

CH 27

**Susan Dupre, Ray Gordezky,
Helen Spector, and Christine Valenza**

Values Into Action (VIA)

*Two sides to every question, yes, yes, yes . . .
But every now and then, just weighing in
Is what it must come down to . . .*

--- Seamus Heaney

The Parliament of the World's Religions

Is it possible to bring together the world's pre-eminent religious leaders, as well as other global leaders and citizens, to commit to take action with their own communities to address critical global issues? This question moved the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions to sponsor the development of VIA for the International Leader's Assembly at Montserrat, Spain, July 4-7, 2004.

This event unfolded over three days, with 400 invited participants – from diverse cultures, geography, ages, stations in life, and socioeconomic levels. During the Assembly, participants considered the following four issues: eliminating external debt burden on poor countries, supporting refugees worldwide, creating access to safe, clean water, and overcoming religiously motivated violence. Participants worked in small groups and in plenary to seriously explore these issues and build relationships with one another and between faith traditions. The meeting culminated in individuals making commitments to simple acts for positive change in the lives of people impacted by these issues.

Three hundred individual commitments were collected from participants in this conference. Another two hundred individual commitments were made during four initial pilot conferences held in Israel and Kenya, and the open-participation Assemblies held as part of the program of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, July 7-13, 2004.

The results continue to unfold: Participants in an executive leadership program built schools in Kenya and dug wells in Kenya and India; church communities visit an international airport's welcoming facilities to help upgrade the services available to refugees as they enter the country, and Muslim and Jewish students meet at Hebrew University in Jerusalem to heal religious and cultural divides.

The Basics

VIA is a question-based meeting process where a diverse group of people explore together their connections to a local or global issue, and make personal commitments to act on behalf of those impacted by the issue. The questions turn people first to one another and their own experiences with the focus issue, then to the issue's complexity and dynamics. This exploration creates a deeply personal understanding, and momentum for individual action and community change.

Working in small groups, individuals explore the focus issue through a few questions:

- Why they care about the focus issue.
- How their most deeply held values and convictions motivate them to take positive action.
- What examples of positive efforts are already being taken to bring about change for people affected by the issue
- What commitments to action will individuals make to engage members of their own community to make a difference on behalf of those impacted by the issue.

VIA engages the motivations and commitments of the **individual** within the context of a large group meeting. The large group acts as a resource and sounding board for individuals to better understand the issue, their relationship to the issue, and their desire to make a difference.

Three principles form the foundation for this meeting process:

- Individual commitment is a powerful catalyst for collective change.
- Connecting individuals to their own deepest values and convictions establishes strong leverage for change.
- Focusing on strengths and on projects that are already creating positive change generates ideas for new initiatives and hope for change.

We have found the use of experts in the issue and graphic artists recording the proceedings to be particularly valuable in the cross-cultural, multi-stakeholders settings in which we've worked. We use the term experts in a broad way. Towards the start of the meeting, we ask several individuals affected by the issue to share their stories with the entire gathering. These presentations put a "human face" on the issue. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the issue's complexities and dynamics as the meeting proceeds, academics/practitioners give brief presentations, followed by small group conversations to further explore the issue. These presentations help participants establish a rich assessment of the issue based on its history and evolution over time.

Graphic recorders work with pastels on eight foot banners to capture in images and words the ideas, associations, emotional rhythms, and questions that arise during large group reporting. In addition, individuals work with the recorder to capture their ideas in images. The resulting multicolored graphics cross linguistic barriers and create a rich reminder of both the ineffable and the expressible.

We developed this approach focusing on individual action, rather than on gaining common ground for collective action, for several reasons. First, those attending this meeting would not likely meet again. In addition, many would not have easy access to travel or communication, making joint projects unlikely. Finally, in our organizational development practices we have observed how, after attending a large group meeting, individuals will engage others in their local community or organizational department in collective action. The seeds for such individual action are planted during the meeting, but they don't often become part of the collective discourse during the meeting. Sometimes, these individual projects become the foundation for systemic change.

