

Race, Place, and Clusters: Current Vision and Possible Strategies

JUNE MANNING THOMAS

Abstract

This paper considers how division by place affects the possibilities for racial unity, especially in severely fragmented US metropolitan areas. It reviews how the Universal House of Justice has promoted use of the institute process as a way of framing action in places such as neighborhoods and villages. We also consider the challenges that place-based action poses for racial unity and suggest how the “institute process” as a strategy could possibly overcome these, especially in places—such as metropolitan Detroit—that are severely segregated by race.

Resumé

L’auteur examine comment la division selon le lieu influe sur les possibilités de réaliser l’unité raciale, en particulier dans les régions métropolitaines hyper fragmentées aux États Unis. Elle examine comment la Maison universelle de justice a promu le recours au processus de l’institut comme une façon d’encadrer des actions dans des lieux comme des voisinages et des villages. L’auteur se penche également sur les défis que l’intervention fondée sur le lieu présente pour l’unité raciale et laisse entrevoir comment la stratégie du processus de l’institut pourrait éventuel-

lement permettre de surmonter ces défis, en particulier dans des lieux (comme la région métropolitaine de Détroit) à forte ségrégation géographique fondée sur la race.

Resumen

Este documento considera cómo la división de lugar afecta las posibilidades de la unidad racial, especialmente en las áreas metropolitanas gravemente fragmentadas de los Estados Unidos. Revisa cómo la Casa Universal de Justicia ha promovido el uso del proceso del instituto como una forma de enmarcar la acción en lugares como en los barrios y pueblos. También consideramos los desafíos que la acción basada en el lugar plantea para la unidad racial y sugerimos cómo el “proceso del instituto” como estrategia podría potencialmente superar estos desafíos, especialmente en lugares en donde hay mayor segregación de raza—como en el Detroit metropolitano.

Division of people of various races, ethnicities, and classes, coupled with estrangement and oppression in many forms, continue to be problematic aspects of human society. In North America, the cause of division related to race is partially the result of persistent prejudice and discrimination, but also of structural inequalities that reduce the potential of human life and threaten the stability of society. Therefore, continuing to think about racial unity in terms of individual relationships or personal prejudice, while important, is not a sufficient response to the need for cultural unity. Structural issues of inequality are essential as well, but these are complex and not easily resolved.

Since its birth in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has emerged as a religious community with significant capacity to unite people across traditional barriers of race, class, nationality, gender, and creed. The cardinal teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, in fact, is the oneness of all humanity. Bahá'í institutions have paid special attention to the issue of racial disunity in North America ever since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the American shores in 1912, when, through both word and deed, He pointedly encouraged interracial fellowship and the disavowal of traditional norms of racial segregation and discrimination. He urged people to overcome all racial barriers through means such as intermarriage, and to worship together as one; these were remarkable exhortations for a time when even casual social mixture of the races was uncommon and when racially segregated religious congregations were the norm.¹

More than a century after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America and

1 Racial segregation of religious congregations has lessened, but recent surveys show that it still exists. In a 1998 survey, 72 percent of non-Hispanic whites belonged to congregations that were at least 80 percent white. When the survey was repeated in 2012, this racial isolation had dropped to 57 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Yet as of 2012, the majority of congregations in America, 86 percent, were composed mostly (at least 80 percent) of one race or another (Chaves and Eagle 21).

a half century after the civil rights era yielded major legislative accomplishments that lessened overt racial discrimination, substantial differences of access and opportunity still linger. This suggests that it is timely to re-examine how to overcome problems of racial disunity, prejudice, and unequal opportunity in the present day. Of the many ways we could look at this—spiritually, psychologically, legally, socially, spatially, etc.—this paper focuses on the interaction between “place” (meaning spatial geographic location) and the institute process (meaning the system of education, expansion, and consolidation currently guiding worldwide plans of the Bahá'í community). Place is important to consider because many social and economic attributes are spatially arranged: lack of access to opportunity is highly associated with place of residence, such as in high-poverty neighborhoods. The institute process is important because of its great potential to address this problem and because at present it is the major tool for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community, which has a solid record of positive work in building unity among diverse peoples. Indeed, the current Bahá'í planning agenda is but the latest stage in a long line of multi-year expansion plans dating back to the 1930s and, conceptually, dating back even further to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters written from 1916 to 1917 and collected in the volume, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.²

2 For a discussion of the role of

Tablets of the Divine Plan and subsequent plan-related documents focused on expanding the global reach of the Bahá'í Faith. With the latest planning phase, particularly since 2001, the Bahá'í community's planning process entered a new era. The global community, building on previous experience, began to deepen its presence in (and service to) villages and neighborhoods throughout the world. Such deepened presence was possible only because of the evolution of particular tools and strategies related to expansion, consolidation, and social action.

This paper will look at how the Bahá'í vision concerning matters related to racial prejudice and unequal opportunity is proposed to operate in an era of geographic clusters, with a focus on neighborhoods and villages. Clusters are the spatial configuration framing the current expansion and consolidation work of the Bahá'í Faith, and both neighborhoods and villages are the places, or levels of action, in which much current Bahá'í expansion and consolidation takes place. To begin, we will describe the place-based strategies that the Universal House of Justice has advised Bahá'ís around the world to use as they build communities and human resources in a wide range of places, whether rural or urban. We will explore briefly as well how any place-based strategy in certain urban

areas of the United States has the potential to encounter the lingering effects of racial disunity, structural oppression, and prejudice that have existed for generations and have abated only somewhat since the legislative civil rights victories in the 1960s. We will then return to a closer examination of how the Universal House of Justice sees the current Bahá'í global plans as eventually leading to the ability of societies to overcome the effects of ills such as entrenched racial prejudice. To do this, we will draw in particular on the guidance of the Universal House of Justice from 2010 to 2016, a period of time that covers the launching of two consecutive five-year plans (2011 to 2016 and 2016 to 2021). We will end by suggesting potential strategies for addressing the issue of place-based racial disunity, building on those that have been advanced by the Universal House of Justice, which counsels at a broad level with full expectation of adaptation to specific circumstances. Specifically, we will describe how those strategies might work in challenging urban settings, such as metropolitan Detroit, which, by several creditable metrics, is one of the most racially segregated areas in the United States and is plagued with high rates of central-city poverty. Of particular importance will be our discussion of how these strategies could help overcome its social and economic divisions. For this last part of the paper, the strategies indicated will be merely a visionary exercise. What actually evolves in the future will be

planning in the Bahá'í Faith, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá tablets, referenced in text, but also others in works cited (Smith and Lample; Thomas, *Planning Progress*).

determined by the actions of people living in this area, forces of social integration and disintegration, and the passage of time.

PLACE-BASED PLANNING STRATEGIES

The matter of place has always been important in the expansion plans of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters written to the North American believers, compiled in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, mention specific states, countries, and other places in North America, South America, and the world at large to which Bahá'ís should travel in order to spread the teachings of the Faith. His instructions were couched in spiritual exhortations and practical advice, but they were very place specific. The series of plans initiated and led by His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, were also unambiguous, often naming the countries, regions, and territories to which Bahá'ís should travel in order to expand the reach and influence of the Bahá'í Faith; it was Shoghi Effendi who began the practice of naming specific multi-year timeframes for national or global plans, but he built these upon exhortations given in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

Many subsequent plans generated by the Faith's worldwide governing body, the Universal House of Justice, and by various National Spiritual Assemblies, have asked for Bahá'ís to travel to specific places in order either to assist local Bahá'í communities or to establish them. In a new series of global plans initiated in 1996 with the

call for the creation of a worldwide “network of training institutes,” however, the concept of place became important in the expansion plans of this global religion in a different way—as an organizational construct allowing communities to shape their teaching and consolidation efforts (Riḍván 1996, par. 29). The most important aspect of this effort was the continued evolution of training institutes, which are Bahá'í-sponsored “centers of learning” (Riḍván 1996, par. 28) designed to build human resources and improve communities through training for such purposes as enhancing devotional meetings and conversational skills on meaningful topics as well as facilitating the spiritual education of children and junior youth. Out of several potential curricula, the Universal House of Justice chose those developed by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia as the most effective ones available for use throughout the world.

