

# Parliament of the World's Religions survives financial crunch

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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(RNS) With the help of pagans, Jains and people of a range of other faiths, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions has raised more than \$144,000 in two weeks using a crowdsourcing campaign in a desperate bid to survive a financial crisis.

The Chicago-based interfaith network was recently ordered by a U.S. court to pay \$276,000 in expenses related to its 2004 meeting in Barcelona, Spain. Deadly train bombings in Madrid months beforehand prompted a drop in expected attendance. The council took out a loan and was involved in a lengthy dispute about how to make up for lost revenue.

Mary Nelson, the interim executive director of the council, said the group had raised about half of the funds needed, but individuals and groups who took part in its crowdsourcing campaign have apparently helped her organization survive.

Two pagan groups alone raised more than \$16,000. A Jain board member raised \$6,300.

"Despite the fact that it's been a difficult, difficult road, we are so encouraged and renewed our vows to move forward," said Nelson, who began staffing the council voluntarily in September when it no longer had funds to pay a staff.

Nelson is a longtime Chicago community development expert who also serves as the chair of the progressive Christian group Sojourners.

As of Tuesday (April 16), the council had raised more than \$144,000 of the \$150,000 it needed, and had received permission from a donor to use additional

funds from an operational grant, if necessary, to make the final debt repayment.

Support across the interfaith spectrum included the National Council of Churches, which has had its own financial troubles and urged its member organizations that are affiliated with the parliament to help out. Leaders in like-minded work also wrote personal checks.

Eboo Patel, president of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, said it was significant that so many people quickly gave a sizable sum to see the organization continue, especially with its trademark large-scale gatherings that attract everyone from Adventists to Zoroastrians.

"That is its single largest program and its single largest contribution to the field," he said.

The first parliament was held in 1893 in Chicago and its work was revitalized 100 years later with a centennial gathering in its hometown. The most recent meeting was in 2009 in Barcelona; future meetings are being considered for Mexico and Canada.

"The idea of interfaith dialogue and collaboration is much, much bigger than the parliament, but what the parliament has served to do is essentially to seed that idea into a lot of places worldwide," said Gustav Niebuhr, author of "Beyond Tolerance" and a professor of religion and the media at Syracuse University.