

28 September 2014

Transmitted by email

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U.S.A.

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your .. October email letter, sharing observations and seeking clarification regarding the teaching process, has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which has asked us to convey the following. We regret the delay in responding.

Your concern for the progress of teaching efforts is warmly acknowledged, as are your reflections on making evident the criteria for Bahá'í membership. The beloved Guardian, in the early years of his ministry, set out criteria for Spiritual Assemblies and Bahá'í teachers regarding the enrollment of new believers. In a letter dated 24 October 1925 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

I would only venture to state very briefly and as adequately as present circumstances permit the principal factors that must be taken into consideration before deciding whether a person may be regarded a true believer or not. Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the True Exemplar of the Bahá'í Cause, as set forth in 'Abdu'l-Baha's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present day Bahá'í administration throughout the world—these I conceive to be the fundamental and primary considerations that must be fairly, discreetly and thoughtfully ascertained before reaching such a vital decision.

Later in his ministry, however, after the administrative capacity to embrace larger numbers grew, the Guardian alerted the friends to the danger of being too rigid in the requirements for becoming a Bahá'í. For example, a letter dated 9 July 1957, written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, stated:

As he has written the Central and East Africa Assembly, he feels that the friends should be very careful not to place hindrances in the way of those who wish to accept the Faith. If we make the requirements too rigorous, we will cool off the initial enthusiasm, rebuff the hearts and cease to expand rapidly. The essential thing is that the candidate for enrolment should believe in his heart in the truth of Baha'u'llah. Whether he is literate or illiterate, informed of all the Teachings or not, is beside the point entirely. When the spark of faith exists the essential Message is there, and gradually everything else can be added unto it.

Today, we can generally be open and flexible in accepting individuals into the Bahá'í community. As the believers invite growing numbers of individuals to participate in a

united effort to apply Baha'u'llah's Teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, it becomes clear that the process of becoming a Bahá'í is best viewed as a continuum—based on independent investigation, engagement in service, and increasing understanding—rather than as dichotomous states of membership and non-membership.

The Bahá'í teacher is encouraged to adopt an approach suitable for the individual seeker, taking into account the seeker's growth in relation to Baha'u'llah's Teachings. The Guardian stated in *The Advent of Divine Justice* in connection with the role of the Bahá'í teacher towards the seeker:

Let him refrain, at the outset, from insisting on such laws and observances as might impose too severe a strain on the seeker's newly awakened faith, and endeavor to nurse him, patiently, tactfully, and yet determinedly, into full maturity, and aid him to proclaim his unqualified acceptance of whatever has been ordained by Baha'u'llah. Let him, as soon as that stage has been attained, introduce him to the body of his fellow-believers, and seek, through constant fellowship and active participation in the local activities of his community, to enable him to contribute his share to the enrichment of its life, the furtherance of its tasks, the consolidations of its interests, and the coordination of its activities with those of its sister communities.

Though declaration of faith and enrollment into the Bahá'í community may occur at the same moment, they do not necessarily have to do so, in light of the above passage. Where, for example, a tutor is accompanying seekers through the institute process and a seeker declares, it would not be unreasonable for formal enrollment to be deferred while the new believer is being nurtured to the point where he or she is ready to assume the responsibilities associated with membership in the community. In different parts of the world, as well as with different individuals, circumstances may vary, and it is left to the wisdom of the teacher and the discretion of the institutions to determine how to attract receptive souls, when to invite them to embrace the Faith, and how to nurture them to full maturity.

It is hoped that this letter provides you with the clarification you seek. If related questions about the teaching process arise, you are encouraged to consult with an Auxiliary Board member for your area or with your Regional Bahá'í Council. May your efforts to spread the Message of Baha'u'llah be blessed and confirmed.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: National Assembly of the United States