# WORLD RELIGIONS ENGAGE CRITICAL GLOBAL ISSUES

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## The Challenge

In July 2004, at the Benedictine monastery set atop the pink, jagged mountains in Montserrat, Spain, 350 delegates to the Assembly of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions gathered for what would be an experiment in global change. They came from the great diversity of the world's cultures and religions—Sikhs, Muslims, aboriginals, Hindus, Jews, pagans, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, agnostics, and more—young people from many continents, television and newspaper reporters, documentary film makers, activists, leaders of major businesses and NGOs, and citizens from many countries. They came knowing that this meeting would break from conventional proclamations, panel discussions, and theological debates of past Parliaments in order to seriously explore four critical global issues: (1) increasing access to safe and clean water, (1) eliminating the crushing burden of external debt on the poorest nations, (2) supporting refugees worldwide, and (3) overcoming religiously motivated violence. In this exploration, they expected to learn deeply and to be moved to take simple and committed action with their own communities to benefit people suffering the burdens brought by these issues. We came to help them change the world one person at a time.

**Background**

The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (hereafter "the Council") works with religious and spiritual communities, as well as government and nongovernment organizations, to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. The Council expresses its mission through several initiatives, including the Parliament and the Assembly held in conjunction with the Parliament. The Parliament, convened every five years since 1993, draws together thousands of people of faith, spirit, and goodwill to encounter the vast and rich diversity of the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

The Council did not want this meeting to focus on building consensus or joint action, but rather wanted to inspire individuals to make commitments to engage their home communities to respond to these crises. Although the commitments desired were individual, we were to build a "community container" in which connection to self, to others, to faith and values, to the issue, and to their local community could occur. The dilemma was how to create this container for people who are often at odds with one another, are used to having a platform to express their "worldview," and who, more often than not, come together to make declarations about what *others* can do for the betterment of the world rather than to develop and articulate what they will commit to do as individuals.

The Council wanted the Assembly to:

- Engage key representatives of all faith, and spiritual traditions and powerful institutions in issues of critical importance to people around the world.

- Include in each conversation people affected by the issues, youth, and subject matter experts, as well as representatives of various traditions.
- Inspire committed action leading to change at the local level.
- Introduce participants to a practical, repeatable process that could be easily transported and applied in communities back home-in effect, to offer a way to "snowball" the impact.

We decided to develop a process that, at the core, would have participants examine the issues in their own hearts and in the wisdom of their own tradition. Here is the situation we faced:

- We needed translation for many languages; which ones were unknown to us.
- We needed simple processes acceptable to many cultures for people to do their work together.
- The differences between people in the room had, in the past, been a barrier to candid and honest conversation. We needed to create and hold a space where people could be genuine, yet express differences and conflict in a way that was not debilitating.
- A number of people in the room would not be used to talking as an equal in a group that included pre-eminent leaders, Nobel laureates, global experts associated with the issues, young people, and citizens from around the world.

- Some of the participants, by virtue of their position, would be more comfortable “teaching” others rather than reflecting on questions and speaking from a personally vulnerable place.
- There was a history at the assembly of representatives from disenfranchised groups demanding time to air very real grievances and redress past injustices.
- Some individuals would not be used to making commitments for themselves.

We started with a belief that we could be successful if we could do the following:

- Get people connected across cultures, religious and spiritual traditions, generations, roles, and status.
- Make everyone feel welcomed, part of the community, and able to give voice to whatever they wished to share that was related to the task at hand.
- Put a human face on each issue, that is, focus on the human toll these issues have taken on people’s lives through the voices of those affected before examining the issues intellectually.
- Give people time to explore how their own and others’ traditions compel them to care about the issues and those they affect.
- Enable people to discover the strategies for social change embedded in the teachings of their own and others’ traditions.

- Give people enough time and support to figure out a simple and profound act they could take with their own community to ameliorate the suffering of those affected by an issue.
- Keep at bay “external forces” that could easily detract from the work.

**Methodology**

To meet these challenges, we developed a methodology that drew on our experiences with inter-faith dialogue and well-tested large group meeting processes, primarily from Future Search and Appreciative Inquiry but with some important modifications. First, our outcome was not to find common ground; we were seeking individual commitment leading to collective local action. Second, while we used the Future Search condition for success-“Global context, local action”-we also believed that a scan against internal values and beliefs was equally important and would lead to the outcome we were seeking.

