Office of Communications

Guidelines for Official Local Bahá'í Websites

General Considerations

Many Local Spiritual Assemblies have expressed interest in developing a website or online presence for their local communities. The National Center has been collecting related experiences over the past decade, and offers the following reflections to local communities who are considering such a course.

An important early consideration is what purpose a website will serve for the community. The following are several of the purposes commonly envisioned for local websites, along with our comments:

- **Acquaint the public with the character and activity of the local Bahá'í community:** This is usually the primary purpose for a local website. Stories and images that portray the distinctive character of Bahá'í community life at a local level may help to attract new people to participate; however, this has rarely happened unless people have already encountered the Faith in another context and are searching online for the local Bahá'í community.
- **Raise the status of the Faith in the eyes of other local organizations:** In some cases, local communities have found it helpful to have an official online presence when dealing with other community organizations.
- **Provide a means to contact the local Bahá'í community:** It is natural to include a contact page on a local website, as long as the contacts that come through are dealt with efficiently. However, the National Center maintains a site at find.bahai.us with a contact page for every community, so there is no need to create a website solely for this purpose.
- Provide **a calendar of local events for the public**: This is a reasonable idea, but communities should be aware that maintaining a calendar requires a lot of work on a regular basis, and people rarely drop in at events without first contacting the community. For many communities it may be more efficient to provide a list of ongoing activities and provide contact information. It is also important to be aware of privacy concerns. Many Bahá'í activities are held in private homes, and hosts may not be comfortable having their name and address published on the Internet. In such cases, the neighborhood or a nearby intersection can be published, along with a phone number or email address to obtain details.
- Provide general information about Bahá'í beliefs and teachings for the public: This purpose is well served by official websites like bahai.org, bahaullah.org and bahai.us. Instead of developing too much content in this area, local communities are encouraged in most circumstances to **present the basics of the Faith and link to sites at higher levels for fuller explanations.**
- Disseminate information about local Bahá'í activities for the local Bahá'ís: To date this has proved ineffective, because most local Bahá'ís do not visit the local website. Most communities may be better served by **continuing to use other channels for internal communications,** such as in-person conversation, meetings, newsletters, email, telephone, Facebook groups, etc.

Human Resource Requirements

The most important human resource to identify when creating a website is usually the editor or editors. Editors should be skilled and/or talented at writing good content for the public, comfortable writing about the current Plans of the Faith, and diligent enough to spend at least a few hours every month working on

the project. Technical skills are much less important, and should not necessarily be considered when choosing editors; rather, the choice of technology should be made for the comfort of the editors. There are many affordable companies and services that can host and maintain your technology, but none that can write content for your community.

Creating and maintaining content for a website is a very challenging task, the difficulty of which is often underestimated. Assemblies might be well served to commission some initial content before committing resources to the technical development of a website.

Sponsorship

Local Bahá'í community websites are generally sponsored by a Local Spiritual Assembly, but in some cases may also be sponsored by registered groups or cluster agencies. For a website serving a metro area or more than one locality, an inter-community committee may be appointed with one Assembly serving as the site's sponsor.

The sponsoring institution is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the site, and it is important to periodically review the site's content as well as the policies and procedures for its governance. Here are a few recommended tasks that the sponsoring institution should undertake on a regular schedule:

- Perform a content audit by visiting every page (or a representative sample for a large site) to ensure that all content is appropriate, accurate, and timely, and that no areas of the site appear outdated or unmaintained.
- Review data on visitors to the website, e.g. from Google Analytics.
- Ensure that any domain names have up-to-date registration and billing information.
- Review various aspects of your governance of the website, including:
    - The rationale for having a website
    - How well the current site aligns with the community's needs, opportunities, goals and capacity to maintain the site without drawing too many resources away from more important lines of action
    - The delegation of content creation, editing, and administrative tasks
    - The means for sharing information and statistics about the site with the community
    - The schedule for each of the above tasks

Note that not all of these tasks must follow the same schedule. For example, an Assembly may decide to review data on visitors every month, perform a content audit every six months, and review the policies for governance once a year.

Technology and Hosting

The choice of technology used for a local web presence should be made by the sponsoring institution, and in most cases, the choice should be such that the content editors will feel comfortable working on the site without technical assistance.

There are many companies that offer easy-to-use web hosting platforms, such as Weebly, Wix, Squarespace, WordPress, etc. A public page on Facebook may be a viable web presence for some communities.

Whatever technology is chosen, the sponsoring Assembly should take steps to ensure that it can always maintain control of the site, regardless of changes in its own membership or the people assigned to work on the website. At the most basic level, this means maintaining control of the domain name.

Domain Names

Domain names registered to local communities should generally include the name of the community or geographical area and the word "bahai", e.g. "wilmettebahais.org," "gorgebahais.org," "sfbahai.org," or "bahailv.org". Local communities should avoid using domain names that are so general that they may cause confusion in the minds of the public.

Domain names may be purchased through a domain name registrar, such as GoDaddy, NameCheap or Gandi. The domain should be registered to the Assembly, at its official email address, not just to one of its members or a member of the community. Many domain registrars allow the creation of multiple accounts to administer a website, so for example the Assembly treasurer might have an account with the domain registrar as the billing contact. The Assembly must ensure that the domain registration is kept up to date because if allowed to lapse, the name could be acquired and used inappropriately by others.

