



Marriage Transformation LLC

Susanne M. Alexander, President
 Relationship & Marriage Educator, Speaker, Author, and Publisher
 P.O. Box 249, Harrison, TN, 37341-0249 USA
 Phone: 423-599-0153; Skype: MarriageTransformation
susanne@marriagetransformation.com
www.marriagetransformation.com; www.bahaimarriage.net

Marriage Transformation® dynamically empowers individuals and couples to engage in skillful, character-based communications and actions that contribute to excellent relationships and happy, unified marriages and families that serve others.

Conducting Initial Meetings with Individuals and Couples with Marriage Problems

A Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assembly Training Resource
 Provided by Marriage Transformation®

*An Effort to Apply the Bahá'í Teachings to the Strengthening of Marriage;
 This is Not an Official Source of Guidance from a Bahá'í Institution
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"...[T]he provision of guidance on administrative matters such as the laws of engagement, marriage, and divorce falls under the purview of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies; while Bahá'ís who are professional counselors are free to share with the friends extracts from the Bahá'í Writings and to offer advice of a general nature, it is best that they refer the friends in the first instance to their Local Spiritual Assemblies when questions arise about the application of the laws and Teachings of the Faith." (From the Department of the Secretariat written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, September 24, 2014)

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1. Overview

1.1 About Resources and This Document: Local Spiritual Assemblies may have specific guidelines from their National Spiritual Assemblies related to marriage and divorce laws. Those and the compilations from the Universal House of Justice entitled “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages” and “Divorce” are primary resources for all matters on these topics. In addition, the applicable civil separation and divorce laws as well as available resource people such as mediators or collaborative lawyers will vary depending on geographic location. This document is an educational guide to assist Spiritual Assemblies in their work. It will not apply to every couple or work in every circumstance. An Assembly through prayer and consultation, knowing their own local guidance, circumstances, and laws, will apply it as appropriate.

1.2 Target Audience: This training resource is for members of Local Spiritual Assemblies and their appointed representatives who carry out fact-finding or provide guidance with individuals and couples about marriage-related matters. Throughout this document, the word “Assembly” is used to represent both the institution and those who carry out its work in this arena.

1.3 Purpose: The intention of this training resource is to build skills and expand the capacity of institutions to more skillfully navigate initial meetings with individuals and couples experiencing marital difficulties. The intent is to guide them through the opening discussions of marital difficulties in ways that can strengthen the couple relationship, provide a foundation for fostering unity and reconciliation, and prevent divorce.

2. General Principles in Responding to Troubled Marriages

2.1 Family Unity and Credibility:

“...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 740)

2.2 Engaging in Early Intervention and Prevention:

“The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá’í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1304)

As Assemblies educate their communities about marriage and family unity, it is important for them to advise couples and the community in general to seek assistance early when experiencing problems rather than waiting for long periods before asking for help. When couples delay seeking assistance, the problems can become entrenched, and the couple may be at the point of hopelessness, strong antipathy, and separation when they finally contact an Assembly. Consider the following actions: An occasional general reminder at Feast, notices in newsletters, a letter to the community, devotionals on the topic of marriage and family, readings on marriage and family at Feast, a talk at Feast on the topic of marriage and family, an annual deepening on the marriage laws.... [Note: There are a few pre-planned Feast readings, devotionals, and deepenings on www.bahaimarriage.net.]

Assemblies may struggle at times with feeling some resistance to placing troubled marriages on its agenda. Faced with the imperative of addressing the teaching and community-building work, and knowing that the energy of the Assembly can be brought down with difficult cases, it can be easy to postpone addressing marriage issues. To help move matters forward, Assemblies can consider delegating many matters to a subset of its members. It can also help to remember that individuals and couples vitally need a healthy connection with their Assembly and are helped when they perceive that the Assembly is effective in its interactions with them. Responsiveness builds trust and confidence.

2.3 Handling a Complexity of Issues: When an individual or couple does come to an Assembly with concerns about their marriage, it can be challenging to know how to help with and respond to the emotional and mental turmoil and relationship upset they are experiencing. It takes asking effective questions and discernment to see whether this is a temporary situation or there are much deeper problems. It can be common for couples to simply need emotional or educational support to navigate through a specific issue, and the marriage can then continue in a healthy and happy way. Alternatively, the couple may be dealing with a wide range of very complex issues that will require the intervention of professionals. These issues could include such challenges as mental illness, addictions, abuse, infidelity, sexual problems, and more. If the Assembly attempts to counsel the individuals through these issues, especially without professional training, the result could be harm instead of benefit. However, you will also have a role in calling on the individuals to follow Bahá'í laws as best as they can. All of your efforts, of course, will be done in a spirit of being loving parents and guides to those involved.