In 2001, after a short period of experimentation in a few countries, the Universal House of Justice announced that the primary locus of planning and action—the venue for plan-related activities employing Ruhi Institute materials—would move from the national level to that of the “cluster.” Clusters were defined by the Universal House of Justice as “smaller geographic areas” composed of “a cluster of villages and towns, but, sometimes, a large city and its suburbs” or other similar groupings (letter dated 9 January 2001, par. 10). Boundaries were not to be set with regard to the presence of

Bahá'í communities or jurisdictions, but rather the cluster would derive from existing secular social constructs as determined by “culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants” (par.10).

In North America, the division of American and Canadian geographic terrain into clusters was placed largely in the hands of Regional Bahá'í Councils—subnational bodies that the Universal House of Justice had brought into existence in 1997 to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, and to decentralize certain administrative functions previously handled at the national level (letter dated 30 May 1997, par. 3, 4). These councils, in consultation with various parties, carved North America into geographic clusters. In southeast Michigan and the Midwest, these clusters were often single counties or nearby groups of counties. The 2001–2002 decision of that particular Regional Bahá'í Council to use existing counties met the criteria set forth and also enabled the use of available census information.³

3 The “Midwest” was actually labeled the “Central States” during this period of boundary setting for the Regional Council. The twelve Central States had been named over eighty years before by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a framework for action: Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas. I participated in the creation of such cluster configurations in the Central States

Throughout the world, because of the aforementioned criteria, some clusters actually had no resident Bahá'ís at the time of the clustering process but became possible places for future communities of believers, as they were “virgin areas” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 January 2001, par. 11).

As the Universal House of Justice and its agencies learned more about the process of increasing Bahá'í membership and consolidating new believers through the institute process and as the Ruhi Institute materials gained a strong footing, the Universal House of Justice began to place great emphasis on urging Bahá'ís to focus their efforts at the level of neighborhoods or villages within their own or nearby clusters. Messages sent between 2010 and 2016 repeatedly mention the value of working within receptive neighborhoods and villages because it was in such settings that positive results emerged in response to efforts to expand the scope of the Bahá'í Faith's influence. In 2010, Bahá'ís were advised

during this 2001–02 period. Two years are listed because this and other Councils began to make decisions about cluster boundaries after receiving the Universal House of Justice's 9 January 2001 letter, and after considering input from Auxiliary Board members, but needed to make a few adjustments in the months just after receiving definitional clarification about cluster boundaries from the Department of the Secretariat, the Universal House of Justice, 12 December 2001 letter.

to continue focusing on conversations with everyday coworkers and acquaintances, meaning existing social networks, but also to look for “smaller pockets of the population” that could become the center of a variety of efforts utilizing the institute process beyond Bahá'ís' existing social networks. The Universal House of Justice defined where these pockets might be: “in an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose” (Riḍván Message 2010, par. 5).

In such places, the task would be to nurture children and youth and to advance spiritually based discussions, but also to “enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives” (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván Message 2010, par. 5). Later, in the same letter, the power of increasing numbers of children enrolled in Bahá'í children's classes was referred to as “a requisite of the community building process gathering momentum in neighbourhoods and villages” (par. 14). The Universal House of Justice expanded on this theme in 2013 as well, noting that its hopes had been exceeded concerning the power of “community building by developing centers of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages,” and they assured the worldwide community that “where this approach has

advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident” (Riḍván Message 2013, par. 6). The same theme emerged in 2015 and 2016, when the Universal House of Justice continued to refer to “neighbourhoods and villages that show promise,” stating that “a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages . . . to the point where they can sustain intense activity” and counseling that because of such strategies the Faith was being shared in many different venues, including “crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths” (letter dated 29 December 2015, par. 17; letter dated 26 March 2016, par. 5).

All of this was in service to a specific vision pursued by the Universal House of Justice as part of its efforts to set in place an alternative to a faltering world order. What this body was beginning to see in locations where its advice about the institute process was taking hold was a salutary transformation in the lives and fortunes of the people being influenced by that process. In several of its messages, the Universal House of Justice describes this transformation:

A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and

neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. (letter dated 29 December 2015, par. 24)

In some parts of the world, such activities transformed the life of entire communities, including members of diverse faiths and creeds, as whole villages began to benefit from and turn toward new ways of educating children and youth and both individuals and local institutions rectified their conduct in response to moral teachings about human virtues. The effects of the Bahá'ís' activities in the future, therefore, would not be limited to the Bahá'í community. As the Universal House of Justice promised in a letter to the believers in the United States and Canada, “the movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of

learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi . . . when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society” (letter 26 March 2016, par. 3). This was in direct reference to Shoghi Effendi's 1938 book-length letter, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, which urged North American believers to wield a “double crusade” by regenerating first their own community and then attacking the “evils” of the larger society such as corruption, moral laxity, and racial prejudice (41). The Universal House of Justice's 2016 letter thus harkened back to historical roots well-known to its Baha'i audience, as it promised that results from their contemporary efforts would extend beyond the obvious, affecting even the problem of “ingrained prejudice” in the larger community. We will discuss this subject further, but first let us consider the reality of racial division and severely uneven opportunity in some geographic places, such as in many US metropolitan areas.

PLACE, RACE, AND DIVISION

The abovementioned benefits associated with the systematic promulgation of the institute process potentially apply, as we have noted, to a wide variety of places, both rural and urban, and to a variety of peoples around the world. Such a process, however, may confront conditions in society at large that are

shaped by social, economic, and political forces beyond the control of the Bahá'ís. This is the case with contemporary metropolitan areas, such as those in the postindustrial Midwest.

Each metropolitan area has its own story that includes facets such as which indigenous populations originally lived there, which transportation systems became firmly established, how industrialization and post-industrialization affected the local economy, what determined the nature of political boundaries, which races and ethnic populations and nationalities arrived and when, and many more. We can, however, summarize some of the factors that have influenced patterns of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in many older, postindustrial US cities and then go on to describe the results in at least one specific metropolitan area, Detroit.

The social division in many metropolitan areas in the United States is so long-standing that people may mistakenly see it as the natural order of things, or they may hold to simplistic notions about the cause of such phenomena as what some have called "chocolate cities" and "white suburbs." This too is a simplistic characterization, of course, because suburbanization has become more integrated racially over the last decade and because central cities and their metropolitan areas are often composed of several major groupings of people, including Latino/Latina, Asian, Indigenous, African-American (black), white, and many other configurations.

Biologically and spiritually, all races are one, but socially and politically the concept of race has a distinct reality, and the federal government's census measures it for various geographic settings.

