

The Increase in the Number of Local Spiritual Assemblies during the Ten Year Crusade
in the continental United States

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I dedicate this article to my father, James P. P. Kolins (Nov. 19, 1942 - Dec. 27, 2024),
who passed during its writing.

Author Note

The author thanks the Spiritual Assembly of Durham, North Carolina, for underscoring
this effort which had received barely any coverage in academic review. The work resulted in a
detailed Bahaipedia article which is here edited and abbreviated.

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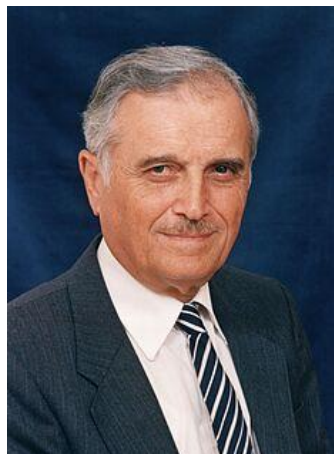
Abstract

The Ten Year Crusade raised the number of local spiritual assemblies in the continental United States from around 170 to about 330, exceeding the goal of 300. The goal was announced during Rúhíyyih Khánúm's talk at the National Convention of 1953. A leading theme of her talk was 'dispersing' Bahá'ís from communities of over 15 adults. Several hundred people eventually homefront-pioneered to goal cities and other places of their choosing. Overall, the number of new assemblies in localities that were not official goals led the growth. Goal cities the National Spiritual Assembly assigned significantly contributed to the increase and were the only new assemblies that formed in some areas. In some cases, assemblies were lost when pioneers moved away despite the emphasis on preserving assembly status, but many more assemblies were gained than were lost during the Crusade, even though the American community also sent several hundred pioneers overseas to international goals. In addition to the number of assemblies, the number of localities with groups of Bahá'ís and isolated Bahá'ís also increased.

Keywords: Homefront pioneering, national plans, Ten Year Crusade, Area Teaching Committee

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In 2004, Ali Nakhjavani gave “the 22nd Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture” which was



published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.¹ His topic was the Ten Year Crusade. He said: “In his summing up of the major objectives of the Crusade, as presented by him on the international level, Shoghi Effendi did not include specific goals which were supplementary and suited to the specific circumstances of each of the twelve bases of operation. We see, for example, among the subordinate objectives for the United States the following goals.... In this message he [Shoghi

Effendi] also refers to the American Bahá'í community as ‘the standard bearers of the all-conquering army of the Lord of Hosts’ who as befits their rank have been given the ‘lion’s share in the prosecution of a global crusade designed to diffuse the light of God’s revelation over the surface of the entire planet.’” Nakhjavani does mention one domestic goal: “the raising of the total number of Local Spiritual Assemblies to three hundred.” Arthur Hampson’s otherwise extensive 1980 geography Ph.D. on the growth of the Bahá'í Faith almost completely skips the continental expansion of the American community during that Plan. Instead, like virtually all other coverage of the Ten Year Crusade, it reviews the international developments.² This paper seeks to fill the gap in the coverage left by previous studies.

¹ Ali Nakhjavani (2004). “[The 22nd Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture: The Ten Year Crusade](#)” (PDF), *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, **14** (3/4): 21–22. ISSN 0838-0430. OCLC 7757100860. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

² Hampson, Arthur (May 1980). [The growth and spread of the Bahá'í Faith](#) (PhD). Department of Geography, University of Hawaii. OCLC 652914306. UMI 8022655. Retrieved Feb 10, 2020.

1953

The Bahá'í directory for 1953-1954 listed 167 Local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs) in the continental area of the country (171 minus LSAs in Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico = 166 then add Washington, D.C., which wasn't a state, in the listing of states with assemblies).³ Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánum delivered a message to the American Bahá'í community at the 1953 National Convention that mentioned the goal of increasing the number of LSAs to 300.⁴ She also mentioned the theme of Bahá'ís dispersing from communities with more than 15 members, and in the coming months and years this would be a refrain often heard by pilgrims.⁵ In April 1954, excerpts of letters from pioneers on their progress and aims were published in *Bahá'í News*, which include a mention of the idea of “dispersing” from communities larger than 15 adults.⁶ By June 1954, the National Spiritual Assembly specifically emphasized that Bahá'ís should pioneer from communities of 15 or more adults to places where new LSAs could form.⁷



An early priority of the National Spiritual Assembly was setting up a system to pursue domestic goals. At the start of the plan in April 1953, some Area Teaching Committees (which typically covered several states) already existed; some, for example, were listed in the January 1953 issue of *Bahá'í News*.⁸ In July the National Spiritual Assembly abolished Regional

³ [“Bahá'í Directory: Local Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies, groups, and localities where isolated Bahá'ís reside in the United States of America 1953-1954,”](#) *Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record*, Vol. 12. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981 [1956], pp. 721–727.