Assemblies have responsibilities to their whole community, so they have to exercise wisdom and discernment in determining the amount of time they dedicate to an individual or a couple. Sometimes Assemblies can attempt to be marriage counselors and spend a large amount of time focused on trying to solve a couple's specific marital issues. This can significantly distract them from the teaching and administrative work they are responsible for guiding and carrying out. The guidance from the Teachings is clear that Bahá'ís can seek professional help in addition to the spiritual help that an Assembly can offer (quotations later in this document).

If there are compelling reasons to do so, such as when one or both individuals are members of the Spiritual Assembly, the couple or the Assembly may make the decision for the couple to consult with a different Assembly.

2.4 Meeting Separately with Each Party: The US National Spiritual Assembly advises:
 “To facilitate screening, regardless of whether abuse is suspected, the Assembly or its representative(s) should arrange initially to meet with the parties separately, as each party will probably be more forthcoming in the absence of the other.” (US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

There are useful observations to gather from seeing the couple interact together as well. The Assembly can determine in each case which will occur first—either separate meetings or a meeting with the couple together—depending on the known circumstances. Certainly in cases of suspected abuse, separate meetings first are wise. Be aware, however, that often abuse incidents are completely invisible to those outside of the home, and intimidation by the abuser that forces silence by the recipient can be common, especially when they are together. Great discernment, wisdom, and sensitivity are needed to avoid exacerbating the problems.

2.5 Screening for Domestic Abuse or Violence:

“Due to the high rates of domestic violence, the Assembly or its representative(s) should routinely, without making assumptions, screen each case for signs of abuse, as the presence of abuse will

change the way interviews with the parties involved are conducted and will affect other recommendations or decisions the Assembly may have to make. Should the Assembly or its representative(s) suspect or determine that abuse is a factor in a divorce case, they should immediately refer to *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies* on how to proceed.” (US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

Abuse may be occurring in situations where there is no physical violence as well. Emotional intimidation, manipulation, and more could be occurring. At times mental illness may be present and often initially invisible to the Assembly. It will be wise for the Assembly to be cautious about jumping to conclusions prematurely. It is also wise to avoid making gender-based assumptions, such as that the man is the initiator of the difficulties.

[A copy of the above-mentioned domestic violence guidelines and others can be found through contacting the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States. If there is any suspicion of violence or serious abuse where the Assembly may need to act swiftly, you may choose to have your institution meet directly with the parties rather than delegate this task to others. It is wise to have plans to protect the safety of all family members and Assembly members/representatives involved.]

2.6 Maintaining Confidentiality:

“It is of utmost importance that all information divulged during the interview be maintained in the strictest confidence, even from each partner. Failure to do so could have serious consequences for the parties and families involved, the Assembly, and the community.” (US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

The Assembly has the responsibility to follow principles of justice and fairness with inclusion of wisdom. Applying these principles includes ensuring that both parties have a voice in the process and their issues are heard, whether it is together or separately, and regardless as to whether or not both parties agreed to approach the Assembly. Confidentiality does not mean that only the one person with a complaint is included in the fact-finding process. In most cases the one with the complaint will agree to the Assembly sharing the complaint or concerns with the other party.

“We must point out that immediately an application is received by a Bahá’í Institution for setting the date of a year of waiting prior to divorce, it is the duty of that Institution to examine the application completely and impartially and do its utmost to effect a reconciliation between the parties. Either party may apply for the year of waiting without the consent of the other.” (Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 23, 1970, to a National Spiritual Assembly, US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

2.7 Reducing Aversion and Fostering Reconciliation: The guidance generally is to do whatever the Assembly can to foster reconciliation and unity with the couple.

“When an application for divorce is made to a Spiritual Assembly its first thought and action should be to reconcile the couple and to ensure that they know the Bahá’í teachings on the matter. God willing, the Assembly will be successful and no year of waiting need be started. However, if the Assembly finds that it is unable to persuade the party concerned to withdraw the application for divorce, it must conclude that, from its point of view, there appears to be an irreconcilable antipathy, and it has no alternative to setting the date for the beginning of the year of waiting. During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their differences, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them. But if the year of waiting comes to an end without

reconciliation the Bahá'í divorce must be granted as at the date of the granting of the civil divorce if this has not already taken place.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1304)

“Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, he [or she] is not to divorce her [or him] but to bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year, that perchance the fragrance of affection may be renewed between them. If, upon the completion of this period, their love hath not returned, it is permissible for divorce to take place.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 68)

The challenge for the Assembly is activating and strengthening the *willingness* of the couple to make efforts. The Assembly must help the couple to adjust their attitudes and behaviors to align with and obey the guidance about marriage generally and encourage them with taking action to foster love and unity. It will take maturity, unity, creativity, and open-mindedness on the part of the Assembly during this process. You will need to help the couple with applying all the tools that are available for facilitating the healing process. This includes helping them reduce their anger, soften their aversion, and have empathy and compassion for each other. Prompting them to speak with appreciation of the best qualities and actions of each other and do thoughtful and loving actions towards each other may be successful in rekindling loving feelings.