The reasons the main issue of concern is often one of race, and specifically one of black-white relations, are manifold. One is that for some time now, statistical measurements of US metropolitan areas have recorded much higher levels of segregation between blacks and whites than between whites and other groups of people or between other groups of people as categorized by race. One particularly popular tool among scholars who measure segregation is known as the index of dissimilarity. This metric shows that the level of spatial segregation between blacks and whites has declined over the decades between 1970 and 2010 in some metropolitan areas, such as in Boulder and Fort Collins, Colorado, but remained high in others, such as Detroit, Gary, Chicago, Newark, and New York City (Rugh and Massey 221).

In Detroit, the unusually high index of dissimilarity score of 86.7 means that in 2010, close to 86.7 percent of blacks would have had to move in order to disperse the black population throughout the metropolitan area (Rugh and Massey, Social Science Data Analysis Network). Surveys in several key cities including Detroit have shown that such segregation is not due to voluntary action on the part of blacks, who actually

prefer mixed-race neighborhoods and generally see no advantage to living close together in enclaves.⁴ Whites in the same surveys, on the other hand, reported being mostly comfortable with one or a few black neighbors but became increasingly uncomfortable moving into or remaining in a neighborhood if a rising percentage of blacks lived there. However, in many circumstances, a rising percentage of blacks was almost inevitable since those whites least comfortable with racial integration continued to avoid the neighborhood or leave, thereby increasing the proportion of the black population and making other whites increasingly uncomfortable. Because of this predictable cycle, some mixed-race situations were inherently imbalanced, as blacks sought racial integration while some whites sought to avoid it, or, at least, too much of it (Charles; Farley, Danziger, and Holzer).⁵ Rath-

4 This is in contrast to some communities of foreign language-speaking immigrants, who may seek to live together in ethnic enclaves in order to facilitate shared housing, job-seeking, and other forms of mutual support.

5 The article by Charles is a multi-faceted study of this "racial preference hierarchy," complete with quantitative data taken from surveys conducted in four metropolitan areas and analyzed in several tables; her study clearly establishes white preference concerning race and residence but also notes changes over time and many variations concerning different racial and ethnic groups. For those who wish a short

er than a benign characterization of place, high levels of racial segregation may mean possible neighborhood instability (at least temporarily, during periods of racial change) as well as markedly different access to transportation, high-quality schools, jobs, and other social benefits, especially if the area has become mostly black and is also poor.

Among the factors that led to such residential segregation by race were federal housing policy, federal urban policy, the history of race riots, the process of suburbanization itself, and a host of other formal and informal agents. The roots of residential segregation of blacks date back to the nineteenth century and before, but it was with successive waves of black migrants from the South during the two world wars that patterns of residential segregation in northern (Midwest and Northeast) states began to be calcified.

These patterns were first held in place by custom and by the resistance of some members of the white working class, which in the industrial North sometimes perpetrated violent reigns of terror that included some of the bloodiest race riots in American

summary of this work, please see her discussion/ conclusion on pages 401–03. For Farley et al., refer especially to chapters 6 and 7; these provide fuller context and report on surveys conducted earlier than those by Charles, but using a similar methodology. These authors also found considerable complexity and variation over time.

history, such as the East St. Louis race riot in 1917 and the Detroit race riot of 1943. Both of those events saw white mobs indiscriminately attacking black residents because of perceived intrusion into employment venues or white residential neighborhoods.⁶

Even more effective, if much tamer, tools of residential segregation were federal policies that essentially codified racially segregated neighborhoods; these included loans supported by the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation, established during the New Deal in 1933; the subsequent Federal Housing Administration, or FHA (1934); and the Veterans Administration, or VA (1944). These federal mortgage insurance programs initially made it easy for white working-class and middle-class families to obtain mortgages in order to buy new houses, but their provisions classified any neighborhoods with black residents as inherently inferior, and they actively discouraged whites from moving to neighborhoods into which intrusion by blacks had already taken place or could take place. Blacks were therefore barred from obtaining such loans, except in certain carefully isolated sites

located in various pockets of the metropolitan area (Thomas and Ritzdorf, pp. 282–24; Thomas, *Redevelopment*, pp. 84–86).

Long after the FHA and VA stopped actively discriminating against people and families of color, and long after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed such outright discriminatory practices in housing sales and rentals, other actors (such as financial institutions and real estate agents, as well as political leaders in some cities and suburbs) sought to skirt the spirit and letter of the law by maintaining segregated racial lines. Lax federal enforcement of civil rights laws further weakened the legislative gains of the 1960s.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development systematically documented active discrimination in housing over many years, extending well into the 2000s, and nonprofit fair housing centers were established in several metropolitan areas to document and litigate against such informal means of exclusion. However, such documentation and litigation did not actually solve the problem, for testing showed continued racial prejudice and discrimination in housing well after 2012 (Oh and Yinger, pp. 30–36). Meanwhile, because of the private real estate market and federally supported public housing, many opportunities were lost for children from low-income families to grow up in less distressed, more racially and economically integrated settings, which, studies showed, could have greatly

6 Later, the term “race riot” became associated with the black community, when, after years of oppression, some of its members arose in several cities (particularly in the 1960s) to protest heavy-handed or violent police tactics and segregated/overcrowded housing, turning at times to looting and setting fires as attention-getting but ineffective approaches.

enhanced their life chances (Massey et al. pp. 186–96).

The federal urban renewal program, initiated in 1949 and nicknamed “negro removal,” destroyed many black (as well as other racial minority and white ethnic) central-city neighborhoods and small-business commercial areas over the next two decades without fair compensation or humane relocation, sometimes leaving racially segregated neighborhoods more crowded or marginalized than they were before and severely dampening both community life and the spirit of black entrepreneurship (Thomas, *Redevelopment*, chapters 3, 5). Federal income tax and transportation policies facilitated decentralization, but that process was, for reasons described above, racially discriminatory and left marginalized people farther behind in the race for livable environments, at least until select areas in many central cities became popular again (though unaffordable for some) due to a process of gentrification. The end results were staunch barriers of exclusion and encircling strands of oppression that created a moral dilemma: an interlocking web of social, economic, and political constraints severely limited life opportunities for some, even as society at large refused to take social responsibility for this situation but rather blamed oppressed individuals for their personal circumstances (Young, 393–98).

All of the above characteristics existed in metropolitan Detroit, as elsewhere, with variations in the

strength with which various trends manifested themselves. Racially selective suburbanization was a strong factor, as well as selective clearance of black neighborhoods, unwillingness of whites to live in increasingly black neighborhoods, prejudice against black residents, growing poverty in an abandoned central city, and lessening entrepreneurship, particularly among blacks. On the other hand, a process of gentrification—wherein well-to-do professionals, often white, move back into the central city—has taken place since 2012 only to a limited extent (and in a very limited area) in Detroit, and that process is still minimal compared to experiences in other major cities in the North.⁷

7 In 2010, Dan Gilbert moved his company, Quicken Loans, to downtown Detroit, and a year later he began to buy dozens of office and retail buildings and rehabilitate them. His initial 2010 staff of 1,700 downtown workers expanded over the next seven years to over 14,000, and the number of buildings purchased may have approached 80. By 2012, the pattern of employee and building expansion was clear, and lack of housing opportunities for new professional employees had become evident. In that year, Rock Ventures, the umbrella company that includes Quicken Loans, launched a program called Opportunity Detroit that was designed to systematize the promotion and corporate-driven redevelopment of Detroit’s central business district, complete with attraction of new residents.

Although definitions of metropolitan Detroit differ, the core of the region includes the three counties of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb. Among these, the most economically distressed is Wayne County, which includes the city of Detroit and just over forty other municipalities. The wealthiest is Oakland County, which includes some of the richest census tracts in the United States. For recent regional transportation and planning purposes, one could expand the parameters of the region by adding Washtenaw County (Ann Arbor) and possibly several other counties as well.

