

Discourse in Local Communities

Preparing for Public Discourse 5

by Arthur Lyon Dahl July 2022

Reaching the wider community

A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §16)

...within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §17)

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §19)

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts.

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §19)

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §20)

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse.... We rejoice 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.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §20)

Public discourse in the 9-year plan

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.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §27)

Local public discourse

Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. ...the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service.

Local public discourse

Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §20)

Local public discourse

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society.... Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §25)

Local public discourse

...every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of... the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society.

Local public discourse

At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

Local public discourse

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments.... Sincerity in this respect is an imperative.... The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

Forces of disintegration and integration

[We] see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose.

Forces of disintegration and integration

Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.... [The] forces associated with the process of integration... will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013 para. 4)

Starting in local communities

The community, a building block of the global arena, can provide a space where alternative, inclusive, and cooperative ways of life can find expression, where men wholeheartedly come to see women as equal partners, and all are empowered to develop leadership abilities.... Through moral educational programs, attitudes of unity and fellowship are instilled from a young age so that participants come to view each other as valued allies working for the well-being of their communities.

(Bahá'í International Community, [The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality](#), 2022)

Starting in local communities

Central to this process is the concept of capacity-building—of enhancing the ability of participants to better understand the material, social, and spiritual realities of their societies and to devise next steps as they collectively chart their own path of progress, deriving fulfilment through service. Toward this end, spaces have organically emerged for individuals to reflect together on their challenges, identify constructive responses, and explore deeper questions related to the meaning of life. These spaces can serve as arenas where hope in times of difficulty finds expression, and bonds of solidarity can strengthen. The... capacities, attitudes, and qualities characterizing a community can reinforce its resilience in the face of extreme events or ongoing environmental burdens.

(Bahá'í International Community, [The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality](#), 2022)

Education

...if [education and institutional capacity building] are to effect the profound changes in the minds of people and in the structures of society (needed to shift towards sustainability), the nature of the educational processes will need to be rethought. As a starting point, the program of education must be based on a clear vision of the kind of society that we wish to live in; and the kind of individuals that will bring this about. It needs to help learners reflect on the purpose of life and help them to step out of their cultural realities to develop alternative visions and approaches to the problems at hand and to understand the manifold consequences of their behaviors and to adjust these accordingly.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

Education

Schools themselves must become participants in the social transformation processes. The curriculum cannot simply aim to impart relevant knowledge and skills; rather it should aim to develop the vast potential inherent in the human being. Individuals must be assisted to channel this potential towards the betterment of their communities and the advancement of society as a whole. The level of consciousness and the deep spirit of service and collaboration required to transform individual behaviors and institutional forces in the direction of sustainability will require a transformation of educational processes commensurate with the task at hand.

Voluntary simplicity

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them. Observe equity in all your judgements, and transgress not the bounds of justice, nor be of them that stray from its path.

(Bahá'u'lláh)

Diversity

In increasingly diverse communities, how do we go from prejudice and withdrawal to open integration and unity?



The Role of Youth

The key to resolving these social ills rests in the hands of a youthful generation convinced of the nobility of human beings; eagerly seeking a deeper understanding of the true purpose of existence; able to distinguish between divine religion and mere superstition; clear in the view of science and religion as two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress; conscious of and drawn to the beauty and power of unity in diversity; secure in the knowledge that real glory is to be found in service to one's country and to the peoples of the world; and mindful that the acquisition of wealth is praiseworthy only insofar as it is attained through just means and expended for benevolent purposes, for the promotion of knowledge and toward the common good. Thus must our youth prepare themselves to shoulder the tremendous responsibilities that await them. And thus will they prove immune to the atmosphere of greed that surrounds them and press forward unwavering in the pursuit of their exalted goals.

(Universal House of Justice, *To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith*, 2 April 2010)

Meaningful work

The provision of meaningful work represents an essential component of poverty alleviation efforts. The meaningful engagement of young people becomes even more important as urban populations swell and, with them, the increase of slums, rising crime rates, use of drugs, unemployment, breakdown of family structures and social isolation.... Lack of meaningful employment only feeds their hopelessness and frustration. Yet it is not only the quantity but also the quality and meaning of work that needs to be reconsidered. Whether tilling the soil or selling goods, one's work should not be reduced to a means for acquiring more goods or as an expendable cost of production. One's work is the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society.

Facing community challenges

- to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal;
- to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity's period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds;
- to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook;
- to put the equality of women and men into practice;

Facing community challenges

- to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative;
- to put one's support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference;
- to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects;
- to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests;

Facing community challenges

- to reject the opiate of consumerism;
- to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §36)

Questions for the process of learning

- how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation;
- how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege;

Questions for the process of learning

- how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development;
- how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization;

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 10)

Questions for the process of learning

- how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory “other” or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category;
- how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups.

Ethical foundations of change

Progress at the technical and policy levels now needs to be accompanied by public dialogue—among rural and urban dwellers; among the materially poor and the affluent; among men, women and young persons alike—on the ethical foundations of the necessary systemic change. A sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization.... Within such an order, the concept of justice is embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked. The pursuit of justice within the frame of unity (in diversity) provides a guide for collective deliberation and decision-making and offers a means by which unified thought and action can be achieved.

...the pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world.... As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.

(Bahá'í International Community, 2010, Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism.)

Establishing Divine Civilization

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.

A vision of the future

A flourishing global civilization in harmony with the natural environment is a vision toward which growing numbers are laboring. The world that beckons is one of integration and balance, beauty, and maturity. It is a world with a redefined sense of progress, filled with communities and individuals working together with the support of institutions toward the realization of their highest aspirations. It is a world increasingly relieved of the destructive moral compromises — social, economic, and environmental — that have so often been asserted as necessary to progress.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

A vision of the future

Movement toward this vision has begun; its momentum is gathering. Lofty ambitions have been articulated and action is being called for on scales unseen. Yet the pace of transformation has not, so far, risen to the demands of the moment. The range of options available to make the adjustments necessary will only narrow if action is deferred to the future. Will humanity act on the truth that its own destiny and that of the planet are irrevocably intertwined? Or will still greater calamities be required to move it to action?

The gulf between intention and action is one of the central challenges facing humanity today. This gap can be bridged; individuals, communities, and nations are contributing their share toward this goal every day.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

A vision of the future

Yet for action to rise to the scales required, far stronger consensus and collective will among the nations is needed around the values demanded by the current stage of humanity's development. It also calls for much greater resolve in putting those values into practice, recommitting to that which is beneficial to the common good and discarding whatever stands in the way of answering the moral and practical call of the present hour. This is a high endeavor indeed, and its benefits a priceless legacy that must be left to the generations to come. Let us join together in rising to its demands.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

Building communities on spiritual principles

The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles.

Community

How do we create unity
in diversity?

Do we see immediate
opportunities for public
discourse?

What are the qualities
we need?



Questions for discussion

How do we stay detached from the consumer society?

What does the information revolution mean for community life and organization?

Are there groups or individuals in our community being left behind?

How do we bring the spiritual dimension into our community activities?