It can take time for the individuals involved to calm their anger and also understand their own part in the current marital difficulties. When each takes responsibility for their own words and actions, the door to personal change can open, which can benefit the marriage. It is more difficult for change to occur when the couple is polarized and only able to see their own hurt and not their own part in causing the difficulties. Empathy for each other's situation also helps to reduce polarization.

In discussing the possibility of reconciliation with a couple, you can include such topics as:

- Encouraging the couple to be open to the possibility of love rekindling after emotions calm and changes occur
- Expressing hope that all efforts will be made to solve differences, address difficulties, and rebuild unity
- Taking time to calm down, pray, and reflect
- Educating themselves about the research on what makes marriages work well

2.8 Understanding Terminology and Whether to Begin a Year of Waiting: If a couple requests a divorce and the beginning of a year of waiting, part of the Assembly's investigation process is determining whether there is a high level of negative feelings and disunity present between the couple. The Bahá'í Writings use a variety of terms to describe these feelings. Details are below.

2.8.1 Antipathy

“Irreconcilable antipathy arising between the parties to a marriage is not merely a lack of love for one's spouse but an antipathy which cannot be resolved. It is for the Spiritual Assembly to decide whether this condition exists before it sets the date for the beginning of the year of waiting, and this it may do on the application of one of the parties. It is not affected by the other party's not wishing to apply for a divorce.”

(On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 12, 1979, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, no. 2338)

“In the strict legal sense there are no ‘grounds’ for a Bahá'í divorce. No question of misbehavior of either party is involved and the only condition under which a Bahá'í divorce may be considered is the irreconcilable antipathy of the parties. Thus it is not sufficient that one or both of the parties has asked that the date for the beginning of the year of waiting be fixed; the Assembly must find the

condition of irreconcilable antipathy to exist before the date can be fixed.” (Universal House of Justice, dated May 24, 1972, to a National Spiritual Assembly; quoted in US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

2.8.2 *Aversion*

“Concerning the definition of the term ‘aversion’ in relation to Bahá’í divorce law, the Universal House of Justice points out that there are no specific ‘grounds’ for Bahá’í divorce such as there are in some codes of civil law. Bahá’í law permits divorce but, as both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have made very clear, divorce is abhorred. Thus, from the point of view of the individual believer he should do all he can to refrain from divorce. Bahá’ís should be profoundly aware of the sanctity of marriage and should strive to make their marriages an eternal bond of unity and harmony. This requires effort and sacrifice and wisdom and self-abnegation. A Bahá’í should consider the possibility of divorce only if the situation is intolerable and he or she has a strong aversion to being married to the other partner. This is the standard held up to the individual. It is not a law, but an exhortation. It is a goal to which we should strive.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 3, 1982, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1303)

2.8.3 *Other Terms Used*

“It can be seen, therefore, that ‘aversion’ is not a specific legal term that needs to be defined. Indeed a number of other terms are used in describing the situation that can lead to divorce in Bahá’í law, such as ‘antipathy,’ ‘resentment,’ ‘estrangement,’ ‘impossibility of establishing harmony,’ and ‘irreconcilability.’ The texts, however, point out that divorce is strongly condemned, should be viewed as ‘a last resort’ when ‘rare and urgent circumstances’ exist, and that the partner who is the ‘cause of divorce’ will ‘unquestionably’ become the ‘victim of formidable calamities.’” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 3, 1982, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1305)

It can be common for individuals to avoid seeking help for marriage problems because they do not wish to be seen as the “cause” of the problems. They may also avoid initiating action that they perceive may result in “formidable calamities”. The person who requests the divorce may not be the primary source for many of the marriage difficulties. It is wise for Assemblies to help their communities engage in preventive marriage education and seek help before the marriage is in such serious difficulty. Assemblies can also help troubled couples see the areas where education and skill building can increase their ability to repair the marriage. It is likely that both the husband and the wife are acting and speaking in ways that are harming the marriage, so blame and accusations about being the “cause” are likely destructive.

2.9 *Offering Reassurance and Comfort:* Part of your role may also include offering some reassurance and comfort that marriage research demonstrates that it is normal in every marriage to have some issues that never get resolved and must simply be accepted. Couples may also need to hear that it is normal to have ups and downs and be able to resume a marriage and find happiness with perseverance. As couples go through transitions, they may question whether there is something wrong in their marriage or whether their marriage is healthy enough to move forward. They may simply need to hear that there is a change underway for them to adjust to, and that they may need to obtain support during this time. Common transitions are:

- Moving from the honeymoon or bliss stage into a stage where more differences and adjustments arise
- When negotiating differences and discomforts, learning to see one’s partner’s perspectives, making changes and assessing them, and working towards a new sense of oneness based on trust and cooperation
- When discussing whether to have a child

- Having young children and teenagers and responding to their development stages and their challenges
- When grown children are leaving home and the couple is living alone
- Dealing with illness and death across the extended family

2.10 Providing Ongoing Mentoring: You can play a pivotal role in helping the couple move through the process towards being in a better, happier place in their marriage. Part of this can be, where appropriate, communicating that you are an advocate for their marriage, and you believe they can be successful. You can remind them of the possibility of a positive future for themselves and their children, parents, siblings, and more.