Even if we talk just about the core three-county area—Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb—we can see fairly well the problematic trends that we've described. Some of the cities in these counties in which the population dropped between 2000 and 2010 include Highland Park (down by 29.7 percent) and Detroit (down by 25 percent), both in Wayne County, and Pontiac (down by 10.3 percent) in Oakland County. At the same time, however, several suburban municipalities grew, fueled by new subdivisions and commercial growth (Thomas, "Redesigning" 195).

Not surprisingly, levels of poverty also vary greatly among these municipalities, as does the presence of blacks, foreign-born populations, and Latinos/Latinas. Detroit, Wayne County's largest city, had 35.5 percent of its families—a solid one-third—living below the poverty line in the Census Bureau's 2011–2015 estimates; Troy,

Oakland County's largest city, had only 5.4 percent of its families living below the poverty line for that same span of years. The population of Macomb County was estimated to be 10.3 percent black in 2011–2015 (up slightly from 8.5 percent in 2010), but the neighboring Wayne County was 40.5 percent black and Oakland County was 13.9 percent black. Blacks comprised 83 percent of the city of Detroit's population in both the 2010 census and in 2011–2015 estimates (*American FactFinder II*).⁸

Michigan's political situation has led to an unusual degree of municipal fragmentation in the Detroit metropolitan region, creating winners and losers. In this state it is very easy to incorporate as a municipality and very difficult for one municipality to annex another (Jacobs, "Embedded" 161–63). This has allowed collections of subdivisions and subsets of counties to incorporate and protect their boundaries, leading to increasing numbers of municipalities and establishing a process of exclusion, sometimes by encircling geographic territory and then setting up land use regulations designed to favor commercial development and large lots or houses. This fragmenting phenomenon aggravates racial and socioeconomic divisions and deviates markedly from the policies in Canada, where several consolidations

8 Except when otherwise cited, all census data for this paper is available through *American FactFinder II*, an online tool provided by the Census Bureau.

have reduced the number of municipalities in any one metropolitan area. The comparison is all the more stark because Canada is located directly across the Detroit River, in plain sight of Detroit's central business district, and because metropolitan Toronto, with a less fragmented, more consolidated governance system, yet with a population size comparable to metropolitan Detroit, is a mere four hours' drive away. More efficient metropolitan governance and less fragmentation has helped bring many benefits to Toronto, including strong, diverse economic development (Jacobs, "Embedded" 147–48; Jacobs, "Impact" 353–54).

Detroit's transportation system has relied upon private automobiles and an unusually extensive interstate highway system within the city boundaries, a situation that has also affected racial and class segregation. Unlike other major American cities, Detroit has no light rail or commuter rail system of any substantial length; extensive streetcar lines were taken out in the 1950s, a three-mile loop of monorail surrounds the central business district, and a new three-mile-long light rail extends only from the central business to New Center, an office/commercial hub northward.

Confirming trends that have been in place since Henry Ford's invention of the automobile assembly line in a factory located in metropolitan Detroit's city of Highland Park, a series of proposals for some form of regional mass transit died over the years, either

because of legislative opposition, the failure of ballot proposals, or, in one case, a governor's veto. Instead, two separate bus systems, one for the suburbs and one for the central city, were poorly connected so that inner-city residents, predominately black, could not get to major job centers in the suburbs and suburbanites, predominately white, had no reason to continue to live in the central city. As is the case in other cities such as Chicago, wealthy suburbanites who still had jobs in the central city (which they increasingly did not) could commute easily by car. As recently as fall 2016, voters in the core three-county region, plus Washtenaw County, failed yet again to approve funding for an integrated regional transit system.

Other problematic circumstances that are specific to metropolitan Detroit include a historically heavy reliance on the automobile industry, which made the metropolitan area particularly vulnerable when deindustrialization took jobs away; the fiscal distress of Detroit's city government—the largest US city to ever declare bankruptcy—accompanied by a major plummet in the quality of public services; and a high rate of housing vacancy, abandonment, and ultimately demolition.⁹ Aggravating

9 Detroit's economy was unusually dependent on one industry, automobile manufacturing, in the mid-twentieth century. Even then, however, firms were beginning to move to suburban locations in metropolitan Detroit, and this exodus

the housing crisis was the Great Recession, which began in 2007; this led to a rash of mortgage foreclosures and then, a few years later, increased property tax foreclosures, which hit southeastern Michigan cities such as Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park particularly hard. These predominately minority-race cities had been especially vulnerable to foreclosure because of a history of subprime mortgages and predatory lending targeted at minority-race neighborhoods; in addition, their housing prices failed to rebound nearly as much as did markets in other cities (e.g., Deng et al.). Each of these three circumstances—economic downturn, municipal fiscal distress, and decline in the housing market—has had major implications.

Deindustrialization means that the foundations of the area's working class have been severely undermined, as tens of thousands of blue-collar

escalated as years passed because, contemporary surveys showed, manufacturers sought large, contiguous plots of land and escape from city taxes. Between 1947 and 1955, the Big Three—Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors—built twenty new plants in metropolitan Detroit, but not a single one was located in the central city (Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 72–74). In the late twentieth century, automobile manufacturing moved to other regions of the country, and global competition escalated, especially from Japanese firms; such factors led to major declines in automobile employment in the city of Detroit and in metropolitan Detroit.

jobs have simply vanished, leaving in their wake men and women ill-equipped to earn a livelihood in an increasingly sophisticated world economy and neighborhoods and subareas of distressed central cities with high levels of unemployment and poverty.

The fiscal collapse and the decline in public services in Detroit and in other distressed cities have affected certain neighborhoods, rendering them undesirable to young families, who might not move there because of poor public services and troubled school systems. The foreclosure crisis has been particularly devastating because it has led to a high number of vacant structures, which have brought down surrounding property values even more and chased away families and individuals (except those with significantly fewer choices), and waves of both mortgage and tax foreclosures in Wayne County, which have further jeopardized the social viability of many neighborhoods. This combination of circumstances has had serious social repercussions and may make sole reliance on a neighborhood-based strategy, for any purpose, challenging.

SEARCHING FOR GUIDANCE

After the above discussion, it will be especially salutary to think about how actors in this stage of development of the Bahá'í Faith, a worldwide community involved in a visionary global plan, might operate in such settings. Revisiting the messages of the Universal House of Justice, we now note

that this body has made very specific suggestions that are relevant to this discussion of race and place. Likewise, it is useful in this context to review several relevant Bahá'í principles: the importance of teaching minority races and ethnic populations, the imperative of overcoming prejudice; the necessary strategies for allowing focus neighborhoods or villages to develop capacity and local leadership, and the crucial roles of both social action and discourse in accomplishing such tasks.

