration with Faezeh Mardani, the Italian translation from the Persian of *Prison Poems* by the poetess Mahvash Sabet in 2016 and, in 2023, a significant Italian anthology of poems by Ṭáhirih, entitled *Il Tesoro nascosto* [The Hidden Treasure].

MARTHA SCHWEITZ (B.A. Stanford 1976, J.D. NYU 1981) practiced and then taught international law for many years in the U.S. and Japan. She has published a number of articles

on civil society, human rights, international governance and on topics in Bahá'í law and governance. Since 2001 she has been serving at the U.S. Bahá'í National Center, primarily in the Review Office.

Dr. DAVID SMITH has been a member of the Baha'i Faith since 1969, four days after he and his wife Meim heard about the Faith for the first time. David has served as an Auxiliary Board member, a Continental Counsellor for the Americas, and on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. He and his wife hold a special interest in the countries of Greenland and China where they have been able to visit, for medical and Bahá'í service, many times over the past 35 years. He is an Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Toronto as well as a visiting professor at the Tianjin Medical University Eye Hospital in Tianjin China.

DERIK SMITH teaches in the Literature Department at Claremont McKenna College. His work focuses on analysis of American culture and particularly African American literary culture. He is the author of many articles and the book, *Robert Hayden In Verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era*.

ROBERT STOCKMAN has a Th.D. in religion from Harvard University, focusing on the history of religion in the United States. He has taught religious studies at DePaul University in Chicago

and currently teaches at Indiana University in South Bend, Indiana. He also serves as an “Affiliated Faculty” to the Ansari Institute for the Global Engagement with Religion at Notre Dame University. He has published seven books on aspects of the Bahá’í Faith including an edited volume, *The World of the Baha’i Faith* (Routledge, 2022). He is the Director of the Corinne True Center for Bahá’í History.

JUNE MANNING THOMAS, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita of Urban Planning at the University of Michigan. She is the author of several books and articles about post-industrial cities, planning theory, and racial justice, and she has served the U.S. Bahá’í community at the local, regional, and national levels.

RICHARD THOMAS is Professor Emeritus of History at Michigan State University. He has authored and coauthored several books on race relations, the African American urban experience, Black Bahá’ís, and the Bahá’í community’s contribution to racial unity. He joined the Baha’i Faith in 1962.

NEGIN TOOSI is an experimental social psychologist with a focus on how education can reduce prejudice. Her research deals primarily with social identities such as race, gender, and religion, as well as their intersections. She is currently an associate professor of psychology at California State University East Bay.

DEBORAH K. VAN DEN HOONAARD, sociologist and professor emerita, was Canada Research Chair in Qualitative Research and Analysis from 2006-2015 at St. Thomas University. She is author of *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer, By Himself: The Older Man’s Experience of Widowhood*, and *The Widowed Self: The Older Woman’s Journey through Widowhood*. In partnership with her husband, she has conducted a study on the experiences of Iranian Bahá’í immigrants in the Atlantic Region of Canada. Together, they have authored *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Bahá’i Community of Canada*, and *How to Think about Ethics While Doing Qualitative Research*.

WILL VAN DEN HOONAARD is Professor Emeritus. He has written fifteen books including *The Origins of the Baha’i Community of Canada*. He obtained a PhD in Sociology from the University of Manchester. The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction awarded him the George Herbert Mead Award for Lifetime Achievement.

PATRICIA VERGE is an author of Irish and Croatian ancestry. Her books include *Angus: From the Heart* (1999), *Equals and Partners: A Spiritual Journey Toward Reconciliation*, and *Oneness, Wazin Íchinabi*. (2018) She is the co-author with Evelyn Loft Watts of *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá’í Pioneers* (2011). She is currently collecting stories about resilience.

Inspired by the sun-drenched landscapes of her Mediterranean childhood, family craftsmanship, and a deep belief in humanity's shared oneness, MELEYNA BIGHORN ZOGRAFOV creates intricate pieces weaving together the textures of nature, history, culture, and hope. Her work honors beauty, invites quiet contemplation, and nurtures peace, unity, and meaningful human connection.



Participants in three of the nineteen seminars that took place as part of the 49th annual conference, in Calgary, Alberta, 2025
Image courtesy of Bahá'í World News Service

THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

Message from the Executive Committee of the
Association for Bahá'í Studies

Message from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada

Association for Bahá'í Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective:
Executive Summary

Association for Bahá'í Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective

Personal Reflections by ABS Collaborators

*Elham Afnan, Julia Berger, Jordan Bighorn, Geoffrey Cameron,
Charles V. Carnegie, Roshan Danesh, Stephen Friberg, Abdu'l-Missagh
Ghadirian, Duncan Hanks, Holly Hanson, John S. Hatcher, Michael
Karlberg, Nava Kavelin, Neil Macmillan, Hoda Mahmoudi,
Ymasumac Marañon-Davis, Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Michael Orona,
Michael Penn, Anne Perry, Martha Schweitz, Robert Stockman,
David Smith, Derik Smith, June Manning Thomas, Richard Thomas,
Negin Toosi, Deborah K. van den Hoonaard, Will van den Hoonaard,
Patricia Verge, Matthew Weinberg*

Approach to Learning

Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies

Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives

Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies

Conferences and Notable Speakers by Year, 1976–2026

Executive Committee Membership by Year, 1975–2026

POEMS

Divine Tension

Meredith B. Folley

Terraces by Night – Laylah bahá'í

Julio Savi

COVER: Painting in Honor of the Centenary of the Ascension
of 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Meleyna Bighorn*