Finally, we hotly debated whether to have the groups manage their own conversations or to use small group facilitators to assist the group’s dialogue. Based on feedback from previous Assembly meetings, we decided to use experienced facilitators for all small group conversations.

After many iterations and testing, we designed a question-based methodology. We felt that inquiry would offer the simplicity we desired and be familiar to most people attending the Assembly, as it is fundamental to all faith and spiritual traditions. Questions could be used to invite stories about the human side of the issues and about the strengths and resources in religious and

spiritual traditions. In addition, questions would provide an easy-to-use framework that would be less dependent on experienced facilitators, supporting the goal of portability.

The questions were built around three core conversations (see Table 6.2), each conversation building on what went before. They were designed to focus on building relationships between and among people before exploring the reality of the issue and the possibilities inherent in the religious and spiritual traditions. We found, through a series of pre-Parliament meetings convened to test the methodology, that giving a lot of information up-front about the causes and complexity of an issue overwhelmed people with the enormity of the difficulties, decreased energy, and extinguished hope. Connecting people first—presenting each issue on a human scale through a personal story—and then asking each person to speak about his or her own connection with the issue, built associations based on caring and reduced the sense of powerlessness in the face of the enormity of the issues. This slow unfolding of issues helped to extend each person's understanding of why acting is essential and enabled people to see how even the simplest action, such as praying for refugees in specific camps, could be a profound act.

The pre-Parliament meetings also gave us the opportunity to see how generating hopefulness for the future could be built by offering brief presentations from experts on the complexity of the issues, followed by discussions on the barriers to making progress and stories of success in overcoming barriers to

action. The stories of success seeded fresh ideas for action that individuals could take to make a difference.

## The Assembly

When registrants entered the meeting hall, they found chairs set in forty-five circles, nine to a circle. As people arrived, they were greeted by facilitators and escorted to their seats—a strategy in hospitality. The room quickly became a living and colorful tapestry: Buddhists dressed in saffron robes; swamis in brightly colored cloth, accompanied by a retinue of white-robed followers; business leaders in suits and ties; indigenous people in traditional dress, and young people in jeans and T-shirts. To introduce themselves as a group, they were asked to stand by geography, by faith or tradition, and by the issue they had come to discuss. No one issued statements. No one asked them to review, support, or sign anything. Instead they were invited to listen deeply, speak with respect, and seek new understandings without a need to reach agreement or find common solutions. What follows is a summary of what happened each day and how what happened is connected to our challenges.

### Getting People Connected Across Cultures and to the Issues (Day 1)

Participants were seated in small groups composed of people from different religious or spiritual affiliations and cultures. This maximized the mix of culture and religion. We included one young person in each grouping to bring freshness and innocence, as well as an experienced facilitator to encourage full

participation in the group. All were asked to introduce themselves: tell their name, where they were from, what issue they were working on, why they had an interest in the issue, and what hopes they had for the meeting. These polite conversations established the beginnings of respectful relationships.

Our challenge at this point was how to get everyone participating, when some people did not speak English, Spanish, or Catalan—the official languages of the Assembly. Translation of instructions from the front of the room occurred in all three languages. Translation in small groups was more problematic, but a group of "translators in training" from UNESCO and a few of our group facilitators were able to provide translation for those in need. We also found that people in the small groups supported one another as best they could. Although translation and language issues certainly slowed down the conversation, the intense listening and slow pacing seemed to deepen the dialogue.

**Putting a Human Face on the Issues (Day 1)**

Next, participants heard stories from individuals who had been hurt by the calamities we were exploring. Starting with stories seems so simple and yet is so powerful. For example, two women—a Palestinian and an Israeli—told the Assembly of the violence they had experienced. The Palestinian woman, who works as a cardiac care nurse in a Jerusalem hospital, told how she helps to repair the ailing hearts of ill Israelis during the day, then is taunted by Israeli youth on her way home. The Israeli woman, from an orthodox religious community, told how her son nearly died in a terrorist-led bus attack, and instead

of seeking revenge, she committed herself to mobilizing Arab and Israeli women to put an end to violence. There was no blame, no hatred; rather there was pain, tears, and a desire that their world of violence become different.