⁴ Khánum, Rúhíyyih (May 1953). [“The Guardian’s message to the forty-fifth Annual Bahá'í Convention”](#) (PDF), *Bahá'í News*, No. 267, pp. 1–2. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

⁵ National Spiritual Assembly (Aug 1954), [“The question of dispersal,”](#) *Bahá'í News*, No. 282, pp. 2–4. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 14, 2022.

⁶ [“Pioneer letters from the Home Front,”](#) *Bahá'í News*, No. 278, Apr 1954, p. 9. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

⁷ [“The Home Front teaching plan,”](#) *Bahá'í News*, No. 280, Jun 1954, p. 6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 14, 2022.

⁸ [“National News: Faith in action: And Greenville....”](#) *Bahá'í News*, No. 263, Jan 1953, pp. 9–10. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

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Teaching Committees (which covered very large areas of the country) in favor of a refocused system of twelve Area Teaching Committees.⁹ Their territories were adjusted in 1957.¹⁰ By September 1953, some were publishing their own newsletters and holding local conferences for the Bahá'ís.¹¹ By June 1954, the Area Teaching Committees were tasked to focus on the community in general, active groups of individuals, and assemblies¹² (a kind of precursor of what the Universal House of Justice called the “three protagonists”). By July, some goal cities had reached assembly status.¹³

The first national list of goal cities was published in the October 1953 *Bahá'í News*.¹⁴ They were chosen by the National Assembly, which requested the National Teaching Committee to focus on a subset of virgin territories (areas with no Bahá'ís) and “to launch an intensive campaign to settle one Bahá'í in each of these...” They called the effort “equivalent to the settlement of pioneers through the world now so vigorously proceeding.” It added, “The National Teaching Committee is working out this campaign through the Area Teaching Committees and the local Assemblies.”¹⁵ The fact that the Area Teaching Committees were designated central to the achievement of the overall goal was repeated again in June 1955.¹⁶

⁹ National Spiritual Assembly (Jul 1953). “New Teaching Structure in the United States,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 269, p. 6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

¹⁰ Voight, Edna, for the American National Teaching Committee (Jan 1957), “To act... promptly and decisively.” *Bahá'í News*, No. 311, pp. 8–9. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

¹¹ “Area Teaching Committees,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 271, Sep 1953, pp. 14–5. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

¹² “The Home Front teaching plan,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 280, Jun 1954, p. 6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 14, 2022.

¹³ Herbert, Jesma (Jul 1954), “American National Teaching Committee: World Crusade within the United States,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 281, pp. 11–2. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 23, 2022.

¹⁴ “Goal cities in the United States for the World Crusade at Home,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 272, October 1953, pp. 6–7. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

¹⁵ “Goal cities in the United States for the World Crusade at Home,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 272, October 1953, pp. 6–7. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

¹⁶ “A national responsibility,” *Bahá'í News*, No. 292, Jun 1955, p. 11. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 18, 2022.

Unfolding progress

The priorities for raising Spiritual Assemblies in the goal cities were explained in *Bahá'í News* in March 1955.¹⁷ The National Assembly delineated these principles:

- If a state had only one assembly, at least one other town was on the list, with priority given to preserving the first assembly.
- Any goal with no Bahá'í presence was called a 'virgin goal'; the others were called a 'consolidation goal'. Forty virgin goals were listed.
- If a state had a cluster of assemblies in one area, goal cities were picked in outlying areas of that cluster of communities to "reduce the immense distances between many Bahá'í communities."
- 133 goal cities were listed where groups of at least 4 Bahá'ís already lived. Some goals were established 'within easy travel' of existing communities so that people who could afford to move only a short distance could do so.
- If a community that was not a goal area were to rise to assembly status, it would be counted towards the total.
- Individuals were free to pioneer anywhere but should not expect other pioneers to be encouraged to join them unless they settled in a goal city.

By March 1954, there were several developments. One hundred and eight cities were listed as already opened, leaving 63 virgin cities.¹⁸ A list of 43 people who had moved to 27 of those virgin goal areas was published, an average of 1-2 people per virgin city.¹⁹

¹⁷ "[What are goal cities and why?](#)" *Bahá'í News*, No. 289, Mar 1955, pp. 3–4. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 18, 2022.

¹⁸ [American National Teaching Committee](#) (Mar 1954), *Bahá'í News*, No. 277, p. 11. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Aug 29, 2024.