As the Universal House of Justice itself has noted, the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* were very clear that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be brought to all the world's peoples. While 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularly mentioned the importance of teaching people indigenous to the Americas, He also strove to show how people of all races, including blacks, should become a part of the Bahá'í community. In a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the Universal House of Justice underscores "the importance of giving due attention to historically significant populations in the United States" (par. 9). This is a clear reference to Bahá'í documents talking about the significance of teaching blacks as well as whites. The letter also calls American Bahá'ís' attention to the growing relevance of immigrants of all races:

Today, the remarkable phenomenon of immigration that has accelerated in recent decades must also claim a major share of your

attention. After all, immigrants—whether from the Latin regions of your own continent, across the Pacific from Asia or the Atlantic from Africa—constitute a sizeable proportion of the American population. Their sons and daughters now apparently number almost one in four of the children in your country. Among these families whose origins lie beyond your borders a vibrant sense of community is often more pronounced. Raising capacity within these populations to conduct classes for their children, and particularly to implement the program for the spiritual empowerment of their junior youth, will enhance the vitality of community-building endeavors in many clusters. (letter dated 9 August 2012, par. 9)

Similarly, in a letter dated 29 December 2015, the Universal House of Justice refers yet again to the importance of including all populations in community-building efforts in places around the world:

In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics involved when a population of this kind embraces the Faith and

is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. (par. 25)

Prejudice enters the picture for several reasons. The Universal House of Justice recalled Shoghi Effendi's counsel concerning the importance of "freedom from prejudice" and pointed out that prejudice "still permeates the structures of society," even though negative preconceptions about race, class, ethnicity, gender, and/or religious belief cannot be defended or tolerated (letter dated 28 December 2010, par. 34). Like Shoghi Effendi, who wrote extensively about prejudice concerning blacks and whites in his book *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the Universal House of Justice noted that it was important for anyone who hoped to attract people of different backgrounds, or "distinct populations," to display absolute love and no prejudice against them; otherwise those contacts would not be attracted to the Faith. Furthermore, any division in the Bahá'í Faith would threaten to rend it asunder, and this too is not to be tolerated. Prejudicial behavior or attitudes toward race would be a sure way to build deep division (par. 34).

As noted in a letter to an individual believer, however, the nature of racial prejudice has changed in the years since the publication of *The Advent*

of Divine Justice, and members of the Bahá'í Faith need to rethink their approach to racial issues. One aspect of that change is the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of America, meaning that it is no longer possible to talk about race relations just between blacks and whites. Another difference is that racial prejudice has become "less blatant," meaning that it is more ingrained and difficult to confront (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 10 April 2011, par. 5). Therefore, strategies that Bahá'ís have been using for many years to address racial concerns are no longer effective.¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice observes that the individual believer to whose letter it is responding has said much the same thing:

In your letter, you observe that the many activities carried out in the past by the American Bahá'í community to address racial concerns, despite their obvious merit and the results achieved to date, have been limited in their effect and have not been systematic in nature. Your review of such efforts suggests a cyclical pattern, with fits and starts, in which a certain course of action is presented with fanfare by the institutions, many believers take part

10 Those strategies are not mentioned in the letter but probably include race unity picnics, conferences, training or outreach programs, etc. See Richard Thomas's *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*.

although others remain on the sidelines, activities reach a peak, and then, after months or perhaps years, attention wanes, and the community is drawn to other areas until some incident occurs or a new heartfelt appeal is uttered, thus beginning the cycle anew. Simply to repeat the approaches implemented in the past, then, will surely not produce a satisfactory result. (par. 2)

As an alternative to this approach and a new framework for action, the Universal House of Justice offered the institute process. It suggested that issues of prejudice of various kinds would certainly arise as Bahá'ís reach out in “the closely knit context of neighborhoods,” but that at the same time, activities would adjust to the needs of that particular population and new believers would be “confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment” (par. 4). It also pointed out that the institute process suitably raises the human resources needed to address the problem of prejudice and marginalization. This is likely true because those who study the institute materials gain grounding in the essentially spiritual nature of human existence, thus helping to overcome prejudices based on artificial barriers such as race.

As for marginalization, institute process participants are expected to create paths of service and, after perhaps receiving short-term outside support from local or visiting tutors, arise to tutor others themselves, becoming

in essence indigenous teachers and community leaders. Therefore the institute process is “not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of the congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 10 April 2011, par. 4). Thus fortified, the letter goes on to note, a growing number of new and veteran believers would be more able through practice and spiritual upliftment to address effectively issues of racial prejudice in a wide variety of settings, in their neighborhoods but also in their workplaces and other social venues (par. 4). Other letters offered similar comments, noting that the destiny of people living in a particular place would have to be in their own hands, a requirement fulfilled by deep engagement in, and ownership of, the institute process (Riḍván Message 2010, par. 5; letter dated 29 December 2015, par. 5).

A particularly compelling example of the Universal House of Justice's faith in the institute process is its interaction with the Black Men's Gathering. Nicknamed the BMG, this national group was composed of black men, largely based in the United States, who had, under the leadership of Dr. William Roberts, formed a mutual support community that met at least once a year as a whole (and sometimes in smaller regional meetings), studied

guidance, and offered coordinated service projects, existing in that way for over twenty-five years. Although it's highly unusual for any group purposefully homogeneous by race or gender to exist in the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice supported the BMG in response to a distinct pattern of disengagement or estrangement that had emerged for a number of black male Bahá'ís. In 2007, the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice said that this group was inspired to help "overcome the crippling effects of a long history of oppression" and that "what the Gathering does so well is to instill in its participants the desire to strive to realize the potentialities they possess" for contributing to the effort to "accomplish the Master's scheme for world redemption" (letter dated 3 June 2007, par. 10).

The many services carried out by members of the BMG during its existence included teaching trips to the continent of Africa, where they were able to interact with numerous indigenous communities. BMG members also encouraged each other to participate in community-building activities at the local level in the United States and engaged in deep reflection about spiritual guidance when they gathered together. But in part, this was a self-healing group that provided social and emotional support for black male Bahá'ís, "creating an environment in which injuries could be tended" (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 August 2011, par. 2; see for history of BMG Landry, McMurray, and

Thomas).¹¹ This quote came from a remarkable letter dated 28 August 2011 and addressed to the participants of the Black Men's Gathering, in care of Dr. William Roberts. In it, the Universal House of Justice gave a much fuller description of several purposes for the BMG; it had served "as a bulwark against the forces of racial prejudice afflicting your nation, and, indeed, attacking the Bahá'í community itself, creating an environment in which injuries could be tended, bonds of unity strengthened, sparks of spirituality fanned into flames, and the capacity for assuming the responsibility for the work of the Cause gradually developed through the experience in the field of action" (par. 2). It then explained the importance of fuller engagement in the institute process and went on to suggest that it was time to end the BMG. It cited the fact that several clusters in Africa, using the institute process, had not only expanded the membership of their Bahá'í communities to a remarkable degree, but also transformed the fortunes and spirits of countless children and junior youth and thrown off "the burdensome yoke of social ills such as tribalism" (par. 3). The letter mentions in particular a

11 A new edition of Landry, McMurray, and Thomas's book is in preparation. This will include information from surveys taken of BMG members and their families. According to direct information from the authors, survey results have confirmed both the service and the social support functions of BMG.

certain cluster in Kenya, Tiriki West, an area lacking in urban or rural centers, implying that it contains at most villages (Simwa 71), and yet that cluster was using the institute process to facilitate community development for thousands of people, only a tenth of whom were Bahá'ís. This was a particularly remarkable reference because during previous periods of time, American believers of African descent would have been expected to travel abroad and help "teach" Africans; now African villages were being held up as examples for African American men. The Universal House of Justice followed that letter with another dated 4 December 2011, also addressed to the BMG, praising past accomplishments but noting that "new possibilities and new spaces for thought and action have been created" and that members' attention should focus on those (par. 2). The letter encouraged the holding of a series of final regional meetings in which BMG members could reflect upon this development and rise to new challenges.

