

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEOPLE OF FAITH

Interfaith Climate Advocacy Day

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I come to you this morning with great concern. Our house is on fire. The crisis of global warming is the great granddaddy of all cultural crises. I care deeply about many justice issues—I care about economic inequity, about gun control, about the plight of black men in our society. But such concerns shrivel in importance when I consider that our planet may soon no longer sustain life as we know it. I've been having conversations with many people about this crisis--some of the smartest people I know mostly go silent when I talk about climate change. Some are giving up hope. I asked a poet friend of mine if she thinks we will be able to change our ways in time. She shook her head sadly and said, "Humans are a very flawed species." I must admit that until a few months ago, I tended to agree with these people in their despair. But today I come with greater hope than I have had in a long time. I sense that the national conversation is shifting.

Why? People are paying attention to what they're seeing, what they're experiencing. People close to the land feel it first. Here in Oregon the farmers in Klamath County don't have water for their crops. The land has suffered from the Western drought which continues to threaten the nation's food supply. Surface temperatures have run 10 to 20° higher than the long-term average. Last year more than half the counties in our country were designated national drought disaster areas.

The increase we have seen in droughts and fires and floods and storms is not an anomaly--it is the new normal. The ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica are more vulnerable than scientists thought. The introduction of massive amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> into the seas is altering water chemistry and affecting the life cycles of many marine organisms. Much of the damage already done cannot be turned around. The ominous changes in our environment will be in place for at least 1,000 years, say the climate scientists.

Those of us who live in the most verdant areas and those of us who have financial resources will not receive the brunt of the changes, at least initially. The suffering will be most acute among poor people living in low-lying island nations and on eroding coastlines. Food shortages and infectious diseases will rise in underdeveloped nations, and waves of refugees will leave, trying to survive. Conflict will break out over scarce

resources. Fragile nation states will fail. We know that these will be the results if we do not address climate change, and address it now.

Of course there are still some who insist that climate change is a hoax. They reject any role that government might take that serves the public rather than the private sector. They don't want regulation, mandates, subsidies for green alternatives – the evidence for global warming does not make a big difference to them, because they are acting on the basis of ideology rather than reason. However, there is a growing recognition of the dangers that we are facing, and climate deniers have become less and less credible, less and less able to convince people of their position. The effects of global warming are making themselves known quite clearly, now, in the present, not off in some far distant future.

Robert Jay Lifton, in an article in the *New York Times* (August 23, 2014), calls this shift a climate "swerve," and says we are seeing a major historical change in consciousness. I think he's right. People are waking up. In a recent poll, 63% of US citizens said they agreed with President Obama's proposal to cut carbon emissions more than 25% by 2025. Obama is doing what he can do, unilaterally, and that gives me hope. Secretary of State John Kerry is making climate change a priority with every country he visits. And China is making its first serious commitments.

Also, Lifton explains, economists have jumped into the conversation in a big way, raising the issue of value. Carbon investment risk is seen as rising—on the other hand, renewable energy resources are becoming increasingly valuable, in terms of returns for investors and long-term energy savings. Institutions like insurance companies and the military have been considering the consequences of climate change for some time, and now financial advisors are questioning the viability of carbon-based fuel corporations. The swerve in awareness has a strong ethical dimension, and people are beginning to understand that it is deeply immoral, maybe evil, in fact to ruin the only home we have and to create a legacy of suffering for future generations. Psychologically, as a people, we are prepared to act. The narrative of climate activists—that is, the story we are telling about our endangered earth—is becoming a shared narrative in this country. I take courage from this.

But some would ask, is it even possible to make the needed changes? Wouldn't these changes, supported by a carbon tax, cost too much? The good news is that no, they would not. We will have to live with climate consequences already in progress—we'll have to adapt—but it's not too late to keep the worst from happening. Leading economists William Nordhaus of Yale University and Paul Krugman, Pulitzer Prize

winner--both have said that if the world spends only 1% of its GNP a year, that would be enough to address climate issues. So I have become hopeful instead of despairing.

And who is going to lead this change? The people are—religious organizations, universities, nonprofits – that is, what is called the third sector, business and government being sectors one and two. As with every other social justice movement historically--workers' rights, civil rights, changes in how we see gays and lesbians and transgender individuals – change comes from the bottom up. Government and business never lead—they are tied together, and they are too closely tied to money and power— but they will ultimately respond to the demands of citizens when those demands become strong enough and constant enough.

So where are churches in all of this? Mostly silent, it seems. Most churches continue to be concerned with individual sin as opposed to systemic sin. We proudly show off our green church buildings, congregants may be admonished to recycle and change their light bulbs and use real cups instead of paper for coffee hour, but they are rarely encouraged to become politically active. We're way beyond changing our light bulbs. The truth is, it's not going to make any difference at all, in practical terms, if you compost food scraps and recycle and refuse to fly across the country to see your grandmother. You would be witnessing, of course, by taking these individual actions, but you will not make any substantial difference. We need to bring that unhappy, startling truth to the pulpits of our land. The solution, if we are to find one, will be policy change.

Oregon is known as an environmental leader, and people all over the country expect us to continue to lead and to set a pattern for other states. And the US should set a pattern for the larger world. If there's any issue that various faiths could come together on, it seems this would be the one. Here's where EMO comes in – we do direct service, yes, but we know that political action is necessary to make policy change, and we affirm that it is the responsibility of people of faith to lead in this, the most significant moral issue of our time. So I thank you, all of you who have gathered here today, who has taken time away from your daily lives, your children, your work in order to lobby our legislators in Salem. You are the ones who will be the levers for change in our society, you and people like you.

You would not be here today if you were not in some pain, and some anguish, about the future of our Earth. It is this felt discontent, of course, that kindles your passion for justice, that impels you to act, and that will ultimately bring the change we need. What sustains us, as people of faith? We know for us to transform our society, we

must be grounded in something larger than our own egos, must be given over to something larger than ourselves. The way of the Holy Spirit is different, is profoundly countercultural. We come today as instruments of that Spirit.

We are a called people, and as such we don't have to prevail-- even in this crucial issue, we don't have to prevail – that is really not in our control. There are two promises, however, that we can count on. First of all if we choose to give ourselves to the good, we will be partnered in our endeavors, partnered by Something Unseen, but nevertheless as real as our own breath. And second, I know, I have seen, that when people are willing to be used of the Spirit, amazing things happen.

A poem by Rilke, a poem in which God speaks to us:

“You, sent out beyond your recall,

Go to the limits of your longing.

Embody me.

Flare up like a flame

and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life. . . . .

Give me your hand.”

Will you join me in prayer?

Living God, remind us that our lives, and all lives, are holy and precious. We acknowledge that the earth itself, which sustains life, is holy and precious. Give us courage and wisdom today as we go about our task of witnessing. Give us loving hearts and true speech. Guide our hands, our feet, our words, as we try to make a world of peace and justice more possible. So be it. Amen.