¹⁹ "[National News: American National Teaching Committee](#)," *Bahá'í News*, No. 278, Apr 1954, p. 8. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

Struggle and regionalization

The loss of spiritual assemblies was underscored in September 1954 when a short list of assemblies that had been first formed during the First Seven Year Plan (1937-44) and that now had lost Assembly status was published in *Bahá'í News*. They were:²⁰

- Brattleboro, Vermont
- North Augusta, South Carolina
- Greensboro, North Carolina.

The September 1954 issue also included a list of the Teaching Committee jurisdictions and members.²¹ In addition to the Area Teaching Committees, there were now two teaching committees for special groups that needed attention: American Indians and African Americans. Area Teaching Committee conferences had been held in August and September, and more were announced for October and November, to be followed by state-wide conventions to elect delegates to the National Convention and then winter-spring conferences before that convention.²² Although not technically part of the explicit effort, regional youth ‘workshop’ conferences were set across 20 states in October.²³

Bahá'í News began to offer summaries of Area Committee bulletins in May 1955²⁴ instead of complete articles and as a result, there is less detail available for review, as the area bulletins are not available online. For example, the Gulf States had the *Gulfstates Crewsaider*,

²⁰ Jesma Herbert (Sep. 1954), “[An Appeal from the American National Teaching Committee](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 283, p. 10. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

²¹ “[Bahá'í Directory United States 1954-1955; National Teaching \(American National Teaching Committees, Area Teaching Committees\)](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 283, Sep 1954, p. 3. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 14, 2022.

²² “[Area conferences](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 284, Oct 1954, pp. 12–3. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021; “[Area Conferences](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 286, Dec 1954, p. 5. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

²³ “[National Youth Committee](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 285, Nov 1954, p. 6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

²⁴ “[Area News Bulletins](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 291, May 1955, p. 14. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021.

and the Southwestern States published the *Area Bulletin*. Consultation at the National Convention was summarized in the *Bahá'í News* in June 1955.²⁵ The first report, by Jesma Herbert of the National Teaching Committee, stated that 42 of the 76 virgin goal cities had been settled by at least one Bahá'í. About 150 adults and 24 youth had joined the religion, compared to 90 adults and 24 youth the previous year. But there was a sense that “momentum has not picked up,” so Herbert reminded the audience that Bahá'ís in larger communities should disperse.

Second, Horace Holley, secretary of the National Assembly, supplemented Herbert's talk with his own statistical review. The number of incorporated assemblies had increased to 81, with a goal of 100 by the plan's end (there were 22 at the start of the plan in 1953). The previous year, April 1954, there were 174 existing assemblies, but only 162 existed as of April 1955. Seven had lost assembly status, five were in question, eight were new, and nine were reestablished old ones.



Charles Wolcott, chair of the National Teaching Committee, raised the question of what was keeping people in larger communities from dispersing. He noted that if a local community came up with its own teaching plan, then invitations to firesides and events of personal interest should be followed by systematic study, and then by the establishment of groups of active individuals until they rise to the number enough to elect an assembly. The work then continues with group and individual study.

²⁵ “[On the Home Front](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 292, Jun 1955, pp. 14–6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 18, 2022.

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Charlotte Linfoot, assistant secretary of the national assembly, then added that while the American Bahá'í community had 162 assemblies, 184 different assemblies had existed at one time or another over the last five years.

For the next two years—through 1957—*Bahá'í News* mainly reported about various teaching and youth conferences sponsored by Area Teaching Committees. Some of the conferences became annual events and were re-termed Bahá'í Summer Schools.



By April 1958, there was a call for increased homefront pioneering. Some 176 pioneers had gone out in the last half of 1957, but 164 pioneers had returned from their places during the same time. It was again pointed out that “the Bahá'í communities having 15 or more members are still the main reservoir” for pioneers.²⁶ After consulting with Hands of the Cause, the National Assembly announced the holding of 38 conferences over the winter of 1958-1959, to which a Hand, an Auxiliary Board member, and/or a member of the National Assembly would speak.²⁷ It was the third opportunity to “produce a maximum response” for pioneers to multiply the number of Assemblies, but it also was planned “for individual Bahá'ís to consult on the new and unprecedented situation created by the passing of the beloved Guardian.” The first conference cities listed were in the Northwest and nearby Rocky Mountain regions: Seattle and Spokane in Washington; Helena, Montana; and Boise, Idaho. Florence Mayberry would attend all of those. In addition, the Portland, Oregon, conference would be attended by Arthur Dahl Sr.

²⁶ “[US National Assembly survey urges increased response to Guardian's last appear for resurgence of pioneer spirit; Homefront gains disappointing](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 326, Apr 1958, p. 6. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 23, 2022.