What, then, is so special about the institute process that it can be presented as solution for so many different kinds of problems and situations? Inherent in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, we should note, is the assumption that its message has the power to solve many social problems. Specifically concerning problems associated with the legacy of American slavery and oppression of blacks, for example, the Universal House of Justice pointed out that Bahá'u'lláh "has given us the

prescription for a new World Order, declaring that 'mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System'" (letter dated 3 June 2007, par. 4). We've already mentioned the very specific benefits that would come from full engagement in the institute process, including the expansion of the Bahá'í community, the elevation of the spiritual dialogue taking place in a locality, the education of children, the nurturing of junior youth, the raising up of natural leaders, and the promotion of moral conduct, but it's also important to note that all of this leads to various forms of social action. Built into the institute process is the idea that groups of people, such as junior youth, will actually develop service projects that can address any kind of community problem, ranging from health and welfare to water safety, provision of food, or neighborhood beautification.

The study circles that are at the basis of the institute process, therefore, are only the first step in what the Universal House of Justice sees as a serious process of community development starting with spiritual empowerment and moral education, extending to social action at a small scale, and ultimately expanding to include progressively complex community-building projects. Eventually, it would also be possible to see greater influence by the Bahá'í community in matters of public discourse, such as race relations—a topic to which the Universal House of Justice has given

considerable thought, as evidenced in its missives to individual believers and elsewhere—and other important areas of discussion. In this way, Bahá'u'lláh's vision, furthered by His descendants and by the institutions of His Faith, would be realized.¹² The following is one such passage, which addresses how the current Bahá'í strategy challenges prejudice and oppression:

While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another

12 See, for example, letters to individuals dated 3 June 2007; 10 April 2011; 28 December 2010, par. 24–25; 29 December 2015, par. 2, 30.

may be realized. (letter dated 28 December 2010, par. 34)

The Universal House of Justice focuses in large part on expanding human resources because in its opinion, the size of the Bahá'í Faith is currently too small to make a difference in the world at large. It stated this clearly in its 28 December 2010 letter when it proposed that the numbers of Bahá'ís worldwide would need to rise significantly in order for the faith of Bahá'u'lláh to have any effect on the general population. As it notes there, a small community “can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society” (par. 14). Therefore, in addition to its many other benefits, the institute process serves to help make the impact of the Baha'i Faith larger.

We should note here that in its communications, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States clearly reflects the guidance of the Universal House of Justice concerning strategies necessary to address such dilemmas as racial disunity. In a letter dated 25 February 2017, written after its representatives met with several members of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa in late fall 2016, the National Spiritual Assembly writes at some length about America's challenges of materialism, moral decay, and “a deeply ingrained racial prejudice” (par. 3).¹³ It assures

13 This pivotal meeting is clearly described, at some length, in the verbal

its members that current Bahá'í institute-related activities would help undo the negative effects of America's racial prejudice and injustice through a process of working in neighborhoods to increase salutary activities involving inclusive interracial fellowship, but also through promotion of community-directed social action and associated discourse in the greater society.

THINKING ABOUT DETROIT

Now we return to the question of how this overall scheme might operate for areas with major place- and race-related problems, such as metropolitan Detroit. We have outlined several difficulties concerning race for this severely fragmented region, and of course segmentation by socioeconomic status, present although not described in comparable detail, is a part of that dilemma as well.¹⁴ At the same time,

report given by Ken Bowers, the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, available in a videotape of remarks he gave during his Secretary's Report to the 109th Bahá'í National Convention held in April 2017. This video, along with an audio version, are both accessible online to US members of the Bahá'í Faith through a password-protected site.

14 In Detroit, as in America as a whole, black and brown people are a minority of the poor; however, the rate of poverty among black and brown people is disproportionately high compared to whites for the perfectly intelligible historical reasons

we have reviewed a remarkable vision and tool for the implementation of strategies that, the worldwide Bahá'í community has been assured, could help resolve some deeply entrenched problems—not just prejudice, but also the need for the education of young people and other social action. How might this set of strategies potentially work in a place like metropolitan Detroit? Could distressed central cities indeed function as healthy venues for the institute process?

Although we can only speculate as to possibilities and constraints, let us undertake a somewhat visionary approach to these questions, but one grounded in the realities of this area. First, a matter of context: there are people living in even the most distressed municipalities in the metropolitan area, and many of those people are in desperate need of a better life. Although Detroit's population dropped markedly in the period after World War II, the Census Bureau estimated in 2016 that 673,000 people lived there. In 2011–2015, an estimated 80.1 percent of city residents identified themselves as African American only, and 7.7 percent identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino/Latina of any race. Yet the existing active Bahá'í community is extremely small in numbers.

The Bahá'í-generated clusters are organized by county in this metropolitan area, and so Bahá'ís live in the three

I have discussed in the section "Place, Race, and Division."

clusters of Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland counties, as well as in Washtenaw County, which is located just to the west of Wayne County. Communities with various numbers of Bahá'ís exist in each of these counties, but those who are actively involved in the institute process are largely concentrated in Oakland and Washtenaw counties, with other counties and communities having initiated activities as well. As we have noted, metropolitan Detroit mirrors the pattern of the “chocolate city” and “white suburbs,” although the Bahá'í communities surrounding the city of Detroit are somewhat racially diverse. In their home localities, these Bahá'ís are carrying out the charge of attempting to build up the institute process by creating, within their own clusters and selected neighborhoods, a more outward orientation to involve more and more people who are not declared Bahá'ís in a spiritually-based community-building process.

In past decades, the Bahá'ís of metropolitan Detroit promoted racial unity through many of the devices used throughout the twentieth century by the American Bahá'í community, including race unity picnics, conferences, radio broadcasts, and other public programs. Their maintenance of interracial communities in different parts of these counties is a testament to their tenacity and belief in the vision of racial unity. Holy Day celebrations commonly bring together different communities, and people in Bahá'í communities throughout the region interact on various occasions.

But given this new era that focuses on community building as described above, strategies would have to change to maintain and build racial diversity. As this area's neighborhoods and localities are some of the most segregated in the country, purposeful action is needed in order to build communities free of racial boundaries. The neighborhood level in these places, that is, could be a segregation trap.

One simple strategy in keeping with the above guidance would be to select neighborhoods with some presence of certain minority populations and begin developing the institute process in the way it is unfolding in other places around the world. This could happen in all counties listed because each contains, even if only to a limited degree, some minority-race or immigrant populations, as census data clearly documents. Much attention could be paid, therefore, to finding such diverse elements and enfolded them into the institute process. But if this process ultimately is to help overcome the social ills associated with disadvantaged places, it would also be necessary to build up functioning neighborhood-based communities within distressed central cities, and much benefit could stem from creating strong linkages among those urban and suburban communities. This approach ties in with the suggestion contained in the Universal House of Justice's 29 December 2015 letter that stronger clusters should serve as reservoirs, or helpers, for nearby clusters that are not as advanced in the institute process (par. 21).

So let us consider the possible implications of this. Wayne County, which contains Detroit and quite a few other post-industrial cities, as well as more prosperous municipalities (but without a critical mass of Bahá'ís), may not yet have abundant Bahá'í human resources for any portion of its cluster, but might draw from human resources (such as visiting tutors) in more suburban clusters, such as Washtenaw, Oakland, or Macomb counties. The tricky part, if enhanced activities were envisioned for the city of Detroit or other possible localities, would be to consider potential receptive neighborhoods, and to help initiate engagement that is both sustainable and not imposed from the outside.