It can also be beneficial to set up married couples to mentor the couple and help them build strengths and increase positive actions in their marriage. It is wise to have two couples working with them to help protect all of the marriages from negative influences. Some marriage organizations offer formal mentor couple training if needed.

3.0 Self-Preparation for Assembly Members (and Assigned Others)

Prior to meeting with an individual or couple who has requested consultation about marital difficulties, the individual Assembly members involved are wise to go through an awareness and detachment process. During these types of consultations, they may automatically filter what they hear through their experiences of previous consultations such as this, their own difficult marriage experiences or those of close friends or family members, and their opinions about who may be right or wrong in the situation. All of these factors may make it difficult to effectively listen and accurately discern the facts and feelings of those speaking.

To best prepare to meet with unhappy and struggling individuals, consider:

- Praying for detachment and protection from absorbing the couple's negative emotions
- Praying for the well-being of the individuals and the unity of the couple and family
- Engaging in focused meditation on cleansing oneself of thoughts related to previous experiences; staying aware as to whether there is any unfinished forgiveness work to do related to one's own experiences that could interfere in the effectiveness of one's service
- Consulting with the Assembly, or sharing what is in the way of personal effectiveness, and asking for their help in addressing it
- Seeking to fact-find rather than following an impulse to give advice, offer commentary, or arrive at judgments or conclusions; advice can be well-meaning, but inappropriate for a vulnerable individual or couple, and it may not reflect the advice and guidance of the whole Assembly or of a trained professional
- Focusing on keeping one's mind clear, controlling one's emotions, staying open to fully listen, and being discerning and wise
- Suspending judgment as an individual and during the fact-finding stage
- Strictly maintaining confidentiality, with matters only discussed within an Assembly meeting or designated committee meeting

4.0 Assembly or Committee Preparation

It is wise for all involved to be reminded that this initial meeting should not include any advice that has not been previously agreed upon by the Assembly. The individual or couple should be told before coming and at the beginning of the meeting that the purpose is gentle fact-finding and exploration about the issue(s) they are bringing. They may receive some general guidance from the Assembly, but not specific input about their situation, until after the Assembly consults.

It is helpful for you to pray together both for the couple and for the spiritual and emotional strength and compassion of those meeting with the individuals or couple. When a marriage is in trouble, the negative energy of disunity that surrounds the couple can negatively affect the minds, hearts, and souls of those in contact with them. Be judicious about the amount of contact needed with the couple and the amount of detail actually needed. Focus on taking whatever steps are possible to help you see what might assist the couple to rebalance and re-harmonize. In addition, the Assembly's priority is teaching, and it must be cautious and wise in the amount of time and energy it devotes to handling personal problems directly itself.

At an initial meeting, individuals will likely be experiencing strong emotions. It could be counter-productive to raise the topic of reconciliation at this stage in the process. A cooling off period may be needed. Apply wisdom in each circumstance, and be aware of the questions most on the minds of the couple.

The Assembly must always be cautious that its role stays focused on offering spiritual guidance. The Assembly is not responsible for attempting to behave in the role of a trained professional. If there is a professional who is a member of the institution, this person may offer advice to the institution, but it is wise to be cautious about too much overlap of the roles. In balance, however, it also needs to be remembered that most professionals do not have the necessary spiritual perspectives to fully counsel Bahá'í or interfaith couples on their marriages. Your role in providing this input is vital.

“Neither you nor your husband should hesitate to continue consulting professional marriage counselors, individually and together if possible, and also to take advantage of the supportive counseling which can come from wise and mature friends. Non-Bahá'í counseling can be useful but it is usually necessary to temper it with Bahá'í insight.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Preserving Bahá'í Marriages”, p. 455)

(An explanatory document about Bahá'í marriage for couples to give to a non-Bahá'í therapist is located at: www.bahaimarriage.net/resources_troubledmarriages.html)

5.0 Asking Effective Questions

You will be posing thoughtful questions to the couple to prompt them and you to more deeply understand their situation. Your skill in asking questions may help the couple to build awareness and take action to seek and implement solutions to their marriage issues or reconsider moving towards divorce. Positive questioning can open up possibilities and encourage hopefulness. A positive approach can help the Assembly and the couple to see where the marriage and the individuals have strengths that can provide a foundation for going forward.