Participants were then asked to turn to one another to share their own experiences with the issue of their choice. The impact of hearing such stories on listeners cannot be overstated. A woman who has worked for a long time in settling refugees talked about how, over the years, she had grown distant from people for whom she was working. For her, hearing one refugee share her story was enough to rekindle the purpose and inspiration of her work.

**Exploring What Religious and Spiritual Traditions Offer to Encourage Change (Day 2)**

At the start of the second day, issue groupings convened in separate meeting rooms. Each group began with an intense exploration of the issue and what the various faith and spiritual traditions offered as support in responding to that crisis. A brief presentation by an expert in the field, offering participants a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issue, was followed by people of similar faiths gathering together to consider the beliefs, ideas, and practices in their tradition that encourage them to care about the issue. These intra-faith conversations were loud and sometimes heated, as co-religionist debated and questioned the meaning of their own various beliefs and practices. They were often surprised at the variation of stories and interpretation among people of the same faith.

Following the intra-faith dialogue, participants self-organized into inter-faith groups, where they shared with one another the rich resources that each tradition makes available to respond to the issue. We saw people lean forward in focused concentration as they learned, often for the first time, of values and symbols from other traditions that informed prayer and action.

### Expressing Barriers and Successes in Preparation for Moving Toward Action (Day 2)

Sometimes people cannot move forward until they have an opportunity to talk about the difficulties they encounter in enacting any change. This was another learning we took away from one of the pre-Parliament meetings in Israel. As we were beginning to move people into sharing stories about what they've observed that works, the group could not keep themselves from expressing the varied and multiple barriers they were confronting as they worked to overcome violence in the Middle East. These barriers were *real,* and it proved cathartic for the group to give voice to them—not solve them, merely put them on the table as real forces to contend with. Many of the barriers that emerged were confounding; these were sticky, unanswerable questions:

- "How do I work with my own community when people there, even my family members, reject the very idea of dialogue with those people?"
- "Do we have the patience to resolve long-standing needs and concerns?"

- “Can we find commonalities between religions (and as people) to take the first step?”
- “What is the truth?”

The barriers were listened to with great respect, thus adding more layers to the dynamics of the issue and a deeper appreciation of the dynamics of change.

There were many moments during the meeting where graphic recording helped participants see and hear their differences and similarities. This was one of those moments. Participants witnessed their barriers taking shape visually in colorful murals created by the recorders. Seeing the barriers made concrete in this way was a validation of their experience.

A collective sigh of relief rose in the room as participants moved on. The question they next addressed was: “What is already working in your community?” First an activist shared one success he had had in addressing a barrier and taking positive action for change. Participants then turned to one another in their small groups to share their own experiences of what has worked in their communities. There was an energy shift in the room. People laughed, clapped their hands, and even chanted. One young woman told how she used her music to engage her school mates and friends in caring about and addressing the burdens of external debt. She finished her sharing with a song.

**Giving People Time and Support to Create a Commitment (Day 2)**

The time had come to focus people on what they would do once they returned home—a commitment to act on behalf of people in their community suffering the effects of these issues . We wanted people to focus on what *they* would do, not on what they wanted others to do. We began with an invitation for individuals to reflect on what one thing they could see changing in their religious and spiritual community, institution, or their neighborhood that would have a positive impact on their issue. Before sharing their reflections, a panel of youth in each issue group offered their thoughts on the future as an inspiration and springboard for everyone.

This had mixed results, as some ideas were inspiring, some not. But one cannot deny the energy these young people contributed, which served the group well at the end of a long day. For example, in the “water” meeting, a university student said his commitment would be to say a short prayer of thanks every time he drank or used water. He wanted to leave the world a better place, he told the group, but was afraid that the world would come to an end before he had grandchildren. Silence filled the room as people considered his words. A rabbi from Holland waved to the facilitator and asked to talk. Speaking to the young man, the rabbi told how, when he was a child during World War II, his parents had given him to a Christian family, hoping they could save him from the approaching Nazi army. “The world was in a desperate and hopeless state then, but I am alive and have grandchildren. You will have grandchildren, too,” he said

to the young man. There was a profound shift in the room as people spoke, in a generative way, of what they wished for the world.