Again focusing on the city of Detroit, outside of the gentrified Greater Downtown—which includes the central business district, portions of the riverfront, and Midtown—broad swaths of formerly healthy neighborhoods are in severe distress, some with only a few houses left standing where many once stood. The series of foreclosures and other economic crises have led to considerable depopulation and quite a number of vacant homes. So it would be necessary to consult carefully with knowledgeable people in order to decide which neighborhoods might be receptive and intact enough to benefit from the community building that the institute process entails. Possible areas within city limits might include majority-black west-side locations that are largely intact physically and socially, such as Minock Park or

North Rosedale Park; largely Hispanic southwest locations, such as the Vernor-Springwells district; or east-side locations, such as the predominantly Muslim immigrant “Banglatown” neighborhood, located just north of the small enclave city of Hamtramck but within Detroit’s city limits.¹⁵

The Universal House of Justice suggests that visiting tutors or homefront pioneers who reach out to a receptive local population, “youth in particular,” can help generate initial impetus in an area’s community-building process (letter dated 29 December 2015, par. 5). In a city such as Detroit, visiting tutors could help in this manner, but so too could a few pioneer individuals or families moving into specific neighborhoods and committing to community building in collaboration with local residents, particularly youth. Because a major drawback for families considering moving to Detroit is the public school system—although in some cases Detroit neighborhoods still retain access to good public or charter schools—it might be easier for people without school-age (or with home-schooled) children to make such a place-specific commitment, although the Ruhi Institute’s children’s classes and junior youth curriculum provide an important and salutary supplement

15 I have led projects for classes or for research in three of these four named communities, and they have potential as outlined here, although of course the actual communities would have to be chosen through some other process.

in such a context, as well as opportunities for engagement. Deep integration into the local culture would be necessary to enable people to live safely and to join in ongoing efforts to uphold the neighborhood and protect it from destructive elements. North Rosedale Park, for example, has strong community-based organizations that do just that.

Who would make such inroads? Returning to the Universal House of Justice's explanation of the need to increase the number of Bahá'ís, at the present time even stable suburban localities within the Detroit metropolitan area do not have the critical mass of Bahá'ís necessary to undertake a major campaign of settlement or visitation in a city neighborhood like Detroit's. Nevertheless, the institute process has in some places in the world started successfully with a very few people and then blossomed. For example, in one of the aforementioned Detroit city neighborhoods it would be possible to recruit youth for initial training and then expand through junior youth activities, children's classes, and home visits to engage whole families, slowly enabling neighborhood-based people to lead such activities and then to shape their own community development in some way, however modest. Furthermore, helpers such as visiting youth or adult tutors could carry out service activities for a summer or a year, on a sequential basis, until local resources arise to carry forth the process.

Even without such numbers and resources, however, it would be useful

for metropolitan-area Bahá'ís to begin to think about potential neighborhood centers of activity, to consider how to approach possibly receptive youth or households, make friends, and think seriously about the racial dynamics inherent in such a context. The main one is that in a city that is over 80 percent black, certain mixed-race or predominantly black neighborhoods would benefit from white or other ethnic visitors or pioneers as a visible demonstration of a lack of prejudice and an openness to others.

Such action would also help break the back of continuing forms of residential segregation, prejudice, and distancing. The same areas might also benefit from black visitors or new residents as a show of cultural affinity and affirmation and a means of promoting trust. Equally careful consideration would need to be made for predominantly Hispanic, immigrant Muslim, and other such neighborhoods. All action would have to be determined according to local circumstances in an organic manner free of artifice or patriarchy, without prejudice, and with full understanding of the potential for human advancement.

Motivation for such actions could be recognition of the isolation and relative deprivation experienced by many inner-city residents and the need to pursue racial unity in a new way. With the public school system in turmoil and multiple public and charter school closings a fact of life, many Detroit city children are in major danger of growing up without a good

elementary or high school education. This has enormous implications for their future well-being, as well as that of their future families. And so, rather than trying to reform a public school system that is ridden with conflict, controversy, and failure, Bahá'í children's classes and junior youth programs may help provide educational benefits that outweigh those of public schools, as has happened in many African communities, according to the Universal House of Justice. Similarly, with few employment opportunities available for blue-collar workers or for high school students, early engagement in a Ruhi junior youth curriculum—which covers such topics as science and math, character-building, and service—and attachment to a wider community with many majority-race members favored with material means could open many doors in a process sometimes labeled “bridging social capital.” This means simply that people in disadvantaged circumstances need to be able to access resources outside of their limited frames of reference or neighborhoods. Family friends in more prosperous or stable neighborhoods would be able to offer many benefits for youth who are not in secure or healthy environments.

As for the suburbs and other small localities or rural areas within these counties, it would also be important to think about how to build a base at the neighborhood level that is not racially exclusionary or homogeneous, particularly not all white. In the local history of this region, it has happened that a white family took in a black inner-city

youth in order to have enough Bahá'ís to form a spiritual assembly or otherwise assist that person to advance economically.

Local Bahá'í lore tells of prosperous residents who, starting over fifty years ago, would gather youth together, of all races or specifically blacks, to meet in their homes or to travel to the grounds of the Flint area's Louhelen Bahá'í School for retreats or gatherings.¹⁶ The same spirit of reaching across racial barriers would need to inform this new era of reservoir clusters and neighborhood-based activities because informal association between high-minority city neighborhoods and largely white suburban subdivisions does not always happen and in fact can be actively discouraged, particularly for the poor, because of lack of public transportation and consequent limited access to jobs or affordable housing. Bahá'í communities could consider ways to cross bridges into areas of the region that are normally ignored by residents of more prosperous areas. Assisting in the establishment of the institute process is part of that task, but also simple social association and interaction would also be important in order to build a foundation upon which expansion of human resources

16 These stories are common among black Bahá'ís in the area who date back to the early 1960s. White or prosperous black families that were involved in reaching out included those of Harold Johnson, Richard and Sharonne Fogel, James and Naomi Oden, and Mary Wolters.

could thrive. Bahá'ís have made such efforts in the past, but now the institutional framework exists that would allow them to make their attempts at outreach and inclusion more focused and effective.

With such support and growth in neighborhood activities, in the future it would not be difficult to envision practical social action that helps provide basic needs for those facing material deprivation, in a way that honors self-determination and avoids paternalism. These actions would have to be modest, at least in the beginning, because social action may not be able to confront some major dilemmas such as lack of affordable public transportation in a city where perhaps one-fourth of the households do not have a car in 2010 (Grengs 103). But social action undertaken in the context of suburban support could indeed begin to improve the life chances for at least the younger members of the community.

Activities that have emerged recently in Detroit neighborhoods on their own, out of simple desperation or persistent unemployment, have included small-scale entrepreneurialism such as barbershops and beauty shops set up in living rooms; gardening that has sometimes grown to approach small-scale urban farming; a food cooperative that has evolved into a market with home delivery systems; home-based social services such as elder care or child care; a community-supported coffee shop that serves as a neighborhood venue for informal and formal gatherings; and other

related efforts. Such activities could be built upon and enhanced with a more consolidated process of social action once a neighborhood was affected by the kind of vision-building possible with deep engagement in the institute process.