Appreciative Inquiry is a particular method of asking questions that identifies and builds on the positive in the current circumstances instead of focusing on what is wrong. We often learn throughout life to pose and respond to questions that accuse or blame instead of inquire. “So the idea [of Appreciative Inquiry] is that

provocative questions are used to draw out powerful success stories and identify the factors that are already working well within a human system. We can then use this understanding to help bring about what people want more of (as opposed to the usual cultural focus on reducing what they want less of).”
www.systemsthinker.com/interests/appreciativeinquiry/; www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu)

There are two key skill practices to remember when posing questions. One is to ask “open” questions that encourage discussions rather than ones that simply require a “yes” or “no” answer. Ideally these are also positive and future-focused. For example: “What are your thoughts about applying this quotation to your life in a way that would benefit your marriage?” The other practice is to pose only one question at a time. If you ask two in a row without pausing for an answer, people will tend to only answer the second question. It is also good to remember that you are engaged in mutual exploration and understanding as well as encouraging self-reflection. Ensuring that your tone of voice is positive, non-judgmental, and inquiring for truth will help.

6.0 Some Possible Questions to Ask

Keeping in mind the above information, when you first meet with a couple, try to determine what has been positive in their marriage and not just what is going wrong. You also need to know where remedial education and skill-building will assist them. You will adjust and customize your questions based on your understanding of the situation the couple is in. Some questions may be unwise or untimely. Additional questions to ask that are not listed here will also likely emerge naturally out of the discussion.

6.1 *Aiming for Positive Information*

1. What were some of the positive experiences you had with one another during your courting and engagement period before marrying?
2. What are some of the character qualities and strengths that you admire in each other?
3. What are some actions that show your spouse is a good parent?
4. What are some of the ways the two of you have done service together as a couple?
5. What words or actions have been occurring when you have felt that your spouse loved you?
6. What spiritual practices have been strengths in your marriage? (prayer, attending Feast, Fasting...)
7. What have been the positive signs in your home that indicated you were feeling united at the time?
8. When have you been able to teach the Faith to others together?

6.2 *Fact-Finding About What Has Brought the Individual or Couple to the Assembly*

This is a challenging and sensitive area. The Assembly is not a therapist and must determine just how much information it really needs to know to effectively guide the individuals and couple with improving their relationship, engaging in marriage strengthening or reconciliation actions, and referring them to resources. Where the information is not vital for you, then respecting the couple’s right to privacy is wise.

“It is the Assembly’s responsibility to conduct its own investigation and come to a decision. Assemblies are, of course, discouraged from probing unnecessarily into details of personal lives and the examination of a divorce problem should not go beyond what is necessary to ascertain whether or not such antipathy does, indeed, exist.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 30, 1983, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1319)

As you are fact-finding, you may find it useful to ask the couple to write down answers to questions, perhaps even in separate rooms. Writing down information and then exchanging it and reading it can give the couple the opportunity to slow down and reflect more effectively.

These questions below may be helpful:

1. If a third person or a video camera were in your home with the two of you, what would he or she observe is happening between you?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how skilful are you as a couple at using consultation to reach decisions and solve problems?
3. What words or actions can communicate to you that your spouse feels love towards you?
4. Are you able to pray with one another? If not, what interferes?
5. How often are you each able to forgive the other? Are issues from the past resolved and put to rest?
6. How often is money a source of disharmony between the two of you?
7. What issues are there related to physical intimacy?
8. If you could describe the major issue between you in two or three sentences, what would you say?
9. What actions are you each willing to take to address the problems in your marriage? [Consider meeting with a professional, workshops, meeting with a mentor couple, praying, reading, deepening...]
10. What could you offer your spouse that he/she would find helpful?
11. What do you think your spouse would most appreciate seeing, feeling, or receiving from you?
12. What do you want to ask your spouse to consider saying or doing?

7.0 When Discussing Marriage Strengthening and Reconciliation

If the couple has passed beyond being simply troubled by issues, and they appear to be at the point of wanting to separate, the Assembly has the responsibility to help the couple attempt to reconcile before a year of waiting is set.

“The procedure, briefly, is that when a Spiritual Assembly receives an application for divorce its first duty is to try to reconcile the couple. When it determines that this is not possible, it should then set the date of the beginning of the year of waiting.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 11, 1986, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1320)

Wisdom and moderation are wise, however, as couples can become entrenched in resentment towards the Assembly and each other if the process of attempting reconciliation goes on for too long. Remember that reconciliation attempts can also be made during the year of waiting. Some key points of consideration for the Assembly are:

1. Is the couple seeing a helping professional? (It may be wise to check in with the couple after 2-3 visits with this person to help them assess effectiveness.) Is the professional committed to the institution of marriage, or is he or she encouraging divorce? If the professional is not a Bahá'í, has he or she received the document “When You Are Counseling Members of the Bahá'í Faith on Issues Related to a Troubled Marriage, Separation, Reconciliation Effort, or Divorce” (downloadable from www.bahaimarriage.net/resources_troubledmarriages.html)?

[**Note:** It is wise for the couple to screen the professional ahead of time for attitudes towards marriage and divorce and ensure that the professional has training and experience in working with marriage and couples and not just individuals. At times, therapists trained in just dealing with individuals can focus on individual happiness and not on the importance of the institution of the marriage. If an Assembly is

referring couples specifically to professionals who are Bahá'ís, it also has responsibility to ensure that the professionals have the appropriate credentials and focus.]