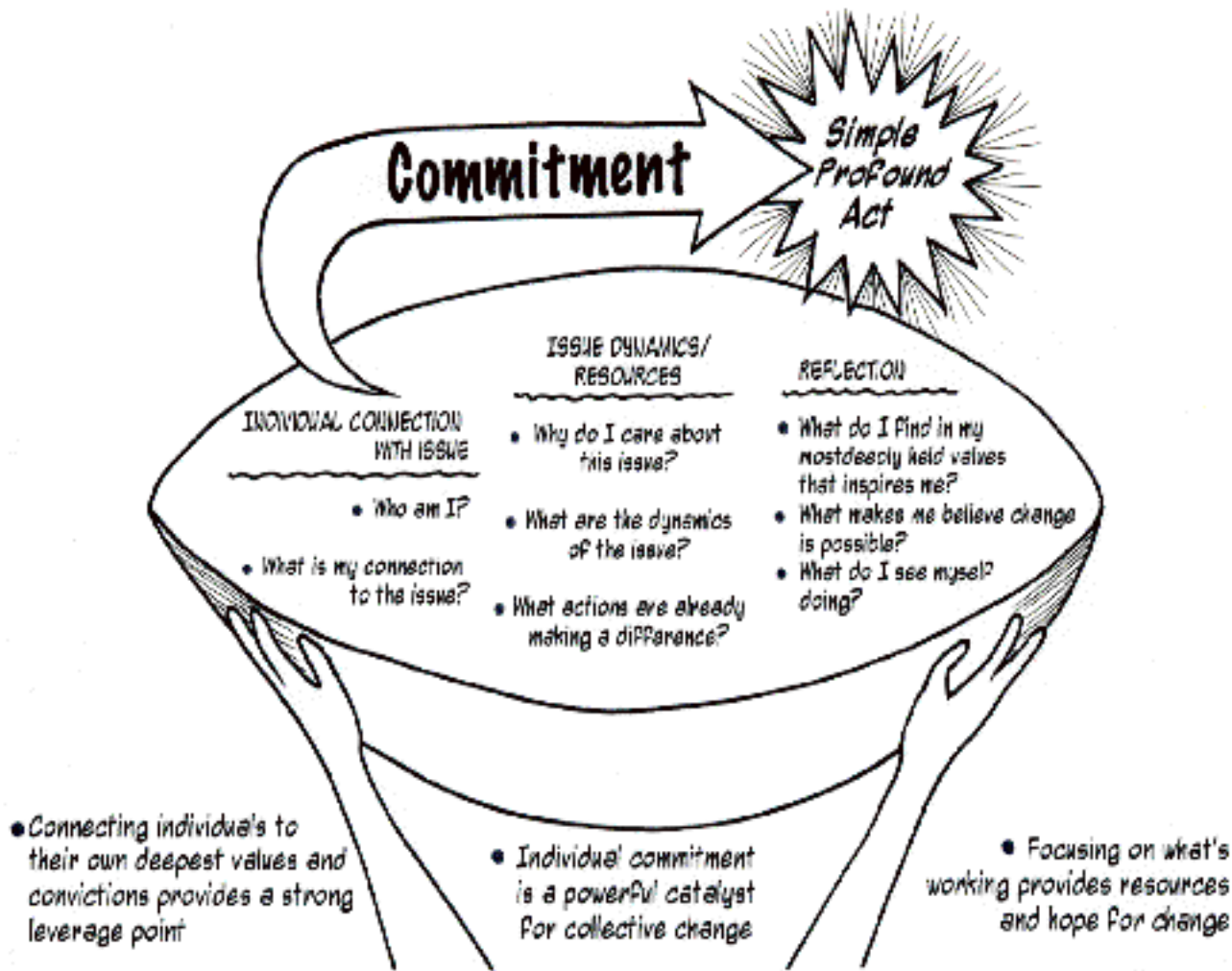


Figure 1.

Subsequent applications have shown the methodology to be quite flexible in terms of the time required and number of people involved.

Table of Uses

Typical Setting/ Brief Description	Project Length	# Participants, Time Required
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<p>International World Religious Leaders Assembly Designed VIA for diverse groups of world leaders from all religions and other institutions around the world, resulting in 500 commitments to action leading to significant change on four critical global issues.</p>	12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 planning meetings • 4 design meetings • Tested the methodology with 4 large group events, one focused on each issue, in various parts of the world where the issues have local significance. • 1 three day large group meeting with world leaders at Assembly at Montserrat • 4 large group meetings one focused on each of the four issues, at the Parliament of World Religions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 people • 50 people • 100 each issue meeting • 450 people • varied (50 – 100 each issue)
<p>Community Peace Building Conference Adapted VIA to support a 1-day conference resulting in 250 commitments to act.</p>	4 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 design meetings to integrate VIA into whole program design • 1 one day large group community meeting • Various meetings before and after to build capacity of community leaders to use the process locally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 people • 400 participants • 45 people each meeting

About the Authors

Helen, Ray and Susan consult to industry, public agencies, nonprofits, education and communities. They adhere to a solid but fluid set of “large group system change” principles and use these to create innovative methodologies and designs that make it possible for diverse groups (15 – 1000+) to work together to determine what they want to do collectively and individually

and how they're going to do it. Christine is a seasoned graphic facilitator experienced in bringing visual and graphic support to large scale change processes. They frequently collaborate on projects, as they did for the Parliament, and also work with other talented consultants from around the world in an expanding network of whole system change consultants. **Susan Dupre**, susdupre@aol.com, **Ray Gordezky**, ray-g@rogers.com, **Helen Spector**, helen6451@aol.com, **Christine Valenza**, www.christinevalenza.com.