The following is just one possible example of social action: Central-city Detroit has a dearth of major grocery stores selling both fresh and affordable vegetables and fruits. Because of the high number of vacant lots and low incomes, and because of the educational efforts of various citywide urban gardening proponents, some city residents have in response created small urban gardens. These can supplement diets (reducing grocery bills) as well as improve the quality of health and well-being. Opportunities for building on such action, however, are limited. Some residential blocks have gardens; others don't. Many people are afraid of gardening because of historic contaminants in the soil or because of the work involved. Others have been trained to overcome such barriers (through soil infill, raised beds, and cooperation) but have no venue in which to share such knowledge and action more widely. Some gardening residents wish to sell their products at small farmer's markets, but those venues are limited (and sometimes exclusionary to amateur gardeners). The list continues in ways both large and small. Conceivably, a neighborhood that was spiritually uplifted by the institute process—and consequently more unified, deliberative, with active

spiritual education for all ages of children and adults, affirmed by character-building and training in ways of serving humanity, connected to the outside world, and with an enhanced sense of empowerment—could choose to make of such efforts a coherent and powerful form of social action.

Furthermore, with enough neighborhoods affected in this and other comparable ways, it would be easy for Bahá'í communities to become involved in a necessary dialogue at the city, state, and national levels about realistic solutions for central cities such as Detroit and for such issues as deeply ingrained racial prejudice and marginalization. The discourse newly emboldened by human resources and activities described above could then tackle the larger public issues, such as economic development, transportation, quality of local schools, and social justice.

This strategy is actually the reverse of previous approaches. In this model, the discourse about race, poverty, and social justice would take place organically, with demonstrated action at the level of the neighborhood, not in the realm of abstraction and dialogue that seems to lead nowhere or moves in fits and starts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The above thought experiment envisioning possible Detroit-specific strategies, which is simply one individual's perspective about a hypothetical application of the Universal House

of Justice's vision and strategies, would still be demonstrably superior to current trends, programs, and practices. Although some advances have been made in improving the physical aspects of life in Detroit's neighborhoods—e.g., streetlights have been turned back on and a small but important number of the vacant houses have been torn down—significant improvements in neighborhood stability, public safety, child welfare, and economic opportunity are still a long way off. Furthermore, typical approaches to neighborhood development, with few exceptions, are limited. For example, although community-based organizations exist, they are largely dependent on outside funding from vanishing public coffers or from foundations, which typically require them to undertake narrow agendas such as construction or rehabilitation of housing, counseling services for home owners, or job training. Nonprofits that attempt to carry out specific actions such as helping feed the poor, a laudable endeavor to be sure, do so in a way that does not empower the poor to take control of their own destinies.

High-level panels and organizations that purport to consult about improving Detroit or enhancing race relations hardly touch the lives of the households where they reside. Proponents of improving the education of children continue to fight over charter schools versus public schools and seem to offer very few solutions for the failure of both kinds of educational institutions. A grassroots movement

that builds on values-driven education of the young, moral and spiritual training for adults, service-related activities, and transformative social action would take time and patience but would in many ways be superior to the business-as-usual approach to social reform that currently exists.

The difficulty, of course, comes with implementation. What is needed are not theoretical ruminations—these are easily conceived and presented—but real-world actions that actually carry out the proposed process on the ground. Such an endeavor thus requires not only vision, but also tenacity, organization, leadership, systematization, perseverance, creativity,

and any number of additional attributes. However, the potential for applying key principles is enormous, and the need, gargantuan. The promise of bringing about human society's positive evolution must in some way be fulfilled while time remains for the utilization of underlying strengths of a community that may appear—especially to those without an optimistic vision and salutary tools for reformation—as a hopelessly dysfunctional environment. The Universal House of Justice assures us that the people in every neighborhood have the inherent talents and capacities needed to transform society.

WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993.
- American FactFinder II*. United States Census Bureau. <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. Accessed 15 February 2017
- Charles, Camille Z. "Neighborhood Racial-Composition Preferences: Evidence from a Multiethnic Metropolis." *Social Problems*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2000, pp. 379–407, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3097236>. Accessed 15 February 2017.
- Chaves, Mark, and Alison Eagle. *Religious Congregations in 21st Century America: National Congregations Study*. Duke University, 2015, http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf. Accessed 22 July 2017.
- Deng, Lan, et al. "Saving Strong Neighborhoods from the Destruction of Mortgage Foreclosures: The Impact of Community-Based Efforts in Detroit, Michigan." *Housing Policy Debate*, 2017, pp. 1–27.
- Farley, Reynolds, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer. *Detroit Divided*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2000.

- Grengs, Joe. "Comparing People and Places with Transportation Accessibility in Metropolitan Detroit." *Mapping Detroit: Land, Community, and Shaping a City*, edited by June Thomas and Henco Bekkering, Wayne State UP, 2015, pp. 101–14.
- Jacobs, Andrew J. "Embedded Contrasts in Race, Municipal Fragmentation, and Planning: Divergent Outcomes in Detroit and Greater Toronto-Hamilton Regions 1990–2000." *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2009, pp. 147–72. *Taylor & Francis Online*, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9906.2009.00440.x. Accessed 15 February 2017.
- . "The Impacts of Variations in Development Context on Employment Growth: A Comparison of Central Cities in Michigan and Ontario, 1980–2006." *Economic Development Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2009, pp. 351–371. DOI: 10.1177/0891242409343304. Accessed 28 August 2017.
- Landry, Frederick, Harvey McMurray, and Richard Thomas. *The Story of the Black Men's Gathering: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years, 1987–2011*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2011.
- Massey, Douglas S., et al. *Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb*. Princeton UP, 2013.
- National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. Letter to the American Bahá'í Community, 23 February 2017.
- Oh, Sun Jung, and John Yinger. "What Have We Learned from Paired Testing in Housing Markets?" *Cityscape*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2015, pp. 15–59. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1774580507?accountid=35396>. Accessed 28 August 2017.
- Rugh, Jacob, and Douglas Massey. "Segregation in Post-Civil Rights America." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2014, pp. 205–32, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000180>
- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984.
- Simwa, Linus P. Iposhe. *The Establishment and Impact of Friends Church among the Tiriki of Western Kenya*. MA thesis, University of Nairobi, 2015. <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/93892>.
- Smith, Melanie, and Paul Lample. *The Spiritual Conquest of the Planet: Our Response to Global Plans*. Palabra Press, 1993.
- Social Science Data Analysis Network. CensusScope. http://www.censusscope.org/us/rank_dissimilarity_white_black.html. Accessed 28 August 2017.
- Thomas, June M. *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1999.
- . "Redesigning Community with Propinquity: Fragments of Detroit's Region." *Mapping Detroit: Land, Community, and Shaping a City*, edited by June Thomas and Henco Bekkering, Wayne State UP, 2015, pp. 189–207.

- Thomas, June M. *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit*. 2nd ed., Wayne State UP, 2013.
- Thomas, June M., and Marsha Ritzdorf, editors. *Urban Planning and the African-American Community: In the Shadows*. SAGE, 1997.
- Thomas, Richard W. *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1993.
- Universal House of Justice. Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 12 December 2001.
- . Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an Individual Believer, 3 June 2007.
- . Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an Individual Believer, 10 April 2011.
- . Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Participants of the Black Men's Gathering, 28 August 2011.
- . Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Participants of the Black Men's Gathering, 4 December 2011.
- . Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'ís of the United States, 9 August 2012.
- . Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World acting under the Mandate of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 26 March 2016.
- . Letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, 9 January 2001.
- . Letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, 28 December 2010.
- . Letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, 29 December 2015.
- . Letter to National Spiritual Assemblies, 30 May 1997.
- . Ríḍván Message 1996.
- . Ríḍván Message 2010.
- . Ríḍván Message 2013.
- Young, Iris Marion, "Inclusion and Democracy." *Readings in Planning Theory*, edited by Susan S. Fainstein and James Defilippis, Wiley Blackwell, 2016, pp. 389–406.