²⁷ “[NSA calls 38 conferences throughout nation in February](#),” *Bahá'í News*, No. 324, Feb 1948. p. 3. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Jan 23, 2022.

The 1959-1960 Annual Report of the National Spiritual Assembly is online and includes details on the Area Teaching Committees and their accomplishments.²⁸ 1959 also saw the first known public event during the Plan for African Americans in the Seattle region.²⁹ In December 1960, an end-of-the-year summary was published in several public newspapers in various places saying the religion was just 71 short of its goal of 300 Spiritual Assemblies.³⁰

In January 1962, an article was published with a list of ‘preferred goals’. It cautioned people who wanted to homefront pioneer that they should work with the area teaching committees to ensure coordination of arriving pioneers and the maintenance of existing assemblies (16 known assemblies were lacking enough members to re-elect at the time). It specifically listed some of the larger communities from which people could move.³¹ In a special insert for the June 1962 *Bahá’í News*, the National Assembly announced 302 assemblies had been reported at the national convention and asked for at least eight more to be formed by September 1 for a total of 310. The Assembly also issued an updated ‘preferred’ list of goal cities.³²

Finale

In the 1962-1963 Bahá’í directory for the United States continental area, published in the *Bahá’í World* volume 13, there were 331 Spiritual Assemblies, 649 locations with groups of 2-8

²⁸ “[Bahá’í Annual Reports 1959-1960](#),” Via Bahai.works. Wilmette, Illinois: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States. 1960. Retrieved Feb 8, 2022.

²⁹ “[America’s Spiritual Mission is theme of Seattle’s Negro History Week program](#),” *US Supplement to the Bahá’í News*, No. 15, May 1959, p. 2. Retrieved Jan 18, 2022.

³⁰ “At state convention of Bahá’ís,” *The Daily News Leader*, Staunton, Virginia, 5 Dec 1960. p. 2; “Head of Bahá’í college bureau visits Oswego,” *Oswego Palladium-Times*, Oswego, New York, 5 Dec 1960, p. 4; “Kelsey elected Bahá’í delegate,” *The Record*, Hackensack, New Jersey, 7 Dec 1960, p. 12; “Eugene Bahá’ís attend convention,” *The Eugene Guard*, Eugene, Oregon, 10 Dec 1960, p. 2; “Bahá’í national convention delegates elect in S. A.,” *Express and News*, San Antonio, Texas, 10 Dec 1960, p. 24; “Delegates for Bahá’ís Nat’l Convention chosen,” *The News-Times Webster*, Groves, Missouri, 15 Dec 1960, p. 1. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

³¹ “[Home Front Pioneering - 1962 - Where are you going?](#)” *US Supplement to Bahá’í News*, No. 47, Jan. 1962, pp. 3-4. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

³² “[The Year of the Ten Thousand: Raise number of local assemblies](#),” *Bahá’í News*, No. 375, Jun 1965, p. (insert). ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Feb 9, 2022.

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Bahá'ís, and 676 locations with isolated Bahá'ís.³³ All three represented an increase in numbers. A review of 1953-54 goal cities, updates to the goals, and the list of cities with assemblies recognized in 1963, has been posted to Bahaipedia.³⁴ About 143 communities maintained their assembly status throughout the Plan. A similar number achieved assembly status despite not having been a goal community. Some 24 communities that had assemblies were lost by the end of the plan, despite active efforts to restore them.³⁵ Sixty-five of the goal communities achieved assembly status, but twice that number (about 130) of goal communities did not achieve assembly status. Overall, the goal to reach 300 assemblies in the continental US was achieved primarily because of communities that achieved assembly status without being chosen as a goal. In addition, most of the communities that had already achieved assembly status were preserved, and the number of older assemblies that were lost was fewer than the goal communities that achieved assembly status.

³³ [Bahá'í Directory 1962-1963; Directory of localities where Bahá'ís reside under the jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States of America](#), *Bahá'í World: An International Record*, Vol. 13. Haifa, Israel: Universal House of Justice. 1980 [1970], pp. 1036–1059. ISBN 9780853980995. OCLC 933759422.

³⁴ [Tables of Local Spiritual Assemblies by Area Teaching Committee regions as assigned at the end of the Ten Year Crusade inside the continental United States](#), Bahaipedia.org, accessed Aug 30, 2024.

³⁵ * Jesma Herbert (Sep 1954), [An Appeal from the American National Teaching Committee](#), *Bahá'í News*, No. 283, p. 10. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Dec 26, 2021

* [The World Crusade within the United States: Assemblies to be restored](#), *Bahá'í News*, No. 293, Jul. 1955, p. 5. ISSN 0195-9212. OCLC 3665115. Retrieved Feb 6, 2022.