Increasing the Number of Visitors

It doesn't accomplish anything to have a website that nobody visits, and the more visitors you get, the more value you can achieve from having a website. How to get more people to visit a website is a vast and complex subject far beyond the scope of this document, but we must make a few comments.

First, it is good to obtain **links to your site** from other websites. By far the easiest way to do this is for the Assembly's secretary to add the website's information on the community's profile on www.bahai.us. This will let the National Center know about the site, and we will put a link up on the community's page at find.bahai.us. In most cases this step alone will cause the site to show up when someone searches for "bahai" in your area, though it can take some time. If there are local directories of churches or spiritual organizations, inter-faith groups or the like, they may also be willing to link to your website.

Secondly, if you have timely content like local news stories or event postings, you may encourage your community members to **share your site's content on social media** such as facebook or twitter.

Finally, and most importantly, the site should have **quality content that your visitors actually enjoy.** It does very little good to get people to your site if they don't like what they see there, and if they leave immediately then it can actually lower your site's ranking for future visitors.

It is recommended to use free tools like Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools to track information related to how many people visit the site and what they do while they are on it.

Appearance and Graphics

Strive for an attractive and dignified look and feel, with clear, accurate text and appealing images or graphics. Use simple menu structures.

Include photos of the local Bahá'í center, if there is one, or photos of diverse people or faces, preferably of local Bahá'ís. Obtain parent's permission before using photos of children. The photo policy for print

and online publication, which includes a sample photo release form, is available from the Office of Communications.

It is important that the site's content should feel familiar to local people. For example, most communities should not use photos of the Bahá'í World Center or Bahá'í House of Worship as the top image on the front page or in the banner image, as these may confuse visitors who are unfamiliar with the Faith. An exception would be communities near Wilmette Illinois, where the House of Worship is a well-known local landmark. Such photos may of course be included on interior pages of any site, along with appropriate explanation of their significance.

Branding and Copyright

The name of the Bahá'í community should be clearly displayed on the home page, as "Bahá'ís of XYZ" or "Bahá'í Community of XYZ" or "The Bahá'í Faith in XYZ."

The National Spiritual Assembly has obtained federal trademark protection for a particular version of the nine-pointed star. This symbol, together with the words "Bahá'í Faith" in a distinctive font, form a trademark graphic that can be used to identify official Bahá'í websites or publications. We encourage the use of this trademark image as a footer or sidebar element, linked to bahai.us.



The trademark image should **not** be used as a logo in the header of local Bahá'í websites or as decorative "clip-art". Other forms of the nine-pointed star may be used as a logo if desired.

Place a copyright mark at the bottom of each page of the website, listing the current year. Example: "©2016 The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of City, State. All Rights Reserved."

Content

Visitors to a local Bahá'í website are typically seeking information on how to contact Bahá'ís and participate in local activities or events. Make it easy for them to find this information. Focus on the local Bahá'í community and core activities available to the public.

Consider including the following on local Bahá'í community websites:

- "About the Bahá'ís of XYZ": brief history of the Faith in your area and description of significant ongoing activities or events
- A general description of each of the community's core activities, presenting their purpose and significance for the local public.
- A listing of regular events that are open to the public, along with contact information for those who wish to attend. If a community has the capacity to keep a calendar up-to-date – which requires regular updates at least once every month – then the events may be presented in that way.
- Location and a map of the local Bahá'í Center and/or Bookstore, when applicable.
- A contact page or block. Be sure contact information is accurate and that inquiries are handled *promptly* by a responsible person. If possible, offer street address, phone and email contact.
- Videos that explain some Bahá'í teachings or show some aspect of community life. It is most effective to have locally created video, provided a good quality can be obtained, but videos from

the National Center's vimeo or youtube feeds have also proved extremely valuable when embedded on local sites.
- A few selected passages from the Bahá'í writings that are suited to the character of the society in the local area.
- News articles written by local Bahá'ís about the life of the community, if there is capacity to maintain a regular schedule of updates.
- Biographical articles that highlight the personal experience and belief of diverse members of the local Bahá'í community.
- For cluster or metropolitan area sites, a page for each locality served by the site.
- Content in Spanish or other languages used by a significant population of the public in the area.

Avoid the following on local Bahá'í community websites:

- Lengthy explanations of the Faith's history and teachings. Two or three paragraphs are usually sufficient, with links to www.bahai.org and www.bahai.us for more.
- Information intended specifically for the Bahá'í community, such as letters from Bahá'í institutions, or information about activities that are restricted to Bahá'ís, e.g. fund-raising events, Feast dates or Local Spiritual Assembly meetings. Such internal communications are usually better carried out through other channels.
- Use of Bahá'í jargon to describe things that are otherwise familiar to the public, e.g. referring to the local area as a "cluster" instead of whatever local people actually call it.
- Home addresses, personal phone numbers or personal email addresses, unless approved by the individual.
- Inaccurate information, broken links, typos, grammatical errors, confusing menu structure, cluttered layout, and unappealing graphics or color combinations.

Links

Official sites that would be good to link to include:

- bahai.org: The website of the worldwide Bahá'í community.
- bahaullah.org: A photographic narrative of the life of Baha'u'llah.
- bahai.us: The official website of the Bahá'ís of the United States.
- news.bahai.org: A site with international Bahá'í news.
- reference.bahai.org: Sacred texts of the Faith.
- media.bahai.org: A photo library with images related to the Faith around the world.

Local community sites can also provide links to individual sites, blogs, and social media channels that provide a window into Bahá'í life.