The international dimension of the Emmaus Movement stems from the worldwide impact of Abbé Pierre’s appeal during the winter of 1954. He made this appeal after having searched in vain for a legal solution via an adjustment of the reconstruction budget, to draw attention to the situation of the thousands of rough sleepers. On Monday morning, 1 February 1954, upon hearing that a woman who had been evicted from her home two days previously had frozen to death on a pavement in central Paris, Abbé Pierre wrote the speech which he read out during the midday news on Radio Luxembourg. This appeal led to a huge outpouring of solidarity known as the “uprising of kindness”, but which Abbé Pierre preferred to think of as “an uprising of intelligence against absurdity, and in favour of justice”. Over the following weeks, he condemned the inaction of the French government and MPs in addressing the housing crisis affecting the poorest.

As of 1954, Abbé Pierre travelled throughout France, Europe (Belgium, Italy) and the world, and became involved in an international struggle against poverty in all of its forms. In 1955 he travelled to the United States and Canada and then in response to a growing volume of requests, visited Morocco and Switzerland in 1956, Germany and Portugal in 1957, Austria, the Scandinavian countries and Lebanon in 1958, India and South America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) in 1959, the French colonies of Sub-Saharan Africa in 1960, just before their independence, and Australia in 1972. Everywhere he went he held conferences and met with the public and civil and religious authorities. He tirelessly told the story of Emmaus, explaining its values and actions to enthusiastic audiences and making each person reflect on their duties as citizens of their countries and of the world. Sometimes he would speak to people who were already carrying out actions similar to those of Emmaus and they would join the movement; sometimes the conference would give rise to a local initiative led by people who identified with Emmaus’ values and solidarity practices, and they would also go on to join the movement.

In 1963 a shockwave rippled through the Emmaus groups, which were already established in more than 10 countries. Abbé Pierre was on board the ship “Ciudad de Asunció” which sank in the Río de la Plata between Uruguay and Argentina, and his death was announced by the international press. However, he actually survived the disaster. The incident made him realise that he was the only link between the Emmaus groups around the world, along with Lucie Coutaz, and he decided to organise a meeting between the groups. Abbé Pierre subsequently made many trips to meet with
Emmaus leaders to talk to them and convince them to hold a first world assembly. Upon his return, he asked Jean Hossenlopp, who at the time was a member of Emmaus International Secretariat, to draw up a fundamental text and a worldwide directory for Emmaus. He also asked 5 experienced members of the movement - José (Pepe) Aravena (Chile), Marcel Farine (Switzerland), Robert Laporte (Canada), Robert Vallade (Japan) et Jean Wilken (Netherlands) to form an “Interim Board” to help to lay the foundations for an “international organisation of the movement”.

The most significant item from the action plan presented by the Interim Board was the organisation of a first “World meeting of the Emmaus Movement” on 24 and 25 May 1969. At the request of Abbé Pierre, the Swiss Emmaus Federation agreed to host this Assembly and also to take charge of the organisation and presidency. The Swiss government also offered to provide the Federal Palace in Bern for three days, at Whitsun 1969.

The organisers of this first world meeting placed great emphasis on co-construction. All Emmaus groups around the world were invited to suggest additions to the draft fundamental text. The suggestions and proposals for modifications received by the interim board showed the groups’ interest in this common cause.

This International Assembly represented a source of joy and great hope for Abbé Pierre, as the Emmaus movement entered its twentieth year of existence. It brought together people of “all conditions, races and languages, who shared just one essential link: the shock felt by all at seeing these oppressed workers, and regaining a sense of purpose and joy through helping those who suffer most”. The assembly was marked by passionate words on justice and about the urgency of education on social conscience for all.

Those present at this meeting adopted the Universal Manifesto as the fundamental text of the movement and agreed that it would be published along with documents for actions specific to each Emmaus branch, the “scope and strength of which was a surprise and a lesson for the delegates at this first meeting.” They also appointed an International Central Committee/Interim Committee in charge of establishing the Emmaus International Secretariat, taking over from Lucie Coutaz who had until then filled this role. This International Secretariat was set up in Montreal with a two-year mandate, thanks to the generosity of Emmaus Canada. Its main task was to “strengthen the links between the different groups, coordinate efforts and provide guidance on any problems hindering effective assistance of those who suffer most”.

At this first “World Meeting”, a new “General Assembly” was called in 1971 in Montreal in order to establish Emmaus International as an association and adopt its articles of association.

The most recent World Assembly was the 13th and was held in April 2016 in Jesolo, Italy.