

“Every soul may find sanctuary...”

A Series on Queerness and the Divine Plan

The New Series of Global Plans

Summary

In its 30 December 2021 letter, the Universal House of Justice describes the next page in the unfolding of the Bahá'í Cause and the development of the Bahá'í community. This letter launches a series of Plans that will run a full 25 years and beginning in full measure with the Nine Year Plan beginning in Ríḍván 2022. The letter includes many passages that are relevant to the work of “A Single Heart” and similar projects, to Queer seekers and believers alike, and to all Bahá'ís wishing to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the learning of the Bahá'í community to the issues facing Queer people. These include a description of the characteristics of enkindled souls raised up through the processes of the Plans, the areas of endeavour in which Bahá'ís are to focus, the dynamic and growing relationship between the three protagonists, the need for continuing to further the process of entry by troops and the removal of barriers; the importance of the Ruhi Institute process, the need for creativity and quality, the qualities of an advanced cluster, the way in which we engage meaningfully in social action and public discourse, the continuing central role of education, the role of Institutions, and the need for an awareness of the eventual need for Bahá'ís to better explicate the principles we advocate. These are explored through a Queer lens with explicit examples in the publication, ending with an assurance of Bahá'u'lláh's support, and a call to action.

In this article we will describe some possible future developments in the Plan as they pertain to Queer people, given certain excerpts from the House in its message. Perhaps it is best to first read and reflect on how the House describes those “...enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan...” (UHJ, 30 December 2021), and the communities in which they live.

They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. 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. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. In places where growing numbers are helping to build communities of this character, the power of the Cause to transform people's social existence, as well as their inner lives, is becoming increasingly visible. Earnest pursuit of the Plan's central aim will, we are sure, cause many, many such communities to emerge.

(UHJ, 30 December 2021)

The House of Justice further describes three *areas of endeavour* that will be of focus over the next series of plans: 1) learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities 2) learning how to bring about spiritual and material progress and 3) learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress. These are the means of releasing the "society-building power" of the Cause, which is the singular *aim* of this series of Plans. Although these areas are all familiar to us, they will now be more in focus, and will see the benefit of the well-developed framework of action that was the particular area of endeavour of the previous series of Plans. This new focus will require a closer and more dynamic relationship between the three protagonists, so that their "powers are combined and multiplied". Such a dynamic requires that individuals feel loved, understood, supported and respected by Institutions and their communities, a situation that is lacking for most Queer Bahá'ís. An effective relationship that is strong, connected, and unified, is impossible if this issue is not resolved. Institutions require the communities within their jurisdiction to increase their collective capacity for encouraging universal participation, caring for the most vulnerable individuals amongst them, being open and humble to new ideas and voices, exploring new conceptions of reality borne out of the Writings in the field of action, remaining united in its diversity, and sharing learnings with the Institutions. In such a culture, existing relationships can become more strongly forged and promote their growth.

Although the aim of the Nine Year Plan is not to increase enrollments, a further advance in the process of entry by troops is still needed. This process entails both formal enrollments and those who see themselves as part of the community but who have not yet chosen to formalize that relationship administratively. However, we see the process of entry by troops, the doors must be open to all, including Queer folks and seekers. Attention must then be given to what barriers exist for Queer people as being part of these troops, and the negative consequences in such exclusion, deliberate or accidental. Believing in Bahá'u'lláh and registering in the community is a distinct step in a persons spiritual journey, and if Queer people are prevented from taking this step, the damage to both Queer seekers and the Bahá'í community will become more extreme and apparent.

The furthering of the process of entry by troops occurs through several pathways, although the two most prominent are direct teaching and the Institute process. To date, there has been virtually no attention paid to directly teaching Queer people as a distinct population, and this will need to be remedied. The Institute process will continue to be essential to both expansion and consolidation, giving a pathway for Queer people to engage with the Faith in an introductory manner that is intimately connected with bringing them in to the field of action through community building efforts and service initiatives, as well as into the life of the Bahá'ís Community. It has been learned that bringing interested individuals through the Institute process and into the field of action as soon as possible is the most effective way to walk with someone on their journey towards Bahá'u'lláh. And it has been seen that most new Bahá'ís or seekers need this support. Although this process of Institute courses and community building is not meant to be the only thing Bahá'ís do, or the only thing seekers will be interested in, it is very effective for both introductory engagement with the Faith, and meaningful application of its teachings to the real world. The House of Justice states in its letter that:

It is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

(UHJ, 30 December 2021)

Those clusters that are passed the third milestone, which will include those assisting neighbouring clusters in their development, are reminded by the House

of Justice that this means in practise the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are "creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they may live." Often these neighboring clusters are extremely small in population, and perhaps homogenous in background, culture, gender, and sexuality, where there is a reduced likelihood of consciousness to the barriers and issues facing Queer seekers and Bahá'ís. As clusters develop, they will be in more need of efforts to reduce barriers and issues faced by Queer folks, seekers, and believers.