**Making a Simple and Profound Commitment (half of Day 3)**

Imagine ending a day of work listening to the angelic voices of a famous boys' choir performing Gregorian chants in the stunning Montserrat Basilica. This interlude set the stage for people to contemplate what they would draft as their simple and profound act—the takeaway of this auspicious gathering. The next morning, the group convened as a whole again, and participants returned to their small groups of the first day. It had the feel of a reunion, of people returning home after a long journey, and in a way this was true. They could hardly wait to catch one another up with what they had learned. Each individual was asked to draft a commitment by answering these questions:

- What community will you engage?
- What simple and profound act will you commit to take with your community to make a difference for people affected by your issue?
- Who in your community will you engage to help?
- How will you get started?

People then paired up to share what they had written and to get feedback from someone else prior to preparing their "formal and final" commitment card. All commitments were shared in the small groups, and we even attempted a mass simultaneous reading of all the commitments.

By the end of the Assembly and then several other meetings connected with the Parliament—all meetings in which we used the same design—over five hundred commitments to “simple and profound” acts were collected.

The council transcribed the handwritten commitment cards and entered the information into a database that will enable tracking and updating of what happens during the five years between assemblies. Some of the commitments have already had an impact: one participant convened a conference in San Jose California and engaged four hundred people in a similar process for building “cultures of peace” in local families, the community, and the world; a team of facilitators formed a nonprofit organization to take teams of executives to areas where help is needed and provide tangible services (they have already built a school for a Masaai Village in Kenya and plan to dig wells to provide water to a village in Africa or India); those making commitments to improve access to safe water have engaged with their local Rotary groups to connect with that organization’s initiative to support a Decade of Clean Water. These and other stories are circulating within the Assembly community and providing encouragement to those who have returned home and are facing the challenge of acting alone to mobilize their own community.

**Reflections**

The community of 125 volunteer consultants, facilitators, designers, logistics experts, photographers, and graphic recorders that formed to support

this event remains in active conversation, in many subsets, unpacking what we learned this past year.

The following are areas of important work not addressed in the previous section: hospitality, the power of youth, the question of whether to use facilitators or not, the use of graphics, cross-cultural training and the use of mentors, and the power of the place where meetings are held.

**Hospitality**

For most, the trip to Montserrat was long and arduous, culminating with a trip on a tram up the mountain to the monastery. We knew that our first point of contact with participants would be fateful in either helping us or hindering us in creating that container for connection and learning. At key locations (Barcelona Airport, various train or metro stations throughout the journey, at the tram station at the bottom of the mountain) participants found Council staff available to support and direct their journey. Our logistic aides greeted participants upon arrival at the monastery to assist with handling luggage, finding rooms, and getting through registration. A whole contingent of our volunteers greeted and supported participants throughout registration. Hospitality was intentional and everywhere.

**Power of Youth**

The Council wanted young people to have a strong voice in the Assembly. We imagined that if the youth were present in some force, our concerns about

some of the group dynamics would be mitigated if—and the big question was *if*—they were not intimidated by the situation, the setting, the dignitaries, and the isolation of being the single "young person" in a small group. The challenge then was how to ensure their full participation. Fortune was shining brightly when we learned that the monastery had a youth hostel on-site to accommodate all fifty young people, who came from all over the world. This provided them a safe haven to build their confidence and their community.

To engage them further, we asked them to come a day early, and we put them in charge of designing a portion of the Opening Ceremony, under the tutelage of one of the young Council staff. This gave them a task, put them immediately in an up-front role, connected them, and allowed their presence to be felt by all.

**Facilitators or No Facilitators**

The principle of self-management is a central tenet for all large group methodologies with which we are familiar. *Self-management* means group members take responsibility for how they conduct their conversations and how they report on their deliberations. Although most of us felt that the principle was critical to uphold, the council was not ready to take that step, based on their experiences at prior Assemblies. We respectfully took their wisdom into account and recruited, trained, and used small group facilitators.