2. Have you identified areas where building knowledge and skills can help the couple? What educational steps are being taken?
3. Have you ensured that any issues of safety for all family members of both genders have been addressed? (Consider domestic violence, threats, incest...) Are there any legal steps required for the Assembly to take on behalf of the family or actions to recommend that the individuals or couple take? [Note: There are some National Spiritual Assemblies, such as in the United States and United Kingdom, that provide domestic violence guidelines to Local Spiritual Assemblies.] Are you setting follow-up meeting dates or communication frequency agreements with the couple rather than leaving them wondering what is happening?

8.0 Application for a Bahá'í Divorce; Year of Waiting

If a couple approaches an Assembly and requests a divorce, the Assembly will of course attempt reconciliation and assess the level of aversion between the spouses. The Assembly will also consider whether to begin the year of waiting (sometimes referred to as a “year of patience”). Many may be confused between applying for a Bahá'í divorce and the Assembly granting a year of waiting as a prerequisite for the divorce to occur. The US National Spiritual Assembly advises its Local Spiritual Assemblies this way:

When a couple or a partner of a marriage approaches an Assembly or its representative(s) with the intention of starting a year of waiting, the Bahá'í teachings on divorce should be reviewed with the party(ies) and the understanding made clear that a year of waiting is an application for Bahá'í divorce and not just a request for marital assistance. It may be pointed out that divorce is condemned and that certain conditions must exist to justify the extreme measure of dissolving the marriage. Assemblies are advised to ask any party(ies) seeking a year of waiting to agree in writing not to compel the Assembly to testify or produce records in any legal proceeding regarding the matter. (US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 12 – Divorce; Revised April 2016)

There can be many ways that individuals interpret the term “year of waiting”. Many couples who feel reconciliation is impossible think it is “waiting for divorce”. However, it is wise to share with couples that it can also be a period of time for:

- Cooling down of anger and becoming calmer
- Reducing feelings of aversion
- Becoming willing to work on the marriage
- Reconciling differences
- Rekindling of affection
- Gaining of knowledge and skills for how to have a successful marriage
- Understanding the issues and how to address them
- Strengthening of unity
- Gathering of a support system for the couple and family
- Consulting with institutions, professionals, and family members
- Re-birthing of friendship
- Realizing significant concern for any children involved if there is a divorce
- Experiencing of compassion and empathy for each other
- Deepening in the Covenant and the guidance about marriage and divorce

“During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their differences, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them.” (Universal House of Justice, dated November 3, 1982, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1304)

“It is understood that two Bahá’ís who reach the point of strain where they feel a divorce is necessary need time to cool down and reflect, which is, of course, the purpose of the year of waiting.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 3, 1981, to a National Spiritual Assembly, quoted in US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 13 – Divorce; Revised September 2011)

It is important for couples to recognize that they are responsible for their marriage and for attempting to reconcile their differences. The Assembly and counselors are part of their support team. The Assembly is responsible for helping and encouraging, but the couple cannot hold the Assembly accountable for what is their own work to do.

9.0 Separation or Year-of-Waiting Agreement

Assemblies and couples may struggle with how to make reconciliation attempts and rebuild the relationship and marriage. A limited selection of marriage education/strengthening books and practices exists to help separating couples with calming emotions and taking practical actions. This information can aid reconciliation or help the couple to carry out less destructive divorces. At this point there are no books written by Bahá’ís on this topic.

One of the key recommendations in the materials is for the couple, often with the guidance of a professional, mediator, or clergy member (an Assembly for Bahá’ís), to create a consultative agreement that structures any type of separation. If a temporary separation becomes a year of waiting, the couple would then create a new agreement. If there is significant conflict between a separating or divorcing couple, or the Assembly grants the beginning of a year of waiting, it is wise for the agreement to be in writing to minimize disunity.

Clarifications and agreements about separation could potentially address the following topic areas:

- Type of separation (such as, mental and emotional distancing; in-house with separate sleeping arrangements; separate residences; short-term; year of waiting...), living arrangements, and sharing of home furnishings
- Start date and length of separation and date for reflection and review
- Sharing and caring for children or other dependents
- How each will handle finances in light of the guidance in the Bahá’í Writings
- Keeping the management of the family going (such as, household responsibilities; personal responsibilities like medical visits; children’s school and extracurricular activities; contact with other relatives; family outings; family events; holidays...)
- Expectations of spouses in light of the guidance in the Bahá’í Writings (such as, methods and frequency of communications, personal development, constructive actions, dating each other or others, not registering on online matching sites, sexual contact with each other, ending an affair, entering of each other’s residences...)
- Meeting with a professional together or separately
- Professional assistance for any children or stepchildren
- Marriage education and skill-building initiatives

- Whether to involve legal counsel or mediation and at what stage
- Confidentiality and sharing with children, family, and friends (Encouraged guidelines: limiting explanations, discouraging gossip and backbiting, refraining from maligning the other spouse, discouraging others from taking sides)

Up until the point a year of waiting is granted, a separation into separate dwellings is not required. Couples may find that other types of separation, whether it is temporarily living apart, or simply living in separate parts of the same home, provide enough space for emotions to calm down and repair attempts to begin. Separate dwellings only become a requirement when the Assembly approves the application for divorce, and the year of waiting begins.

