

Welcome to Marrakesh!

Opening Remarks by FFI Conference Director, Debbie Powell

It is a very special thing for us to be in Morocco. The beauty, the rich culture, and warmth of its people would have been reason enough to hold our World Conference here. But what makes this conference especially meaningful is this: we have never before held our conference in a predominantly Muslim country.

It's no secret that there is a lot of fear and misunderstanding currently regarding the Muslim world. The goal of all the fear-mongers, demagogues, and extremists is to convince us that our worldviews, religions, and societies are incompatible. Only when there is no dialogue do we allow ourselves to believe this, to be divided along artificial cultural and religious fault-lines. We cannot let this happen. We have to be able to respect and trust each other and this is exactly what happens when we meet face-to-face, when we shake hands or share a hug or a joke, meet family members and neighbours, talk about our troubles and our dreams, and come to the understanding that we are, in fact, not really all that different after all.

So we may be a smaller group at our world conference this week, but your presence here may in many ways be more meaningful than at past conferences. I am moved to see you all gathered in this room, excited to be here, eager to learn more about the people and culture, and take that knowledge and these experiences back with you to share with your families, friends and communities. Experiencing a cross-cultural connection yourself is a wonderful thing – as you all know – but it is almost as powerful just to *hear* about it. So please, when you go home, do share your stories about your new Muslim friends and the time you will have enjoyed together here and perhaps even in their homes. Share those stories with your club members, with your friends, with your local newspapers and TV stations.

Martin Luther King, Jr said *'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.'*

Your simple act of coming here has already influenced those who know you back home. You are showing that you believe in something very different to the suspicion-filled atmosphere created by extremists, politicians, and the media: that you believe in the very simple act of gathering with friends from around the world; a group of friends who happen to have some different belief systems, but ultimately believe in peace and harmony.

I do too, and I'm very happy and proud to be here this week with all of you.