Although these facilitators made significant and lasting contributions to this process, based on what we learned collectively we would not compromise this

principle again. We found that the purposefulness and the environment the lead facilitators created established enough of a framework for participants to hold productive conversations. For the Parliament meetings held in Barcelona and subsequent meetings in San Jose, small group facilitators were not used, and the results proved to be equal to those achieved at Montserrat. We are not saying that all conversations would be described as highly successful. We are saying that the benefits of self-management outweigh the bumps in the road that happen in most group conversations.

### Use of Graphics

Much of the proceedings were recorded by graphic recorders using markers and pastels to vividly honor and capture the conversations. One of our concerns was that people would use the platform of the Assembly to express all sorts of ideas that were unrelated to the task. A strategy that the graphic facilitators used to honor this potential need and diffuse the possibility that it would happen in the meeting was to put up a blank mural in a prominent spot, with the simple invitation on the top: “What else would you like to say?” Participants filled it with pronouncements, questions, concerns, symbols and pictures, teachings, and expressions of hope.

### Cross-Cultural Training and the Use of Mentor Supports

During the work of designing this methodology, we were not able to gather a truly cross-cultural team because of the constraints on resources, travel, and

time. So we tapped the expertise of cross-cultural consultants to help us become aware of our own blind spots regarding the ways people from a variety of cultures prefer to work in groups. This introduction to the concepts of circular time, deference to experts and leaders, indirect speaking, and making statements rather than engaging in inquiry helped us appreciate the challenge in front of us—to create a space for participants to connect with each other and with the issues. Ultimately, it reinforced our commitment to the simplicity and universality of the question-based conversation format.

In addition, we provided a team of mentors drawn from the senior members of our design team, who focused on supporting all the volunteer facilitators so that they could concentrate all their attention on their work with Assembly members. This proved a critical resource for the whole enterprise, as mentors helped facilitators to stay aware of the cultural dynamics and, at the same time, gave support and encouragement to continue responding with the heart, and with authenticity.

**Power of Place**

In our large group work, we always insist on holding the meetings in places where windows let in natural light. But we underestimated the power of a place itself to exert a potent influence on consciousness. The beauty of the mountains, the expansive view, the history of the monastery, the black Madonna, the voices of the boys' choir, the regularly tolling bells, morning prayers—all of these exerted potent influence on the energy and consciousness among and

between participants and all who worked to support the meeting. Montserrat was not just any meeting place; it was a meeting place with a feeling of occasion and destiny.

### Questions Remaining

The Montserrat Assembly unfolded over three days in a spiritual setting sheltered from the outside world; the group was luminous and religiously, culturally, and geographically diverse—an intergenerational group of people selected specifically for their potential to gather as a group and develop individual commitments to change their home communities. From the Council's perspective it was a huge success. Participants expressed awe and appreciation; a sense of community was built, and commitments were made. The most significant unanswered question is this: Did this methodology, which we now call Values in Action (VIA), lead to the action that we desired?

This question about what happens after the awe and appreciation is one that has surfaced for us in other large-scale change initiatives when, after a meeting that brings a large group together, participants disperse to parts of the world or county where communication and travel infrastructure may be unreliable at best, and where they become absorbed in their busy lives.

Determining the success of the Assembly only by evaluating the achievements of commitments can blind us to the subtle, enriching changes that occur at the individual and small group levels. We do have anecdotal evidence: participants have sent us notes with their stories about how profoundly they were

affected by their experience. Some have been moved to take very visible action in their community; others have worked quietly within themselves to cultivate greater respect in their relationships with others.

One hopeful perspective on this conundrum comes from scientists working in the areas of chaos and complexity who write about *emergence*—the unpredictable and often invisible order that can ripple out and affect many people and organizations. The ripples take time to evolve and patience to see. The ripple effect occurs in cities where over a long time certain neighborhoods become centers for the arts or finance without any central planning. This perspective suggests that the interactions at the Assembly were like seeds planted in the soil. Some seeds will sprout into full bloom in a relatively short time; others take a much longer time to leaf, and still others remain dormant. Thus through chance encounters, communities of interest or commitment can constellate use coalesce  and initiate unexpected change.

Which brings us back to the question: Did this event lead to the desired change? From the perspective of emergence, it takes time for meaningful patterns to form, for abundant will and modest resources to support and sustain the newly emerging changes. We hope that with the database of people and commitments and with a modest infusion of resources, this meeting and others that follow it will speed the desired changes into our world.

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