In considering the financial arrangements during a separation of any type, Assemblies and couples will need to keep the following guidance in mind:

“The House of Justice views it as a basic principle of Bahá’í law that the husband is responsible for the support of his wife and children as long as they are married, i.e., until the granting of a divorce. There may be particular circumstances in which the wife is the bread-winner of the family, or both husband and wife are earning income; such situations should not be ignored, or changed merely because the couple is in a year of waiting.” (Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 24, 1983, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1323)

“The only provision of Bahá’í law regarding the support of the wife is that which makes the husband responsible for her support during the year of waiting. This does not mean, however, that further support is prohibited; all such matters will require legislation in the future. At the present time it is the responsibility of the Assembly to arrange an amicable and just financial settlement between the couple, and any such arrangement must, obviously, take into consideration the financial situation of both parties and their relative responsibilities.

“While it is obvious that the Assembly should encourage the husband to honor his Bahá’í responsibilities in paying the required support money, matters of support may be covered by the civil courts when a civil divorce is applied for and, in such a case, the wife would, of course, be able to invoke whatever civil remedy is available. (Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated February 6, 1978, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1337)

You may also be in the situation of having one member of the couple willing to participate fully in educational efforts or reconciliation attempts and the other adamantly against it. You may need to assist with encouragement about dealing with tests and difficulties and remaining obedient as best as they can. Even having one person seek help can benefit the family. The Assembly may also need to reassess whether there are issues arising involving threats or abuse that are causing the resistance.

10.0 Some Possible Actions for Marriage Strengthening

10.1 Studying Bahá’í Quotations and Materials on Marriage Together

Sometimes an Assembly decides that it would be helpful for a couple to meet for deepening and perhaps studying of marriage education materials with its representatives or two strong married couples in the community. Together they can study the guidance on marriage and begin to explore new and practical ways to make their marriage work. As the study progresses, it is wise for the individuals and the couple to create development and action plans that move them forward.

A skillful question to ask at the end of each meeting is “How specifically will you work to create unity over the coming week?” After that is discussed, you can ask, “How will you serve each other and others this week?”. (This may assist them to generate positive actions and feelings.)

At the beginning of the following session, it can then be useful to ask questions such as the following ones:

- “What did you learn in the previous session?”
- “What experiences did you have with applying this material in your life?”
- “What ways did you find to serve others?”
- “What worked well?”
- “What challenges did you experience?”

Remember to be aware that some individuals may feel shy about sharing. Encourage participation, but try not to demand it. Be sure to set a date for the next session at the end of each session.

Note: Possible study materials include the “Marriage and Family Life” compilation of the Universal House of Justice, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages” compilation of the Universal House of Justice, *A Fortress for Well-Being, Mindful Marriage* (Raymond and Furugh Switzer), and materials available through www.marriagetransformation.com. Some couples may benefit from studying marriage preparation materials together as part of marriage strengthening. A book to consider that is based on the Bahá’í Writings is *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* by Susanne M. Alexander and Johanna Merritt Wu, PhD. There are also online courses for married couples available through The Wilmette Institute, an agency of the US National Spiritual Assembly. Details on courses are available at this link: <http://wilmetteinstitute.org/ourcourses/marriage/>. Compilations of quotations on relationship and marriage topics, a list of educational books, and a list of educational online videos can be requested from the person serving as lead faculty for the courses, Susanne M. Alexander, susanne@marriagetransformation.com.

10.2 Seeking Consultation and Professional Guidance

Consultation can be a gift for couples that often assists them to discover solutions to their issues. They can also consult with professionals, friends, and of course the Spiritual Assembly.

[In response to an inquiry about specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives] “...for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgment they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.” (Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, no. 2341)

“Consultation has been ordained by Bahá’u’lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured and/or their views belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse are present.” (Letter of the Universal House of Justice, January 24, 1993)

“The House of Justice advises you to continue the strenuous efforts you are making to overcome the difficulties in your marriage. It is pleased to note that you and your husband have turned to the Local Spiritual Assembly for guidance and have sought help from a Bahá’í who is a marriage counselor. Such endeavors, when combined with a strong and determined effort, improve greatly the prospects that your marriage can be maintained. However, it must also be borne in mind that the fact that Bahá’u’lláh has permitted divorce is, no doubt, an indication that in certain circumstances it is unavoidable. If your earnest efforts to maintain your marriage do not yield the desired result, you should not be distraught.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, no. 2345)

“Neither you nor your husband should hesitate to continue consulting professional marriage counselors, individually and together if possible, and also to take advantage of the supportive counseling which can come from wise and mature friends. Non-Bahá’í counseling can be useful but it is usually necessary to temper it with Bahá’í insight.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, no. 2339)

“Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict. Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives...” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, “Women”, no. 2160)

10.3 Seeking Active Solutions

There are many actions that couples can take to assist themselves during marital difficulties. These can include such actions as prayer together and with the Spiritual Assembly or its representatives; service for each other and others; and marriage counseling.