The House of Justice describes for us some characteristics of advanced clusters, and some of what we can expect to see during the Nine Year Plan:

1. Increased frequency of uplifting, well-prepared community gatherings. We emphasize here the aspect of gatherings being uplifting and well-prepared, which includes mindfulness of Queerness and an outward looking stance towards all people.
2. The proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a particular people, and we see this as an avenue for Bahá'ís to work for the benefit of the Queer population, which globally is among the most targetted and disparaged.
3. Social action does not only arise in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'í effort. We see this as an observation and sanction of efforts on behalf of individual Bahá'ís not experienced or active in the community building efforts or activities related to growth. The House of Justice says that it "...rejoice[s] to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world."
4. Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contribution to the discourses of society, which is described as "simply a capacity for participation in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Baha'í principles and Baha'í experience." yet, do date we find generally this capacity of Bahá'ís to engage with topics pertaining to Queer people to be very underdeveloped. This is because of purposeful avoidance, inherited prejudices, ineffective methods in public discourse, ignorance and unintentional bias. These shortcomings must be dealt with if Bahá'ís are to be able to, for example, answer the most simple questions about Queer topics, without hurting the questioner, misrepresenting the Cause, damaging its reputation or alienating its community from wider society?
5. As the Bahá'ís inevitably become more conscious of social, economic or cultural barriers that are impeding people's spiritual and material progress, they must be open and mindful of Queerness within this context. It may be fruitful at this time to address briefly the importance of ABMs that are mindful, aware and connected to Queer believers and issues in their jurisdictions. Instead of raising defences and creating a hostile environment

for those coming out as Queer, ABMs are called by the House of Justice to be "...alert to anything that might affect the spirit of a community.", of which Queer believers are undoubtedly a part.

6. The friends labouring at the grassroots are increasingly occupied with the progress and well-being of everyone dwelling in their vicinity.
7. Institutions feel more keenly their responsibility for an entire younger generation, whether engaged in community building activities or not, and strengthen their relationships with authorities and local leaders, and the role of Assistants becomes more and more relevant in the role of support and lending momentum to the processes in motion in a small geographical area. As reticence has been a longstanding issue in local Bahá'í communities regarding Queerness, we are heartened to see the House of Justice describe thusly advanced clusters:

In places where the activities of the Plan have reached such a degree of prevalence, the inhabitants now possess a substantially increased capacity to steer the course of their own development, and the institutions and agencies of the Faith there now have an expanded vision of their responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities still include having robust systems in place to continually build capacity and support those taking initiative. But the advancement of the community depends, to a greater extent than before, on local institutions and agencies being conscious of the social forces at work in the environment and acting to preserve the integrity of the community's many endeavours.

A major part of Bahá'í community life is centred on education in one form or another, and we would like to highlight certain areas where Queerness, in theory, science, society, and people, can be explored or at the very least kept in mind:

1. Teachers, animators, and tutors of the Institute process and community building endeavours, must be trained and mindful
2. Formal and informal sessions hosted by Assemblies or individuals for deepening
3. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), where young students and professionals are better acquainted with the Bahá'í perspective on issues relevant to the progress of humanity
4. In the refinement and formalization of educational material, writers and editors should be mindful of Queerness during the editing process
5. Educational efforts through social action, where Bahá'ís focus most of their energies

We would like to end by quoting in its entirety a section from the letter that highlights a challenge, and perhaps a caution, to what is facing the Bahá'ís as the Cause grows:

As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. 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.

(UHJ, 30 December 2021)

It is evident to us that the Universal House of Justice has described features of a Plan and emerging Bahá'í society that invite - and even beckon - for developments, advancements and changes that will create a better spiritual space for Queer human beings to experience and with which to identify. We see the Divine Civilization described in such detail by the Beloved Guardian as not one where there is an absence of Queerness, but one where Queerness has been made an inseparable part.

We put great reliance on you (Counsellors) and on National Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that, in all the efforts made to acquaint the friends with the nature of this collective enterprise, the perspective of history is kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: "Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?" The establishment of Divine Civilization is, in the words of the Guardian, "the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith". It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration, fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth, a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart.

As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it. Looking ahead on this path, might we not perceive Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the reins of humanity's affairs in one hand, His other beckoning all to hasten, hasten?

Reference

Universal House of Justice. Universal House of Justice to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, Haifa, Israel, December 30, 2021. www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/1#758524470