“There have been many instances in which a couple, through a consecrated and determined effort, aided by the power of prayer and the advice of experts, succeeded in overcoming seemingly insuperable obstacles to their reconciliation and in reconstructing a strong foundation for their marriage. There are also innumerable examples of individuals who have been able to effect drastic and enduring changes in their behavior, through drawing on the spiritual powers available by the bounty of God. As you know, in the Bahá’í Faith, divorce is discouraged and should be resorted to only when a prolonged effort to effect reconciliation has been unsuccessful.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, p. 459)

“Marriage problems are often very involved and subtle, and we Bahá’ís, being enlightened and progressive people, should not hesitate, if it seems necessary or desirable, to turn to science for help in such matters. If you and your husband talked over your problems—together or separately—with a good physician you might find that you can cure your own husband, or at least try to do so. It is a great pity that two believers, united in this glorious Cause, and blessed with a family, should not be able to live together really harmoniously, and he feels you should take constructive action and not allow the situation to get worse. When the shadow of separation hangs over a husband and wife they should leave no stone unturned in their effort to avert its becoming a reality. He urges both to devote more of your time to teaching the Cause and to pray together that Bahá’u’lláh may give you a real and lasting love for each other.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, no. 2329)

“Shoghi Effendi described ‘service’ as ‘the true basis’ of family unity and called upon the family members to ‘arise with renewed effort to teach the Faith’. The Guardian’s secretary writing on his

behalf to one couple who had ‘jointly undertaken a most successful teaching tour’ stated: ‘This bond of common service to the Cause which is so closely uniting your hearts...has proved such an effective solution of your personal problems.’ And the hope was expressed that this ‘bond’ would be ‘further cemented by the passing of years’ and through the couple’s ‘increased and joint participation in the teaching work.’” (Universal House of Justice, introduction to *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, section 3.8)

“...[T]he unity of your family should take priority over any other consideration. Bahá’u’lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, we must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it. For example, service to the Cause should not produce neglect of the family. It is important for you to arrange your time so that your family life is harmonious and your household receives the attention it requires.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. 2*, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, no. 2336)

10.4 Some Activities to Consider for the Couple

The activities below may be beneficial for the Assembly, its assigned team members, or a married mentor couple to do with the individuals or spouses. Many other activities are also possible when done along with the assistance of a professional.

1. Goal: To create positive connection through memories.

A sign of a couple in deep trouble is one where they struggle to recall positive memories. If the Assembly is able to help them remember some positive memories, this can begin to provide some foundation for harmony or reconciliation. Areas of exploration to consider are how they felt when they first met each other, early dating experiences, the engagement period, wedding and honeymoon experiences, activities early on in the marriage, positive dates or vacations, times of working through a problem together, facing a test in unity, successful consultations, the birth of a child....

Goal: To picture the reality of the consequences of their choices.

Instructions for the individual spouses:

Visualize your family in 3 years in these different situations:

- a. Having divorced
- b. Having continued the way the situation is now (chronic conflict)
- c. Having being successful in overcoming the current crisis

Assembly: Discuss with the individuals or couple how they feel about each alternative and what actions might lead them to each of the three potential outcomes.

11.0 Additional Resources

As mentioned, the guidance from your National Spiritual Assembly, the Universal House of Justice, and the Bahá’í Writings are primary resources for you.

In addition, the Assembly can draw on the fruits of over 40 years of extensive marriage research that has been occurring. There are many marriage educational materials now available for couples to use and workshops to attend. It is practicing the harmony of science and religion to utilize or excerpt from the

marriage education materials that are in alignment with the Bahá'í Writings (Note: A common challenge in relationship books is the inclusion of cohabiting or homosexual couples in the stories, but the principles and information in the resources are generally valid for heterosexual married couples.) Most marriage issues can be addressed in some way for positive progress.

Some Bahá'í-inspired resources can be found at the websites listed below and through links placed on them.

- www.bahaimarriage.net (Includes 19-Day Feast readings on marriage, devotional handouts, and other resources); www.bahaimarriage.net/resources_troubledmarriages.html
- www.marriagetransformation.com (books and materials that include the Bahá'í Writings and married education sources)

In addition, research-based information can be obtained at many websites, such as the following:

- www.healthymarriageinfo.org
- www.smartmarriages.com
- www.gottman.com
- <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wordpress/>
- <https://www.prepinc.com>